

Building Good Relationships with ESL Authors

Katharine O'Moore-Klopf

The publish-or-perish mandate now affects scientists in many nations. Scientists in some countries outside the United States and United Kingdom are required to publish their research articles in English-language peer-reviewed journals in the United States or United Kingdom before they will be granted jobs, tenure, and sometimes even housing—a requirement documented by journalists^{1,2} and confirmed by some of my clients. Although the scientists may do impeccable work, often their English needs such heavy polishing that target journals will not enter their manuscripts into the peer-review process. In my experience, that situation has created a lucrative market for freelance medical copyeditors who can offer substantive editing for English-as-a-second-language (ESL) authors. Using the tips that I provide here will help you to build and maintain a thriving clientele of ESL authors.

Make Communication as Easy as Possible

Take steps to ease communication; good communication helps to avoid frustration for your ESL authors and allows you to provide them with the best editing possible. That doesn't mean that you must be multilingual. My ESL clients live in such places as Brazil, China, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Egypt, Finland, France, Hong Kong, India, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, Sweden, Taiwan, and Turkey, yet I speak only English fluently.

Remember that ESL authors must go over extra hurdles to get their work published in English: writing in a language that they're not fluent in or having someone translate their writing into English and dealing with a copyeditor who may not speak their language. I take the following steps to ease communication:

1. **Communicate by e-mail rather than by telephone.** Written communication gives your authors the chance to go over what you've said as many times as necessary for full comprehension.
2. **Even if you have your own domain and you receive e-mail through it, have a backup free e-mail account.** I receive e-mail at *editor@kokedit.com*, but I also have a backup Yahoo e-mail account. That is because authors in some nations may not be able to communicate with me otherwise; for instance, China blocks some domains and Internet service providers. Communicate through your domain-related e-mail account whenever possible because it comes across as more professional. Switch to communicating through your backup e-mail account if you suddenly stop hearing from an author through your domain-related account.
3. **Explain, explain, explain:**
 - **Explain the editing process step by step:** You edit, the author reviews the editing, you do cleanup editing, and the author gets the final manuscript. Include an explanation of how and when you expect to be paid and the hours and days when you are available for consultation.
 - **Explain how you will show queries.** Will you use Microsoft Word's comment balloons? Will you use inline comments in boldface and in brackets, all highlighted in yellow?
 - **Explain that you will handle any major structural changes for authors,** such as renumbering reference lists.
4. **Avoid using long, complex sentences** in your e-mails or queries. Break compound and complex sentences into smaller ones for better comprehension.
5. **Avoid using contractions** in your e-mails or queries. Some languages do not have them, so their use will confuse some ESL authors.
6. **Avoid using idioms** in your e-mails or queries, because many idioms don't carry over into other languages and will make your meaning unclear.
7. **Tell your authors often that you will be happy to answer all questions about procedure or about your editing.** That gives your authors permission to be straightforward. In some cultures, it is seen as impolite to be direct, and lack of direct communication can hamper thorough editing.

Between Author and Editor

continued

8. **Find a way to communicate in your authors' languages.** If you've been editing a long time, you may have written boilerplate instructions for how you want authors to review your editing. You'll endear yourself to new-to-you ESL authors if you can provide those instructions in your authors' first languages. Freelancers in the United States can deduct the cost of obtaining professional translations as a business expense. Providing translated instructions shows your authors that your goal is to help them, and it increases the chances that they will follow your instructions.
9. **Suggest specific fixes** to problem text rather than asking the author to come up with fixes, and ask whether each suggestion conveys what your author wants to say.
10. **Counteract authors' dismay at a sea of strikeouts in their manuscripts.** They may feel overwhelmed at how much polishing their English needs. Assure them that even authors who are fluent in English need help from editors. For example, when you write for publication, your work is edited by someone else. Thank them for the privilege of working with them.

Set Authors at Ease about Your Fees

Sometimes ESL authors don't know the value of copyediting and thus think that they shouldn't have to pay much for it. Some may request a discount on your fee, citing the state of their country's economy. Giving discounts for time-consuming substantive ESL editing will quickly drive your income down.

- **Point out that you are providing a specialized service**—not just editing but *medical* editing, and not just medical editing but *ESL medical* editing. Compare your expertise with that of a medical specialist: If you were a physician, you would be, say, a cardiovascular surgeon rather than a general practitioner. This is a financial model that your authors will understand.
- **Explain that authors are making an investment in their career by paying for ESL editing.** Your editing will help their research to shine and may help them to get published and thus advance their

career, and this can increase their income in the long term. However, *never* promise that your editing guarantees that their article will be accepted for publication. This is what I tell my ESL authors:

Please note that having your manuscript edited by me does not guarantee that it will be accepted for publication by the journal of your choice, although such editing does help your writing to be more polished. Journal editors base their decision to publish or not publish an article on the quality of the research, on how well that research is documented and described, on how important they believe the research to be, and on whether such research has already been described in their journal or elsewhere. Those are facets that I cannot fix by editing your writing. I can, however, edit your writing to make it flow smoothly and follow the conventions of your target journal.

Turn Authors into Repeat Clients

Every freelance copyeditor wants to have many repeat clients. You can engage in several practices that will draw ESL authors back to you again and again:

- **Always be straightforward and communicate about all issues in a timely manner.** Keep your authors informed about schedule changes or any unexpected difficulties.
- **Take advantage of opportunities for small talk.** A little bit of small talk makes you seem more approachable. If authors mention an award that they will soon receive or a presentation that they have been invited to make, put a reminder on your work calendar. Then on the appropriate day, e-mail the authors to wish them luck. Congratulate them again, or whatever else is appropriate.
- **At the end of projects, thank authors for the privilege of working with them and invite them to contact you for their next project.** Also note that you will gladly accept referrals to their colleagues.
- **Send receipts to authors because doing so is an opportunity to encourage**

repeat business. At the bottom of your receipts, thank authors for using your services, note that you hope to work with them again soon, and mention that you accept referrals. In e-mails that you attach your receipts to, tell authors that you enjoy hearing about their successes, and invite them to e-mail you when their article, chapter, monograph, or book is published. Be sure to follow up with a congratulatory message.

- **At the end of every year, send your ESL authors greeting cards by "snail mail",** thanking them for their business in the preceding year and wishing them a happy, healthy new year. Enclose a few of your business cards; they may pass these on to colleagues.
- **Research the national holidays in the countries where your authors live.** On each such holiday, e-mail your authors good wishes and thank them for having used your editorial services.
- **When you go out of town, send e-mails to your authors ahead of time to let them know.** You don't want to leave authors who need your help wondering why you're not responding to their e-mails. These notifications also remind authors whom you worked with in the past how pleasant your collaboration was, so you may find project offers waiting when you return.

References

1. Jacobs A. Rampant fraud threat to China's brisk ascent. *New York Times* 2010 Oct 6; Sect. A:1. Available from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/07/world/asia/07fraud.html>.
2. Qui J. Publish or perish in China. *Nature* 2010;463:142–143. doi:10.1038/463142a.

KATHARINE O'MOORE-KLOPF (www.kokedit.com) of KOK Edit, East Setauket, NY, has worked in publishing since 1984; January 2011 marked her 16th year as a freelance copyeditor. As a medical copyeditor with an ESL specialty, she has helped researchers in more than 20 nations to publish their articles in 35 US and UK medical journals. She is also the creator and curator of the Copyeditors' Knowledge Base (<http://www.kokedit.com/library.shtml>).