

Recommendations for Editors from the ACES Value of Editing Study

A Companion to the ACES Value of
Editing Report

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Developed for ACES by
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About ACES

ACES: The Society for Editing is the nation's leading organization of editing professionals, educators, and students. Founded in 1997 by copy editors, ACES is dedicated to improving the quality of the written word and the working lives of editors. It sets standards of excellence and gives a voice to editors in journalism, government, business, publishing, and beyond through top-notch training, networking, and career opportunities. ACES hosts an annual in-person conference and, since 2022, an annual virtual conference. ACES Academy hosts monthly webinars. ACES also offers certificates in editing, which it co-hosts with The Poynter Institute, a global leader in journalism.

About WSI

Writing System Institute (WSI) is a woman-owned small business dedicated to helping professionals write better, faster. Founded as Graham Associates Consulting in 1985, WSI has trained over 100,000 professionals on our 12-step Writing System for writing effective materials 20% to 40% faster. Our specialty is helping subject matter experts in science, health, engineering, policy, and business communicate with executive and lay audiences. Through our writing courses, one-on-one writing coaching, and writing consulting services, we serve organizations throughout the federal government; private sector companies focused on medicine, technology, and business management; and nonprofits in education and research.

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Introduction

About This Report

For editors seeking to grow their work opportunities and skillsets, this brief report summarizes four recommendations based on findings from the ACES Value of Editing study.

For details on the methods and results that led to these findings, see the companion document *ACES Value of Editing Report: Study Findings and Recommendations for Industry* (August 2026).

This brief report also complements the June 2026 ACES Academy webcast “Do Readers Care About Editing?: Recommendations for Editors from the ACES Value of Editing Study.” ACES members can access a recording of this webcast in the webcast library: <https://aceseditors.org/aces-academy/>. This brief report has some minor differences from the webcast. For example, we combined two of the recommendations in the webcast into one recommendation for this brief report.

About the Study

WSI conducted this study from October 2025 to August 2026 with funding provided by ACES. This study builds on a previous ACES-funded study on the value of editing, which surveyed college students on their perceptions of news articles that did or did not undergo copy editing.¹ A decade later, our study expanded on this work by examining the effects of different levels of editing, increasing the range of material types studied, and adding a qualitative method to the study approach.

We used the following mixed-methods approach:

- Quantitative: We surveyed a nationally (U.S.) representative sample of 584 people on their perceptions of either edited or unedited versions of six different materials. To determine if editing the material made a significant difference in readers’ perceptions of the material’s qualities, we used post-hoc comparison analysis to compare the average response of the people who read the edited version against the average response of the people who read the unedited version.
- Qualitative: We interviewed 22 people who completed the survey. We manually coded the interviews to understand how these readers value different levels of editing for different material types. We also coded for other themes that emerged in the interviews, such as opinions about AI writing.

¹ Vultee, Fred. 2015. “Audience Perceptions of Editing Quality: Assessing Traditional News Routines in the Digital Age.” *Digital Journalism* 3 (6): 832–849.

While the interview results can help editors understand why readers have certain preferences for editing, the survey results can help editors quickly and persuasively communicate with clients and employers about statistically significant trends in readers' preferences for editing.

Key Definitions

We defined three levels of editing for this study:

- Copy editing: Changes to ensure the material complies with relevant standards. Copy edits can include 1) word choice changes to comply with dictionary definitions; 2) grammar changes to comply with acceptable language standards; 3) punctuation changes to comply with style guide standards; and 4) mechanics changes to comply with the standards set within the material itself to maintain consistency.
- Stylistic editing: Changes to stylistic writing choices. Stylistic edits include changes to word choice or sentence structure to 1) clarify the author's tone or meaning or 2) make sentences easier to read or more aesthetically pleasing for the intended audience.
- Developmental editing: Changes to the content or organization of the material. Developmental edits can include moving, removing, or adding sections, paragraphs, and sentences to ensure 1) the content is relevant to the intended audience; 2) all necessary content is included and accurate; and 3) the organization helps the intended audience understand the point of the content for them as they read.

We also grouped different material types into two categories:

- Work materials: Materials that readers “have to” read, as part of performing some form of paid or unpaid labor, such as a user manual or proposal.
- Nonwork materials: Materials that readers “choose to” read, to overcome boredom or satisfy curiosity, such as a fantasy novel or blog post on celebrity fashion.

Note: Outside this brief report, we refer to work materials as “cold materials” and nonwork materials as “warm materials.” We use the terms “work” and “nonwork” in this brief report for simplicity, so editors can more easily reference the study findings in conversations with their clients and employers.

Recommendation #1: Negotiate for early involvement.

What We Learned

The study showed that editing is most likely to make a difference when it involves a combination of developmental, stylistic, and copy editing.

