Proofreading or Editing – What's the Difference?

You know your document needs polishing up, but you're not sure whether to have it proof-read or opt for a full editing job. How do you know which option to take?

To summarise the differences in brief, proofreading usually involves checking the document for errors in areas such as spelling and grammar, whereas editing is more concerned with the overall quality of the writing as well as accuracy. Below we give some pointers that should help you decide which service is for you:

Proofreading usually involves checking to ensure that the following are correct:

a) Spelling – although a spellchecker is useful, it will not spot mistakes such as, their instead of there, or wine instead of whine. This is where an experienced proof-reader is useful.

b) Syntax – this involves the rules of language and the way in which words are put together to form sentences and phrases.

c) Typos - short for typographical errors, which are usually errors in printing or typing, for example, hitting the wrong key by mistake.

d) Grammatical errors, which also include errors in punctuation.

Editing is more concerned with the overall quality of the written work. An editor will look at the structure of a piece of writing to see if it can be improved in any way. He will make suggestions regarding ways to enhance the flow and make the piece easier to understand. The editor will also check for inconsistency, repetition and contradiction.

The overall organisation of the document will be important to the editor. For example, do the paragraphs link to each other, and do different parts of the document tie in with each other? There should be a logical order and smooth transition between paragraphs. Any numbering system used for different sections of the document should be consistent.

Other factors that an editor will look at are:

Is the writing style appropriate for the readership?

Is the writing too long-winded, and could it be made more concise by cutting out excessive words and phrases?

Editing is usually more costly than proofreading because there is more work involved, and an editor usually needs to have more writing skills than a proofreader.

Your decision as to whether to employ a proofreader or an editor will ultimately depend on whether you want to have your document checked for accuracy, or whether you believe that the quality of the writing can be improved by allowing someone to cast a professional eye over your work. In either case, hiring a professional can prove invaluable in terms of the overall impact of your finished document.

434 words