

# “It Is Rewarding to Read Books and Journals Before They Are Published and Get Them Polished for Publication”



Karen Ette



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**Abstract** In our interview with Karen Ette, she tells us about her journey from PhD into working as an editor and proofreader, as well as a university chaplain. Her academic work was in studying Great War fiction. Karen’s roles are varied, encompassing the editing of fiction and non-fiction works, plus PhD theses, providing pastoral and bereavement support at the university, and maintaining the chaplaincy library. Karen offers practical advice for those considering a similar path, including details of proofreading and copy-editing training, seeking career guidance, and discussing factors that drew her to her current roles. Finally, Karen highlights the importance of being true to oneself when considering career paths and maintaining personal happiness in the chosen work.

## Contents

Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?.....	266
What was the focus of your PhD?.....	266
As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career plans?.....	267
Can you tell us more about the proofreading and copy-editing training?	
What did these entail?.....	267
What do you do as a university chaplain?.....	268
Can you tell us a bit about what day-to-day life is like in your current role?.....	268
What do you like most about your work?.....	269
And what do you like least about your work?.....	269

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How do you think having a PhD has helped you succeed in your current position?.....	269
If someone currently finishing their PhD were considering a position similar to yours, how might they decide if it would be a good fit?.....	270
If someone was interested in pursuing a similar career path, what would you suggest they do to better prepare themselves?.....	270
A lot of people like academia because they feel it gives them an opportunity to work on a topic that they deeply care about. Do you think this is also true in your current position?.....	271
Another reason many like academia is that they feel it provides them with more freedom than they think they would get in other positions. How much freedom do you feel you have to work on what you think is interesting?.....	271
Have you thought about returning to academia as a lecturer?.....	271
Based on your journey, what advice or suggestions do you want to pass on to someone who's currently finishing their PhD?.....	272
Is there anything else you'd like to tell someone reading this interview?.....	272

## **Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?**

Karen: I am Dr Karen Ette and work in two different areas: I am a professional member of the Chartered Institute for Editors and Proofreaders and work freelance as a copy-editor, proofreader and development editor. I also work with a hybrid publisher (Goldcrest Books). My work is with both fiction and non-fiction authors, publishers and research students.

My undergrad, post-grad and PhD were all undertaken at Loughborough University and I am now on the chaplaincy team as a methodist lay chaplain (which means I haven't been ordained). In this role I support students and staff at the university whether they have a faith or none.

## **What was the focus of your PhD?**

I began my PhD in 2011 having gained an MA in English and creative writing. My PhD was also in English, contemporary and modern, and my focus was on Great War fiction. Its title is *Heroism in the Abstract* and examines social history as well as military history. Using unpublished, unseen resources, such as soldiers' diaries, letters and postcards, together with archived documents, PhD theses in the British Library, non-fiction accounts and published Great War fiction, I concentrated on Leicestershire in the Great War, especially the Leicestershire Regiment. There had been no Great War fiction about Leicestershire and that was the lacuna I needed to fill.

## **As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career plans?**

My first priority was to write a novel from the writing and research I had done for the PhD. Having completed the teaching qualification I also continued to teach undergraduates on the publishing module, and a few part-time, bought-in sessions for creative writing MA students. When addressing the minor corrections post-viva, I realised that many of them would not have been needed had the thesis been professionally proofread. Shortly after that I began training in proofreading with the Publishing Training Centre and qualified in March 2017. Following on from there I did a copy-editing course and qualified in December 2017. Development editing courses followed in 2020.

I had also joined the university chaplaincy, initially just to cover staff absence, but then became a chaplain in 2016, the same year that my PhD was conferred.

## **Can you tell us more about the proofreading and copy-editing training? What did these entail?**

My interest is in line- and copy-editing, but to gain the necessary qualification it was essential to take the proofreading course, which was 50 hours (over 12 months) via distance learning. This involved six independently marked modules:

- Techniques and good practice.
- Proofreading or proof-editing?
- Working on PDFs I.
- Working on PDFs II.
- Working for publishers.
- The BSI symbols (British Standards Institution symbols for editing, such as to denote the insertion or deletion of letters).

The copy-editing course was more taxing and was 70 hours (over 18 months), distance learning. There were seven independently marked units, which covered:

- Fundamental copy-editing skills to work on fiction and non-fiction, and on many styles of text and websites.
- The particular aspects of copy-editing that are relevant mainly to books and journals, giving you the tools needed to work in the either field.
- Working on-screen and on paper.
- Managing more complex non-fiction projects.
- Dealing efficiently with detailed tables, technical drawings, figures and end matter.
- Briefing an illustrator and editor.
- Covering the requirements of the wider business world as well as publishing.

