**Freelance scientific editor and writer**

What does your job entail on a day-to-day basis?
For my ‘bread and butter’ work, I am lucky to be part of a freelance pool of editors involved in quality checking scientific manuscripts that have already been edited for English language.

The company that I freelance for has a database of the manuscripts that need to be checked and I grab and work on them as and when I wish. Most importantly, the files need to be checked and returned to the clients to strict deadlines, so I ensure that I only claim files I know that I can return in good time.

Occasionally, I have other client work, which involves more detailed editing or writing of short scientific news pieces.

This type of work enables me to have incredible flexibility regarding what my ‘office’ hours are, so every day can be different. However, to ensure I have a strict work/life balance (because I work from home and because I have two young children aged 4 and 6 years), I typically do my work during school hours or in the evening depending on what the deadlines are or what other activities are on.

What qualifications are required?

The qualifications required depend on the level of editing and subject area that you wish to work in. I have a PhD in pharmaceutics and that has been very helpful in gaining the level of understanding needed to tackle developmental editing of manuscripts.

Developmental editing involves editing the article for the content – asking pertinent questions regarding the research results or methods, for example – as well as ensuring that the structure and overall ‘story’ of the manuscript, is presented in the best way to ensure maximum impact.

Copyediting is a different level of editing; this is the ‘polishing’ stage of editing and is usually performed after an article has been peer-reviewed and accepted for publication. At this stage, the finer details regarding grammar, language, application of specific styles of a journal, and ensuring all parts of a manuscript are presents and correct (e.g., figures, references etc) are performed.

I was lucky enough to receive training for both copyediting and developmental editing when I worked for a scientific publisher (first as a copyeditor and then as a developmental editor) before I became a freelancer. And this is the best form of training.

However, there are courses that provide such training or can be used as a ‘taster’ to see whether this type of work is what you really wish to do or whether you have the aptitude for being a copyeditor, which really requires an eye for detail.

The Society of Editors and Proofreaders (SfEP) and the European Association of Science Editors both offer training courses.

What other transferable skills do you need?

Time management and super organizational skills! Sometimes I’ll be dealing with multiple manuscripts with different deadlines and so both of these are vital to ensure that deadlines are met.

Communication skills too, because I deal with different clients and it is important to let them know where you are regarding their manuscript.

Are there opportunities to widen your knowledge of other areas in your field?
It depends on what you wish to do. If being a science editor is what you want to go into, then read widely on the field of research that you are in so that you know what is the latest research.

For copyediting, being able to work on a wide range of manuscripts will widen your experience regarding certain words or language that is used for particular subjects.

I don’t think there is a lack of opportunity to widen your knowledge; there is so much information available on the Internet!

Is training continual? Career Progression?

I’ve been lucky to have had the bulk of my training done ‘on the job’. But, as mentioned above, SfEP and EASE both offer training courses and hold conferences/meetings that would be great opportunities for networking and finding out from others about career prospects.

If working for a publishing company, then career progression will depend on what the company offers.

What do you enjoy the most in your job?
The flexibility of being able to chose when I wish to work and zero commuting! All I need is a computer and an Internet connection.

What challenges do you have to overcome?

Personal circumstances helped me make the leap from working for a publisher to working for myself. It was terrifying – I did not know whether I’d be able to find enough work as a freelancer and the nitty gritty involved in becoming self-employed was also terrifying (i.e., how much tax do I pay? What about pensions? And so on).

I also missed (and still do) the day-to-day interaction with colleagues; being a freelance editor can be quite lonely.

Working from home also means it is difficult to shut off work. It is very easy to slip into the habit of accepting all work that clients pass to you and then working all hours to meet deadlines.

Any advice for those interested in a position such as yours?

Gain as much experience as you can before making the leap to become a freelancer. As well as experience, you will also build up your network of contacts. For example, I am lucky in that the freelance pool that I’m part of is headed by a colleague that I used to work with.

Get professional advice regarding finances; going freelance means that taxes, NI etc are all up to you now. So if you don’t have a head for numbers, then an accountant will become your best friend. Other freelancers I know are doing just fine on their own though too; lots of advice on the HMRC website as well blogs etc will help in deciding.

To combat ‘loneliness’ join a forum or something similar so that if you need advice then having people to ask and offer support is great.

Also, be strict to ensure that work doesn’t creep into your home life. Saying no to a client is good on both a professional and personal level. If you know you cannot do a good job on the manuscript because you are juggling a dozen other manuscripts then that is unfair to both parties. And then you won’t be stressing out because you already have a dozen manuscripts on the go.

What sources did you use to find out about the job vacancy?

Contacts made through working at the publishing company. But the SfEP and EASE (as well as other similar societies) can be excellent sources for opportunities.

Is there anything that you miss about being in the lab (if you were previously a lab-based scientist)?

It sounds absurd, but I miss the physical activity involved in setting up and performing experiments. When I first started work in editing, the contrast in walking to fetch this reagent or go to different labs to perform different experiments was stark compared to the sit in front of a computer for hours on end to edit a tough manuscript. So now, I force myself to get up and go for a walk to grab a coffee or something to avoid such ‘stagnation’.