For work material in particular, the survey results showed that this level of editing (which we call “developmental+”) made a significant difference in how the average reader perceives four qualities of the material:

- Interest in the Source: The reader is likely to choose to read more material from the same source (the authoring individual or organization).
- Readability: The reader considers the material easy to read.
- Comprehension: The reader considers the material easy to understand.
- Attention: The reader perceives the material as keeping their attention.

Without developmental editing, a combined stylistic and copy edit (stylistic+) still made a significant difference for work materials. Readers perceived a significant difference in one quality: readability. Interview responses supported these survey results.

For nonwork materials, developmental+ editing was the only level of editing that made a significant difference in readers’ perceptions. Readers did not perceive any one specific quality differently, but they did perceive a significant difference in general. Interview responses supported this survey result, with readers preferring nonwork materials with developmental improvements.

Stylistic+ editing did not make a significant difference for nonwork materials. Interview responses did show that some readers prefer nonwork materials with stylistic improvements. However, when surveyed on nonwork material that had a stylistic and copy edit but not a developmental edit, readers perceived that material no differently than when the same material underwent no level of editing.

Finally, for both work and nonwork materials, copy editing alone made no significant difference for the average reader. Interview responses did show that some readers prefer materials free of copy errors. However, when surveyed on materials that had no copy errors but did have developmental and stylistic issues, readers perceived these materials no differently than when the same materials did contain copy errors.

What You Can Do

We recommend that editors cite these findings when negotiating with clients and employers to involve them earlier in the development of work or nonwork material.

We know that getting involved early can be a hard sell. Clients and employers have to budget the extra time that the material is with the editor, and they have to budget the additional compensation for that editor’s time. To save this time and money, clients and

employers might ask for a copy edit only, to remove surface-level embarrassing errors. Editors can do this limited edit in less time, much later in the process.

However, editors can now point to this study's findings to show the flaw in this logic. If clients and employers want the time and money they invest in editing to be worthwhile, they are better off investing that much more to provide the level of editing that the average reader actually values.

This argument gets even stronger if the client or employer is developing work materials with any of the following four goals: to increase the reader's interest in their other materials, for the reader to have an easy reading experience, for the reader to understand the material easily, or for the material to hold the reader's attention. Cite this study's findings to convince your client or employer that doing a combination of developmental, stylistic, and copy editing has the highest likelihood of helping them reach their goal.

Finally, if your client or employer is developing work material and insists they do not have the time or money for a developmental edit, cite this study's findings to convince them to at least do a stylistic edit with the copy edit. This argument is even more persuasive if improving readability is a goal of your client or employer.

Recommendation #2: Strengthen your uniquely human skills.

What We Learned

Interview responses showed that readers want materials tailored to them as the intended audience. As examples of tailoring, readers described using terminology the audience understands and providing only the detail the audience needs.

For work materials specifically, readers want materials they can use effortlessly. In interviews, readers' most cited developmental preference was limiting the content of the material. Their most cited stylistic preference was simplifying word choice. Both these editing preferences help readers achieve the same goal: to read and understand their work materials as easily as possible, so they can do the work itself that much more easily.

With nonwork materials, readers prefer a different experience: for a story to pull them in and keep them engaged. Developmental edits that limit content help achieve this goal, as readers described long-winded descriptions losing their attention and fast-paced storytelling maintaining their attention. Readers also described the organization of content as important, such as opening with a hook or the main idea to grab their attention at the outset. For stylistic concerns, readers shared how nonwork materials with a conversational, "human" tone kept them engaged.

While developmental and stylistic editing can help readers achieve these different goals for their work and nonwork materials, these levels of editing can also help resolve some of the issues readers encountered with AI writing. We did not ask readers for their opinions about writing done with generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT and Claude, but readers volunteered their opinions anyway. They described AI writing as appearing polished and error-free but being overly wordy, having inaccurate content, or using a flat "not human" tone. These concerns mirror some of the most cited developmental and stylistic concerns that readers shared when discussing their preferences for both work and nonwork materials.

What You Can Do

To help your clients and employers develop materials that readers want, we recommend strengthening your uniquely human skills that enable that tailoring. That is, rather than focus on making predictable, pattern-based edits—which AI tools already do fairly well—we recommend focusing more on what each specific material needs to do for its specific intended audience.

To do this tailoring, you need to know at least three things, which change from material to material:

- what your client or employer's goals are for the material
- the intended audience's strengths and limits for understanding the material

- what developmental, stylistic, and copy edits can bridge your client or employer's goals with your audience's goals of either using the material effortlessly or staying engaged in the material

Developing and then applying this knowledge are uniquely human skills because they involve breaking patterns rather than relying on them. Even if you use AI as one of your editing tools, you still need to apply this knowledge to decide how to use the AI outputs you receive.