The development editing courses I took were for fiction, one was theory and the other in practice. I completed these in May 2020. I work in all three areas although the most in-demand is copy-editing.

When joining the Chartered Institute for Editors and Proofreaders (CIEP), I began as an intermediate member as I had the necessary qualifications for this. Their membership grades reflect the high standards of professional competence and conduct that the Institute upholds. As part of their mission to promote these standards, they expect each member to progress to the professional grades as they build up their training, skills and work experience. Each grade carries its own requirements.

Upgrading to professional membership required further training and a minimum of 500 hours of editing work (as well as a timed test). I achieved this in July 2020.

## **What do you do as a university chaplain?**

My main area of work within the Chaplaincy at Loughborough University is pastoral and I head up our bereavement and loss support. I qualified as a bereavement counsellor with Cruse Bereavement Care in 1999. Another responsibility I have is that of the chaplaincy library, and although not a librarian, I do love books and so was asked to take on that role too.

Within such a large organisation, students and staff may have to wait a while before they can access counselling. We work with the counselling and well-being services and often receive referrals from there. Where support is required, we often ‘stand in the gap’.

## **Can you tell us a bit about what day-to-day life is like in your current role?**

In the Chaplaincy we support students and staff alike; we are fully inclusive, non-judgemental and support those with no faith equally with those who are people of faith. We never proselytise. I also support special services, both religious and non-religious, including plaque dedications and remembrance. We have a large number of faith groups who use the building and chaplains and are often invited to events, or even just to speak to the students about our role. We welcome visits from local scout groups, schools, etc. Our strapline is: Here to help, here to listen, here to care.

## **What do you like most about your work?**

As a chaplain giving support to someone in distress, it is rewarding over the weeks and months to see them grow and flourish. Bereavement and pastoral support is satisfying when you are effectively made redundant. It's always good to see someone who has struggled come into the Chaplaincy just to say hello, tell us their news, or maybe have a cup of tea with you in the cafe. Another joyful occasion is that of graduation. It's so good to see students achieve their goals. This year, during Lent, we gave out 'random acts of kindness' which were small hearts impregnated with flower seeds – and we always have chocolate. At certain times of the year, pre-exams, Lent, Open Days, for example, we will have a stand in the university library and this gives us an opportunity to informally chat with students.

As a freelance editor, it is rewarding to read books and journals before they are published and get them polished for publication. Editing helps improve writing and support writers. It's pleasing when an author comes back again to have their next book edited. An author said to me recently that they didn't know an editor could enjoy a book while working on it, and I assured them that it is definitely possible, and believe me, I've seen some shockers, but they were much improved when they left my desk. After publication, I will add the book to my website.

It's really pleasing when a PhD student whose thesis I have proofread makes contact after their viva to let me know that they have passed.

## **And what do you like least about your work?**

To be honest, as a chaplain I don't think there is anything to dislike. Data gathering for university statistics isn't a particularly pleasurable activity, but a hoop that has to be jumped through. You can't quantify chaplaincy and admin isn't particularly enjoyable.

As a freelance editor, working on screen for a long time can be taxing as concentration has to be one hundred percent at all times. I also dislike doing the admin: quotes, invoices, booking forms, and tax returns. Website updating is also something I don't particularly enjoy.

## **How do you think having a PhD has helped you succeed in your current position?**

Having a PhD certainly helps when working in an academic institution. As an undervalued female chaplain there can be a degree of unconscious bias, but having Dr as a title does help. I completed my undergraduate studies, master's degree and PhD at

the institution where I now work and therefore can have empathy with other students, both undergraduates and postgraduates, plus staff on campus in both my pastoral, and academic roles.

When working with PhD students on their theses, I will only proofread a thesis, not copy-edit, and always ask for, and adhere to, the guidelines from whichever university the student is at.

On completion of my PhD, *Heroism in the Abstract*, I turned my research into a novel, and filled that lacuna of Leicestershire in the Great War. My book, *Don't be Late in the Morning*, was published in December 2019 and the book launches were held in the Leicestershire village of Syston, where the home front setting was, and Loughborough's Carillon Tower and War Memorial. The book is still selling well. I am often asked when the next one will be published.

