

Indie Editor Advice

A couple of months ago I saw an editor offering free edits to get their name out there. I wrote this email to them with some advice for how to begin charging money and how to best grow the business into something that can pay the bills.

We were on a forum for independent, self published authors, so it went without saying that those were the intended clients. The experience within traditional publishing would be quite a bit different, however I am finding more and more trad-minded writers are hiring indie editors to look at their work before they try submitting it to an agent.

Self published authors were already beginning to dominate a lot of the best seller categories on Amazon. There is a gap in traditional publishing houses understanding of the e-book market and a couple of my clients are making six figures self-publishing.

There's a high demand for good editors right now and I'm happy to give out advice because there's not enough good indie editors to serve all the authors out there right now.

I did what you're doing!

Three years ago I was working on free edits to get some experience before charging anything. I'm now doing this full time and quit my day job two years go.

Here's everything I wish I'd known from day one: Don't wait too long before raising your prices. And those people who appreciate the free work you did, will pay the new high rates because good editors are hard to find.

When you do start charging don't start too low. Professional authors want to hire editors who charge professional rates. They're making money and can afford it.

If you have a bad feeling about an edit, just say no. If something about the writing makes you uncomfortable, or is a red flag that the person who wrote it had a personality incompatible with your editing style, just pass on the project. Tell the client that it's a bit outside your wheelhouse, or not the style of edit you usually do and move on.

Make a website. Keep it clean and simple, and put you rates there along with contact form so people can reach you. You will want it so you can link to it wherever you post.

Don't let genre limit you too much. Fantasy works a lot like science fiction. Romance works a lot like fantasy. And mystery works a lot like romance. I was honest about not knowing much about romance. People booked me anyway. Now I know a ton about it and it's my favorite genre to work in. I get a bit burnt out when I do only one genre for too long, so it's good to switch it up.

Keep a calendar and encourage people to book ahead of time. An edit two months from now, pays just as well as an edit today, but it also gives you job security. I used to offer a 10%

discount to people who booked three months in advance.

Be honest with people but always be nice. "Hmm, I think this might become a problem later if it's not consistent with the other chapters" hits softer than "No, no, this totally wrong and it breaks your story." but accomplishes the same thing. The more careful you are with your author's ego the more likely they are to take your advice. And you can get more blunt with them in future edits as you get to know each other better.

Other forums: I got most of my clients through kboards. But most have moved on to other groups. So don't neglect other forums. 20booksto50k is the biggest, but beware the rules and only post in the places you're allowed. They have an offshoot called 20bookseditors that is worth looking up. There's also 20booksfantasy. And then each of the indie author podcasts has its own little facebook group where people share info and seek editors, so be sure to join the Sell More Books Show facebook group as well as the Self Publishing Formula facebook group.

Raise your prices fast. Don't drag it out over three years like I did. There aren't enough good editors out there right now. Authors are still struggling to find and keep them. I know this because my own calendar is overbooked.

Good luck,
Dustin

They had some follow up questions for me. Here's my answers.

I tried my best to answer
Though this is all just my opinion, and I've still got a lot to learn.

1. How long would you recommend to wait until I start to charge? Three months, six months?

I would set a rate almost immediately so that anyone who likes your free edits knows what it will cost to hire you for the sequel. 90% of my work is repeat customers hiring me for sequels. And half of my clients write 3 or more books a year, so a handful of regulars keep me in business year round.

If you are honest with your clients about your experience levels, I found that a lot of people are happy to pay for an inexperienced editor, because experienced editors are so expensive. I was so insecure that I didn't call what I did editing at first. I called it Developmental Beta reading or Advanced Beta Reading. That also allowed me to relax and not stress too much about the job I was doing. They knew they weren't paying for perfection. They were just paying for me to spend a week giving their book my full attention. I never got a complaint, because I always delivered above and beyond what was promised.

When you're comfortable that you know what an edit looks like. Set a price. Then when you have gaps in your schedule you can post on here and say: *I have time to do one free edit this*

month any takers? Or 50% off edits this month. Or \$99 edits this month. Then when you've got enough lined up to keep you busy for a while, advertise your regular rates and see if you can get any takers. As long as you're honest about your experience levels, it shouldn't be an issue.

2. What price would you think is fair to start with?

My prices are middle of the road for indie editors, but trad publishing would consider it much too low. I charge \$8 per 1k for developmental editing. I can do about 10k per day. It includes an editorial letter, comments throughout, probably averages out to one per page, but sometimes much less if the manuscript is very tidy. And I keep track changes turned on and occasionally tweak their language or catch typos if I feel like it, though that's more of the line editor's job. So the average book takes about ten days and earns me about \$800.

All of last year I charged \$5 per 1k. That was okay, but it was hard to make ends meet. I also was doing \$200 flat rate proofreading

For the first year I was charging \$1-\$3. I didn't have any professional full time authors hire me until I started charging \$3.

And there was six months at the beginning where I worked for free. But a few of the people who booked me when I first started are now selling a lot and have been willing to pay my new rates each time I increased. So I like to think our careers have grown together.

