

## Editing in an age of troubled writing

Imagine: You're working in your office and there's a thump outside the door. You open the door to a pile of manila folders. The folders contain manuscripts for publication in this journal. You are to copy edit them all by a particular date.

Back at your desk, you see that the first item is a 50-page paper reviewing the efficacy and safety of a genetically engineered drug. The font is tiny and the pages are thick with symbols and a pharmacist editor's handwritten corrections and requests. There are multiple tables, heavily ruled and byzantine, and 141 semicomplete references. After more shuffling and tasting, you feel momentarily daunted by the task that lies ahead. The article is an important contribution by four brilliant clinicians, but some of what they've written gets in the way of what they're trying to say.

Also in the pile are an editorial a third again as long as the space into which it must fit, a letter to the editor that started life as a commentary, an article on a lipid program written by someone for whom English is not the mother tongue, and a Managed Care Forum installment in which the abbreviation "ERTIOC" is used 13 times but not defined once.

Some of the makings of another issue of this journal. You sharpen your pencil and start work.

Authors may believe that their manuscripts, having been carefully refereed and thoroughly revised, are ready for almost rote translation into the final print and electronic media. Although that is sometimes true, more typically the job is not yet done. Rather, a new phase is beginning that focuses on a different yet intimately related facet of the paper: the writing itself.

For the facts may be there, but how are they presented? How clearly will they come across to readers who have never heard of ERTIOC? Why does paragraph 3 in the discussion section begin with "however" when there is nothing in the preceding text with which the statement can be contrasted? Did this "however" just tumble from the sky, or was the author trying to say something else that needs to be coaxed from between the lines? Is the essay on excellence itself excellent in terms of grammar, diction, and organization?

What if a sentence makes no sense? Or a passage is so imprecise that there's no way to be sure how many patients received drug A and how many drug B? What if the math on cost savings doesn't add up? What if instructions on dosage and administration are so ambiguous that a patient might be harmed as a result?

The challenge to the editors is to seek answers to such questions and to wield our pencils and keyboards in ways that provide resolution without displeasing our valued authors, whose expertise in their chosen fields may not always be matched by training in writing. We also have to be mindful of the requirements of the journal and the needs of the individual ASHP members, for whom and their patients it's all about.

Talley<sup>1</sup> in 1991 reviewed the life cycle of *AJHP* manuscripts from submission to publication and noted that, even with the reviews and revisions, it is not practical to apprise authors of every editorial change they will find in their galley proofs. "The process," he wrote, "requires authors to trust that the editors' changes make a good piece of work even better, enhancing its readability and thus helping the authors to communicate their message." This relationship of trust is backed up by the galleys, in which authors can see what we have done, set us straight if we have erred, and make additional late changes.

Alas, a handful of authors—often those who have less experience writing for publication or who have published in journals with less exacting standards<sup>1</sup>—do become displeased, even angry, that their wording was "tampered with." A few others write letters thanking us for having "improved their work." The rest simply accept what we do as routine.

As I once observed in an explication of the dirty mechanics of copy editing (the building's maintenance workers have wryly noted to me the drifts of eraser crumbs beneath my desk), the editor serves as "a hidden bridge between the reader's interests (to understand) and the author's (to be understood)."<sup>2</sup> Another task is to inject, where appropriate, some life into writing that may be dead on arrival and thus unlikely to animate the reader. The point of it all is not to impose unreasonably on authors but rather, working from our foundation of many years of experience with literally thousands of papers, to help them convey their ideas transparently and their facts accurately. Ideally, it's a win-win proposition, with ample room for negotiation,<sup>1</sup> but there are so many details to juggle in so little time that some may get unintentionally dropped and broken, for which we apologize. Editors would be foolish to cultivate notions that they themselves write and edit flawlessly; everyone needs an editor, even editors. But I sometimes find myself longing for a greater understanding of what editors everywhere are striving to accomplish and for a broader spirit of cooperation and respect.

1. Talley CR. What have you done to my manuscript!? *Am J Hosp Pharm.* 1991; 48:2388. Editorial.
2. Kepple SR. Why journal manuscripts are edited. *Am J Hosp Pharm.* 1991; 48:909,912.

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