Satisfactions of Science Editing: Experienced Manuscript Editors Reflect

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What satisfactions do manuscript editors in the sciences gain from their work? What motivates them to remain in the field? What experiences and anecdotes in these regards can they share? Those were among the questions that an editing company asked me to address in a talk to young editors working there.

To help answer the questions, I consulted by e-mail an array of science editors that I knew through the Council of Science Editors and other professional venues. All had substantial experience in manuscript editing and had been working in science editing for at least about 10 years; some had been science editors for more than 30 years. The following are highlights of the responses. The respondents and presentation host have granted permission to share the material.

Motivations and Satisfactions

For the respondents, sources of satisfaction and motivation regarding science editing included the abundance of intellectual stimulation; the opportunity for lifelong learning; the chance to help others and contribute to science and society; interactions with researchers, fellow editors, and others; and enjoyment of the editorial process itself.

Intellectual Stimulation

Respondents repeatedly mentioned being drawn by the intellectual stimulation inherent in editing manuscripts in the sciences. Tom Lang, of Tom Lang Communications and Training, stated, “I enjoy the intellectual process of determining what authors meant to say and the process of expressing it well, not just in words but also in tables and graphs.”

Freelance science editor Susan M Shirley wrote of “being able to work with brilliant people who write about fascinating research, sharing the authors’ passion for science, [and] learning something new each time I edit a paper”. Mary E Knatterud—who from St Paul, Minnesota, serves the Department of Surgery at the University of Arizona, Tucson—expressed appreciation for “the gift of being able to conscientiously read and creatively critique such a fascinating assortment of written work”.

Observed Gabe Waggoner, copy and production editor at the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics: “I think more critically than I used to. Editing has been good for my inner skeptic, I suppose.”

Lifelong Learning

The appeal of continual learning—about science, the editor’s craft, and publication technology—was another recurrent theme. “I love a challenge, and I love to learn,” wrote Marianne Mallia, of the Texas Heart Institute. “My day is filled with the challenges of learning and absorbing new information.”

Leslie Neistadt, managing editor of the Journal of Athletic Training, said, “I like the lifelong learning aspect of editing. Not a day goes by that I don’t learn something new.” She noted, “Sometimes that involves recognizing that I’ve been doing something wrong all these years (sigh), but that’s still valuable information.”

Stated Cheryl Iverson, of the AMA Archives Journals: “It’s fun to learn something new through editing a manuscript about it. And in medicine, it’s neat to ‘get the jump’ on the news by editing late-breaking stories.” In addition, Iverson said, “I continue to learn (through the help and encouragement of younger colleagues) about the many things that are possible when working online. It’s amazing!”

Helping and Contributing

Respondents mentioned drawing satisfaction from helping in various ways. “When I believe that I’ve helped make an important message clearer, I feel a personal sense of satisfaction,” wrote Stephanie Deming, a scientific editor in the Department of Scientific Publications at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center. Deming also noted finding it rewarding to help authors learn new skills, make more efficient use of their time, and advance in their careers.

Helping to develop terms for new procedures and techniques has also brought Deming satisfaction. “On several occasions over the years I’ve been able to persuade authors to use simpler terminology that gets . . . propagated through the medical literature,” she said. She also stated that cancer research “is something that I personally care much about, and that keeps me motivated”.

Neistadt tells of noticing, in an accepted paper that she was editing, a fact overlooked by reviewers and others: that a model had five steps, not six as stated. The author, Neistadt said, thanked her repeatedly for saving him from embarrassment and has continued to welcome editing.

Ability to contribute to the editing profession can be another appeal. Lang, for example, said he enjoys “pushing the profession . . . to new levels” by teaching and mentoring and by raising new topics for discussion among editors.

Collaboration—and Appreciation

Although editing has been stereotyped as solitary, collaboration was repeatedly cited as an appeal. “I enjoy being part of a team that publishes high-quality research in high-impact journals,” Lang stated.

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Similarly, Shirley mentioned being motivated by “working with other dedicated editors and authors to produce a good final product”. Iverson noted liking to work with other editors and with editorial boards. “I am sure I’m biased,” she said, “but I think editors are a great crowd of people.”