Here's the thing...it's not hard to find people willing to pay \$90 for a beta read. It's not hard to find people willing to pay \$200 for a novice developmental edit. So if I were you I'd not wait too long before you start to charge at least that much because it will make you feel good about yourself to be earning something for what you do.

3. Do you use an app or calendar for booking your clients?

I just use excel. I don't keep a public calendar because it makes my job harder when everyone can see my calendar. And because it gives me extra flexibility. When I'm seeking new clients I'll post openings. I will say: Hi everyone. I have openings for one more edit in December, two in January, three in Feb. Any takers?

Then when I am booking, I can adjust my calendar based on their needs. One edit might have a specific start date and a specific end date. Another might just say (client doesn't care when this happens as long as it's in January.) I tell clients to expect a three week turnaround time and I make sure I finish in two weeks so they are pleasantly surprised. But there are a few people whose books take longer than others, and I will pencil in extra time for their books as needed. They don't have to see any of that. They just know they booked one slot in the first half of January.

Also, there are times when I'm overbooked and want to shuffle edits around, I can do some emailing and phone calls and make room for an extra edit with some behind the scenes schedule

changes. Everyone is happy and I'm the only one who knows how complicated my damn schedule is.

I send out regular emails to my regulars to let them know when my schedule is getting full and when they should think about booking ahead.

Only problem with this private calendar method is I have to track it myself and have to be very good about saying no to things, when I don't have time. Otherwise I get overbooked.

This is important: Never lie about your calendar. Authors will forgive an editor if personal issues delay the edit start date by two weeks. But if you start it and they expect a two week turnaround, then a month goes by and they haven't heard from you, they'll start to get angry. It's always much better to say "Hey, my last two edits took longer than expected so I won't be able to start your December edit until the first week of January," than to say nothing at all.

4. How fast do you recommend raising prices? Every 6 months until I get to a certain rate? Or should it depend on work load?

I went too slow. My increases went something like this:

Free

2 mo \$0.75 per 1000 words

6 mo \$1.50

1 yr \$2.50

1.5 yr \$3

2 yr \$4

2.5 yr \$5

3 yr \$6

3.5 yr \$8

I didn't raise rates on existing clients more than once a year. So existing clients were almost always getting a big discount, while newcomers were paying my new rates. It wasn't until this year when I decided that wasn't sustainable and brought everyone up to the same new rate. And I wrote them all a nice letter and they were all really supportive.

I don't recommend doing what I did. It took too long and I spent too many years struggling to make ends meet while trying to decide if I could afford to quit my day job. Then after I quit the day job, I spent too long trying to pay my bills on \$4 per 1k.

Here's how I would do it if I were to do it again:

Start: Free for new clients, repeat clients pay \$2-3 per 1k.

But as soon as you've got a full calendar and are booked a few months in advance, figure out how much money you need to live. And get there as fast as possible. Don't muck around in the \$3-5 range too long like I did. Because that's not enough money to replace a minimum wage job, but just expensive enough that you've priced out people who aren't pro, and most pros will happily pay more than that. Also, your repeat customers are your biggest fans. If they really appreciate what you do, they'll be happy to pay your full rate. Don't starve yourself trying to keep

them at the old prices.

Indie authors don't care how much experience you have. Only that you do good work. So charge what you need and be honest about your experience and abilities.

5. Do you use an app for billing? and what method of payment do your clients use? (wire transfer, paypal, payoneer, some other method). Also, do your clients pay half and half, upfront or at the end of the edit?

I use paypal and transferwise. I wish there was a cheaper alternative to paypal. Transferwise is that. But it's only good for international transfers. And their customer service isn't great.

Any job that takes two weeks or less, I just tell them they can pay me after they've looked it over and are 100% happy. **This isn't normal and I don't recommend others do it. But it works for me.** It keeps me honest and helps me finish on time. But the main reason I don't take upfront payment and offer a full refund is I hate doing free sample edits of first chapters. And this has helped me to avoid that.

Because the pay after approach is risky I carefully vet new clients. When an author asks me for an edit, I make sure we exchange a few emails where they tell me what the book's about, what their intentions are with the book/series, and what similar books they would compare it to. I'll ask them what inspired them to become a writer, how much experience they have, what they like about it. This is mostly just so I can make sure our personalities are compatible. I will sometimes ask to see the first two or three chapters of their book and skim that to get an idea of their writing style. (Never make the decision on first chapter, because some people take advantage of free sample edits, or workshops, to polish up their opening pages but neglect the rest of the book.) If at any point in this little back and forth I feel uncomfortable, I politely back out of the project. **It's worth repeating: The responsible thing to do would be get half or full payment up front. But most of my clients are old friends at this point so it is rare that I bother.**

Sometimes a new client wants more than a Developmental edit. They want a massive full edit that takes a month or two. I don't like doing this or spending more than a month on any one project. But if they can talk me into it then in that case I charge double my Developmental rate and ask for half paid upfront and make them sign a contract. But the shorter edits are what indie authors seem to prefer.

Wow, what a rant. It's been a while since I sat down and thought through all my quirky business practices. Hope it doesn't overwhelm you.

Best of luck,
Dustin