

Substantive and Technical Editing: How Far Do You Go?

Chair:

Karen Potvin Klein

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Panelists:

Margaret Hoppenrath

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Joan C Hinchcliffe

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Karen Potvin Klein was largely unaware of how far her editing should go early in her medical-editing career because her supervisor made that decision. In contrast, Klein now works within boundaries so broad that they encompass "whatever it takes to get the job done". With such latitude, her general approach is to make substantive editorial changes only when something is incorrect. She follows her substantive editing with technical editing, making changes according to clarity, house style, and rules of grammar.

Margaret Hoppenrath uses a theoretical framework to address how far to go in editing a manuscript. In this framework, editing addresses external validity, internal validity, and format. For each of those issues, the responsibility of how far to go lies at a different level.

External validity is a measure of scientific content as referenced to the scientific community. External validity addresses

such questions as, "Is the research question important?" and "Are the methods valid?" Representatives of the scientific community, such as authors and peer reviewers who evaluate manuscripts, answer those questions.

Internal validity is a measure of scientific content of the manuscript as referenced to itself. To assess internal validity, someone who understands the scientific method, such

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as a substantive editor, checks for accurate use of that method, consistency of data presentation, and logical organization and support of statements.

Format encompasses such aspects as grammar, medical usage, and style and is checked, for example, by copyeditors.

Joan C Hinchcliffe highlighted similarities and differences in editing between the corporate and scholarly sectors on the basis of her experiences in these arenas. One problem common to both sectors is that authors do not use style guides. She also found differences between the sectors: When she left the telecommunications industry to become journal editor of a Yale University cancer-research journal, Hinchcliffe brought not only editing experience but corporate savvy. However, when she explained why peer reviewers were now returning manuscripts within 10 days (she was paying \$50

to reviewers who met the deadline), her mortified editor-in-chief responded with a lecture on scholarly publication.

After years at Yale University, Hinchcliffe returned to a corporate setting where an author might be a committee and audiences might range from patients to Food and Drug Administration committees. Using examples from that work, Hinchcliffe illustrated the importance of effective visuals in streamlining a document. She also reminded the audience that authors' work remains close to their hearts and that editors, whether technical or substantive, should be sensitive.

Sharon Naron identified problems that she has encountered as an author's editor. For example, time limitations might grow from an investigator's fear of being scooped. Authors who cannot answer queries create a barrier to improvement of manuscripts. Some authors resist the idea that their papers might need major changes. Other authors depend on the editor to make changes that the author can and should make. Language barriers can require creative solutions. Also, there is the question of how far to go as an editor in reframing a report (for example, should an editor reframe the purpose of a paper?) and in correcting an author's errors (for example, a claim of a trend when none is shown).

To avert those problems, Naron emphasizes tactful, diplomatic interactions in partnerships with authors in which roles and expectations are clear. Such interactions require an editor to listen well. They also require that editors explain and discuss substantive suggestions and document their advice. Naron closed by suggesting that editors view themselves as coaches and advocates, looking out for authors' best interests. ■