Some respondents mentioned satisfaction gained from educating authors. And some noted the pleasure of receiving authors’ thanks. “I love the giddy ‘it was accepted’ or ‘it’s now published’ announcements to me from authors,” wrote Knatterud. Iverson recalled being told by a book author: “Aside from my wife and myself, you are the only one who has read this material word for word with such care and attention.” Iverson said, “It’s great to hear your work is appreciated by someone who truly sees what you do.”

Deming stated that “positive feedback from authors is a huge motivator.” She recalled:

“I’ve had authors thank me for catching major logical flaws in arguments; for making papers and proposals much easier to understand; for making ESL [English as a second language] postdocs’ papers readable; for helping authors avoid practices that conflict with ethical conventions in scientific publishing; for pointing out important deviations from funding-agency requirements or author instructions; for assistance in identifying potential target journals; for assistance with requesting permissions and formatting figures; and for help with using Microsoft Word and EndNote.

Feedback from readers, too, can be rewarding. “It’s terrific,” Neistadt said, “when a student tells me that he or she can read our journal and understand it.”

**Other Appeals**

Neistadt indicated that for editors at journals, satisfactions can also include helping authors to have an experience that encourages repeat submissions. “When an author who has published in our journal submits new work to us”, she says, “that’s gratifying because it suggests that the review and production processes weren’t overly tedious and that the author appreciates the way the previous paper was handled.”

Other appeals can include autonomy and variety. Said Knatterud: “When I grab my red pen or, usually nowadays, my Track Changes cursor, I am in effect my own boss.” Susan Aiello, of WordsWorld Consulting, said, “I like the opportunity to work on a variety of medical and scientific materials, not only in content but also in style (for various audiences, for various purposes, etc.).” Similarly, Mallia states with enthusiasm: “I never know what subject tomorrow will bring.”

Tomorrow is unlikely, however, to bring manuscript editors widespread acclaim. Neistadt noted, “When a student is considering this type of career, I believe it’s important to think long and hard about whether he or she can be satisfied with a behind-the-scenes role and can gain a sense of accomplishment from the work itself.” Indeed, perhaps the greatest motivator for manuscript editors is enjoyment of the work. “I enjoy taking bloated text and making it tighter,” Waggoner said. “I also love working with tables.”

Stated Mallia: “I truly enjoy my work. Wanting to do my best and loving what I do is the best motivator I have ever had.”

**Keeping Motivated**

Despite the satisfactions, manuscript editors in the sciences sometimes do lose motivation. A variety of measures, however, can help to prevent or remedy such burnout.

“To be honest, I’m not always motivated! After editing a thousand-page manuscript for the third or fourth time, I can, and often do, lose my motivation,” Shirley admitted. “But, I don’t get paid if I don’t produce, so I have to motivate myself to continue working. When a large project seems overwhelming, I tackle it in small pieces—chapter by chapter. Eventually, it all comes together in the end. Patience and a desire to ‘get it right’ help, too.”

Mallia said that continuing to educate herself—for example, through conferences—has helped her to maintain motivation. “Getting the education to do my job correctly made my work much more pleasurable,” she stated. “Continuing education has been vital for me to say motivated as a medical writer and editor.”

Knatterud advised, “Keep priming your own vocational pump so that you don’t burn out.” She recommended making time for professional reading, being active in at least one professional organization, and doing some writing oneself, “if for no other reason than to be able to identify with what the authors you edit for go through”. She also advocated arranging for “flextime and flexplace options” so that one can edit when and where one can concentrate best. Finally, Knatterud said, “Balance all those hours hunched in front of a computer screen with fresh air, with physical activity, with emotional rejuvenation.”

She mentioned taking “a bona fide lunch break” outside her office almost every workday, generally with a friend or family member, and making sure to exercise regularly.

Fresh challenges, too, can aid in maintaining or restoring motivation. Aiello said that when her work started to seem too routine, she “decided to branch out into the world of health- and medicine-related trade nonfiction”. This additional scope, she said, brought new opportunities and acquainted her with new groups of people. “The point”, she observed, “is that there’s room for change and flexibility.”

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