

# “Copy Editor” vs “Manuscript Editor” vs . . . : Venturing onto the Minefield of Titles

**Cheryl Iverson**

In the spring of 2003, a request from a copy editor at the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* was taken to the senior staff meeting for consideration: Could the copy editors' title be changed to manuscript editor, a change that would—the requestor felt—better reflect the scope of work done and help gain the editor the respect needed to negotiate changes with authors? The group was in agreement with making a change that would reflect the work done and satisfy the staff—and (an important factor in days of tight budgets) cost nothing! When all the copyediting staff were polled on the change, agreement was almost unanimous; a few felt that “copy editor” encompassed *more* than “manuscript editor”, reflecting that editors also edit figures and tables in addition to the manuscript, but the objections were in the minority and were not strong. Stacy Christiansen, director of editing for *JAMA*, supported the change: “I have always associated ‘copy editor’ with newspapers. . . . While copy editors perform valuable services for newspapers and other media, I think the medical editing positions on *JAMA/Archives* [see Figure] and similar publications are different. We don't write headlines and worry about copy fitting. . . . We also have a much richer relationship with the authors on each article . . . and we edit substantively.”

Christiansen's sentiments were echoed by a few colleagues in Chicago whom I polled. Margaret Perkins, chief manuscript editor for the medical journals published by the University of Chicago Press, responded: “We use ‘manuscript editor’ here: copyediting is viewed as

---

CHERYL IVERSON is managing editor of the *AMA Archives Journals*.

**Figure. Job description for a *JAMA/Archives* manuscript editor, as posted on the CSE Web site in June 2003.**

## Manuscript Editor

You will edit scientific articles written by physicians and researchers for a specialized medical readership of clinicians and academicians. You will edit technical medical copy on an electronic publishing system for clarity, accuracy, precision, readability, technical and structural accuracy, and strict conformity to AMA style. You will substantively rewrite all copy as necessary, particularly for authors whose first language is not English. You will perform research for clarification and verification of medical terms, technical terms, drug names, correct units of measure, reference citations, medical product names, and medical manufacturers' and institutions' names and locations, as well as perform mathematical conversions to the international system of units (SI). You will also edit charts and graphs, tables, and equations to conform to AMA style and to ensure the integrity and clarity of tabular and graphics content, and you will create tables from prose, make tables into prose, or combine tables as appropriate. In addition you will negotiate the approval of edited copy and perform liaison duties between the author, the editor, and other editorial and production staff members.

lighter than manuscript editing.” Diane Berneath Lang, assistant director of publications at the Radiological Society of North America, concurred: “We use ‘manuscript editor’ at RSNA. Our editors do more than just edit the copy, as a ‘copy editor’ might do (eg, checking spelling, correcting punctuation, and formatting). Our editors actually do substantive editing, revising the manuscripts for consistency and readability by the readers (eg, editing to ensure that all readers—including those for whom English is not the native language and those who are not experts in radiology—could reproduce the study or apply the technique in their own patients). Thus we prefer the title ‘manuscript editor’ since we are editing the manuscript as a whole.”

This reminded me of a recent discussion on titles that had appeared on the European Association of Science Editors (EASE) listserv. (This dialogue was summarized in the EASE bulletin, *European Science Editing*, in August 2003.<sup>1</sup>) Joy

Burroughs-Boenisch, freelance editor and translator in the Netherlands, asked, “Is ‘technical editor’ another name for ‘manuscript editor?’” and “Is the technical editor also responsible for the copyediting?” Kathleen Lyle, freelance editor in England, responded that “editorial titles and job descriptions are a minefield—there is no guarantee of consistency between one publisher and another, or one journal or another.” She responded “probably” to Dr Burroughs-Boenisch's first question and, to the second, “Yes, and for proofreading (or collation), indexing, and liaison with typesetters and other suppliers. Also wrapping parcels, making coffee, and all the other things people do in offices.”

It was the issue of substantive editing and working closely with the author that most often was key to characterizing the editor's work, regardless of the titles used. On one side was what some called copyediting (and some called technical editing): a lighter editing that focused

on tidying up—ensuring house style, correcting misspellings, and attending to grammar, punctuation, and usage. On the other side was what some refer to as substantive editing (and some called technical editing, or work done by an author's editor): deleting redundant information, asking for clarification of meaning, shortening verbose text, reformatting figures and tables as appropriate, clarifying questions from the scientific (content) editor, and working closely with the author. For some who responded, the dividing line was often the point of acceptance of the manuscript: what was done *before* acceptance was the second type of editing; what was done *after* acceptance was the first type. This is related to the question of allegiance raised by some as the determining factor: The technical editor works for the *publisher*, and the author's editor works for the *author*, so the author's editor may be more likely to do the second type of editing and the publisher's editor the first type.

However, as seen in the comments from editorial directors at *JAMA/Archives*, *RSNA*, and the University of Chicago, that distinction does not hold true. Mary Ellen Kerans, in Spain, noted that "I've found that copyediting has been redefined with each generation. . . . When I first edited in the 1970s, no one used terms like 'substantive editor' because copy editors were all such." I think that there is no doubt that many of them still are.