During the PhD years I also set up a writing group, Rulers Wit (an anagram of LU [Loughborough University] Writers), which is still going today. We have our own website and have published six books to date.

### **If someone currently finishing their PhD were considering a position similar to yours, how might they decide if it would be a good fit?**

First of all, consider whether or not they want to stay in academia or move into a different environment. If they are looking to work in a pastoral role, then academia is probably not the way forward.

Undertaking some voluntary work to experience what it might be like is always useful, but not always affordable, if a student loan needs to be repaid.

For editing, read and explore websites such as the Chartered Institute for Editors and Proofreaders, the Publishing Training Centre, and traditional publishers, to gain as much background knowledge as possible before making any decisions.

Becoming an author does not pay well, but there are other ways of finding income from writing and copywriting, which is a good alternative, while you write your bestseller.

### **If someone was interested in pursuing a similar career path, what would you suggest they do to better prepare themselves?**

More training would be required if, for example, counselling might be a good fit. The same applies for anyone wanting to move into the publishing world. Many publishers send their editorial assistants to the Publishing Training Centre to gain the desired qualification. As I said, read and explore as many relevant websites as possible.

A careers adviser at the university is definitely worth having a meeting with as they are trained to signpost you in the most suitable roles. You may not agree with their findings, or their advice, but the interviews can help with self-reflection to equip you with a clearer idea of where you would like your career to take you.

**A lot of people like academia because they feel it gives them an opportunity to work on a topic that they deeply care about. Do you think this is also true in your current position?**

Yes, I do, but perhaps not in a conventional way. My role within academia is pastoral, although as I mentioned earlier, it did begin as a lecturer in creative writing for masters' students and for a final year module of the publishing course in the English department at the university, which was entitled Publishers, Authors and Agents. This experience gave me an understanding of what I didn't want to do, but working with students who wanted to move into that field gave me the incentive to help writers in a different way – editing.

As an editor, when proofreading theses, I understand the constraints, what is required, what isn't, how to use different referencing systems, and to some extent, what examiners are looking for. I also think that PhD candidates feel that they are in safe hands with someone who has undertaken and achieved a PhD themselves.

**Another reason many like academia is that they feel it provides them with more freedom than they think they would get in other positions. How much freedom do you feel you have to work on what you think is interesting?**

I have lots of freedom in my role; some days I'm a chaplain in the morning and an editor in the afternoon, depending on the workload. However, when the demand is high in both areas, leisure time is almost non-existent, but it's – cliché coming up – swings and roundabouts. Term time is obviously busier when the undergraduate students are not on holiday.

I mentioned writing a sequel to *Don't be Late in the Morning* but haven't had time to do that, so while I have the freedom, I don't have the opportunity yet.

**Have you thought about returning to academia as a lecturer?**

No, I prefer to work within a caring, supportive environment – although as a lecturer I would be caring and supportive – without the pressures and constraints that an academic career brings. Preparing lectures, delivering them and then marking

assessments steal so much time that could be spent in a more rewarding way. I am able to help students, both undergraduates and postgraduates, in times of need, bereavement, for example, and to polish their theses so that they can be the best they can before submission.

### **Based on your journey, what advice or suggestions do you want to pass on to someone who's currently finishing their PhD?**

Be true to yourself. If academia isn't for you, don't try to fit the mould. Take time out; you can always come back to it later. If, however, academia is definitely your intended career path, start looking for suitable opportunities as soon as you feel ready; you don't always have to wait until after your PhD has been conferred. Working in an academic environment doesn't have to be lecturing; there are many other opportunities within academic institutions.

As I mentioned earlier, see a careers adviser to help plan and navigate life after viva.

If your university doesn't have a PhD support network, led by PhD students, think about setting one up. It's a legacy you can leave in support of PhD students who follow. It doesn't have to be exclusively academic; it can give PhD students a social opportunity with other like-minded people too.

In my pastoral role, students sometimes tell me that they are not being supported by their supervisor(s). You need knowledgeable, supportive supervisors; and if there is a problem, address it as soon as you are able, and never be afraid to request a change. Sometimes people just don't get on, and it's no one's fault, but something that can be remedied.

A tip for the viva: take a bottle of water with you in case none is provided (although it should be) and a notepad so that if you are unsure of a question, write it down; this gives you 'thinking time'.

### **Is there anything else you'd like to tell someone reading this interview?**

Be happy in whatever you choose to do, and if you need your thesis proofreading, you now know who to contact.

**Thank you so much for sharing your experiences and advice, Karen!**