You might also consider marketing your uniquely human skills specifically to clients and employers who write with AI. Because AI runs on pattern recognition and probability-based prediction, the default for AI writing is generic, not tailored. Rather than focus your editing services on removing errors (which Recommendation #4 also advises against), you can market your editing services as tailoring AI writing to what you know readers want. You can also apply your developmental and stylistic editing skills to address the features of AI writing that readers dislike: wordiness, inaccuracy, and an inhuman tone.

Finally, if your current editing services do focus primarily on removing errors, consider reframing your service as providing quality assurance, which is another uniquely human skill. By design, AI cannot tell fact from fiction, and creating factual errors—whether from hallucinations, sycophantic responses, or a lack of sufficient context—will always be a risk of AI writing. Therefore, if you apply your human understanding of each material's unique context *and* your human ability to tell fact from fiction, you can continue to focus your services on removing embarrassing errors, under the name of quality assurance.

Recommendation #3: Determine your responsibility for ensuring accuracy.

What We Learned

The survey results showed that no level of editing makes a significant difference for how the average reader perceives the credibility of the source or the accuracy of the material. Across all six materials we surveyed, readers who read the edited versions responded no differently to our questions about credibility and accuracy than readers who read the unedited versions.

In interviews, readers described being more likely to question themselves than question the source or the material. When noticing content errors or copy errors, their first reaction is to doubt their own knowledge. They have to overcome this doubt before acknowledging that the material contains an error.

Accuracy and credibility matter to readers but only after they apply the knowledge, attention, and self-confidence to find an error. In interviews, readers described a preference for materials that are free of factual errors, a misleading tone, and copy errors. However, not all readers have the knowledge or focus to catch these errors, and the readers who do have that knowledge and focus also need the confidence to overcome their own self-doubt. With this extra context from the interviews, the survey results become somewhat less surprising, though not necessarily less concerning.

What You Can Do

We recommend that each editor decide for themselves if checking inaccuracy is an ethical standard. Making this decision is especially important if a check for accuracy is not already explicitly stated in the editor's scope of services. Because the average reader is unlikely to question the accuracy of the materials they read, the editor then has a potential responsibility to find and correct inaccuracies before the materials are distributed. This responsibility becomes an ethical standard if the editor considers the spread of misinformation to be an ethical concern.

In addition, editors need to acknowledge that correcting inaccuracies during the editing process becomes that much more important with an increase in AI writing. As mentioned previously, AI cannot tell fact from fiction. Human writers using AI as a writing tool risk introducing inaccuracies that even they do not notice. In addition to meeting an ethical standard, editors might also emphasize the finding of inaccuracies as a marketable skill, especially for clients or employers writing with AI.

Recommendation #4: Promote your work helping both writers and readers.

What We Learned

The study findings show that readers can value the effects of editing while devaluing the work itself.

The survey results showed that readers value developmental+ editing for both work and nonwork materials and value stylistic+ editing for improving the readability of work materials. The interview responses also showed a preference for materials that receive developmental, stylistic, or copy-related improvements.

However, the interview responses showed that readers can question or outright denounce the value of editing as a service, even while expressing a preference for edited materials. Some readers described stylistic editing and copy editing as detrimental to a material. They claimed that editing hindered the writer's self-expression and countered the writer's intentions. Other readers considered editing to be too expensive to be worth the investment of time and money. Readers indicated that writers should either self-edit or ask a friend for help rather than work with a professional.

The interview responses also showed that readers who are unfamiliar with editing as a professional service seem to assume that editing focuses on copy errors only. Given that the survey results showed that copy editing alone is not valuable to the average reader, this devaluing of editing as a service then becomes less surprising.

What You Can Do

We recommend that editors publicize how their editing accomplishments help readers. Whether you post on LinkedIn or highlight work experience on your website, focus your accomplishments on the aspects of editing that matter to readers: helping readers use work materials effortlessly or stay engaged in nonwork materials. If you work with a particularly grateful client or employer, ask them to share a testimonial that focuses on these aspects.

To counter concerns that editors undo the work of writers, refer to your work with writers as a partnership. For example, think of the writer as an athlete and yourself as their personal trainer: you help them enhance the hard work they are already doing, rather than criticize their performance for the sole purpose of evoking shame. This framing of the writer-editor relationship also helps fight the misconception that only bad writers need editors.

Finally, if being a member of the "grammar police" is part of your brand as an editor, rebrand. You want potential or current clients and employers to see you as someone who helps writers give readers what they want. This study showed that what readers want involves much more than consistent application of grammar standards.

Furthermore, shaming someone for their language use is not the same as helping someone communicate with their intended audience. Therefore, we highly recommend against presenting yourself as delighting in having a false sense of superiority over people who use the English language differently than you do. You do not have to correct someone else's grammar to celebrate and find joy in the oddities and possibilities of language.