Barbara Wallraff, editor of the newsletter *Copy Editor: Language News for the Publishing Professional* and editor of the "Word Court" column in *The Atlantic*, related her own experience as a copy editor and seconded that notion. When queried about the question of "copy editor" vs "manuscript editor", she responded: "At a publication like *The Atlantic*, the copy editor reads galleys and makes suggestions, which get passed along to the manuscript, or article, editor. The manuscript editor may (or may not) have commissioned the article in the first place; is responsible for any major reshaping, cutting, or other substantive editing that is done; and is the face of

the publication for that author, conveying comments about the article from other editors and the legal department, helping settle any disputes with the fact checker, making sure that the author gets paid, keeping him or her informed about changes of editorial direction, etc. It's true that the jobs of the copy editor and the manuscript editor overlap even in this model. When I worked as a copy editor, I was never hesitant about suggesting major substantive revisions when they seemed warranted. And particularly if the person responsible for the copyediting is also the person who works directly with the author, I can understand why he or she might want to be called a manuscript editor. It suggests responsibility for the manuscript, which, I think, seems to carry more authority than simply being responsible for the copy does."

The key is that regardless of whether the editor is editing before or after acceptance or working for the author or the publisher, the editor is really working for the reader and—if blessed with sufficient initiative, knowledge, and support—will perform tasks on both sides of the "divide" (light vs substantive editing) without separating them.

To see how people in the CSE database described themselves, there was a slight predominance of "manuscript editor" (or titles containing those words) over "copy editor" (or titles containing these words): 23 vs 16 (based on a "sort" of the database provided by Seth Beckerman, September 2003). Other titles found in the CSE database that might reflect similar types of work include "scientific/technical editor", "technical editor", "medical editor", "scientific editor", and "author's editor". A quick review of the mastheads of a convenience sample of journals on display in the American Medical Association's James S Todd Memorial Library contributed yet more titles that might fall into the same category: "staff editor" and "publisher's editor". The minefield is large.

But what amazed me in my review of these publications was that many of the scientific publications I surveyed includ-

ed none of these people in the masthead. The masthead included the editor of the journal; the associate, assistant, and deputy editors; the members of the editorial board; and perhaps the managing editor. No editorial or production staff were included. That prompted me to find out when *JAMA* began including the staff who work on the journals on its masthead—something I assumed had been done from time immemorial. Wrong. The first appearance of more than the managing editor or the division director of the editorial department was not until 1964. At that time, a one-third-page masthead was devoted to a list of staff involved in the work on the journal. That made me wonder whether, in addition to questions of what titles people hold, we should also inquire about how the work done by staff with all these titles is recognized.

One doesn't venture onto a minefield lightly. Aside from curiosity or daring, reasons for taking this risk might be to see how the minefield can be cleared or at least how it can be navigated safely. Curiosity and daring aside, here are a few thoughts for further reflection.

- It is important to be clear about responsibilities. Titles afford one way to do that. For in-house staff at a publisher, this can be achieved through a title that is linked to a detailed job description. For freelance staff, working with authors or publishers, it can be achieved through discussions and contracts.
- Responsibilities can grow—editors who show ability and initiative and have the support of those they work for can expand the boundaries of their editing in many different directions (for example, writing abstracts, rewriting text, and reformatting tables) and, by so doing, perhaps expand their titles.
- It is critical to recognize not only the work that is expected but the work that is done. Recognition may take the form of a title change (which may or may not be linked to a salary change), it may occur through the support that is given to the editor, and it may occur

*Titles continued*

through a listing on the masthead or positive comments from author to editor. As an example of such a title change, in 2002 *The Lancet* changed its manuscript editors' titles to assistant editor precisely because "they do more than editing" (for example, writing summaries of articles, writing short pieces for the end-of-year supplement, writing "News in Brief", and commissioning and editing the "Health and Human Rights" section of the journal [Zöe Mullan, senior editor, written communication, 3 November 2003]).

Why is it that the copy editor/manuscript editor/technical editor/author's editor question has for many excited such debate—been such a minefield? The minefield of titles exists for many titles beyond these—"managing editor", for example, a self-designation claimed by over 100 CSE members, covers an enormous range of tasks. Yet people do not seem to fret about it or write about it. Is it because freelance work is most often done in manuscript editing and this work requires a better clarification of what is required or requested? Is it because of the lack of recognition sometimes given to

the people who do copyediting or manuscript editing?

We have not cleared the minefield, only become a little more aware of its scope. And possibly gained a few ideas on how to walk through it more carefully: request clearer job descriptions, be willing to take initiative, request support for our contributions, and ask for greater recognition (as with authorship) of editing's contribution to the final publication. 🗨️

**Reference**

1. EASE-forum digest: March-June 2003. *European Science Editing* 2003 Aug;29:79-80.