

# One-Page Insights: The 6 Cs of Copy Editing

A trained copy editor focuses on the ‘mechanics’ of written language to ensure optimal readability while retaining (and often enhancing) the voice of the author. They do so by focusing on the following tasks.

## 1. **Correctness:** *Spelling/typos, punctuation/ grammar, and word usage*

Some errors can be picked up by standard software (e.g., Microsoft Word Editor) or high-end apps, but the human copy editor can better understand the author’s quirky punctuation preferences and word choices (such as dialect), can distinguish between a style choice and an outright error, and can suggest fixes that work for both author and reader.

This task also includes some basic fact-checking, such as the spelling of the names of real people/businesses/products/events, etc. You would be amazed how often these are misspelled!

## 2. **Clarity/Coherence:** *Readability and flow*

Sometimes the problem is as simple as a misplaced modifier or an ambiguous pronoun, but sometimes entire sentences, paragraphs, or concepts are unclear. Words or sentences may be moved around for better flow. Where it is difficult to decipher the author’s meaning or intention, or if there are significant gaps, the copy editor will query the author using the comments function of Track Changes.

## 3. **Craft:** *Language quality*

The copy editor will change or flag weak verbs, nouns, or adjectives; overwritten sentences; clichéd phrases or descriptors; overused words, phrases, or sentence structure; and the disproportionate use of passive sentence constructions.

## 4. **Concision:** *Repetition and redundancy*

The copy editor will cut unnecessary words and phrases (sometimes whole paragraphs) to make the prose punchier and more engaging. This is about optimal readability. Much of this work will have already been done by a line edit, but a copy editor will make the final adjustments. Tighter prose means more powerful prose and a stronger authorial voice.

## 5. **Consistency:** *Following style rules*

A copy editor ensures the manuscript follows standard publishing styles (set out by *New Hart’s Rules* in the UK or *Chicago Manual of Style* in the US). The editor will also make sure the manuscript is internally consistent, meaning that the author’s deliberate style choices (such as unusual spellings or non-standard use of punctuation) are applied throughout. This is especially important in fantasy, sci-fi, and historical fiction. Copy editors create a ‘style sheet’ for the project to officially record the preferences.

## 6. **Controversy:** *Risky content*

A copy editor keeps on top of language developments and is trained to spot unconscious bias, stereotyping, and vocabulary/phraseology that has fallen out of accepted or common usage. In nonfiction, a copy editor might query content that appears to be contentious. Although a copy editor is NOT your legal counsel, they can help you avoid unwittingly causing offence.