No Magic: Time Management in Editing

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Time management is a popular professional-development topic these days. Your local bookseller probably carries many general guides to time management. My focus here is on time management in manuscript editing for journals. The following suggestions will be of most benefit to novice editors and those with little experience; anyone who's been in the business for years will already have discovered most of these tips.

Balancing Quality, Cost, and Time

You're probably familiar with the adage that a customer gets to pick only 2 of the following 3 desirable features: low cost, quick turnaround, and high quality. In publishing, resources are increasingly limited (or the money that is available will be spent on glossy paper and marketing rather than editorial work), and the deadlines are usually short, yet we editors still want to maintain some standard of quality. The challenge is to optimize our use of the time we have.

Over the years, I've come to recognize that there is no magic formula for time management. Rather, managing one's time well means developing good work habits, building on small improvements, and accepting that time and capabilities are not infinite.

Constraints and Opportunities

Editing journal articles is characterized by the need to get original research into print as soon as possible, so both author's editors and publisher's editors will feel pressed for time. But some aspects of journal publishing work in the editor's favor.

A publisher's house style can take the grief out of at least some decision-making. If you are a publisher's editor, help in developing and maintaining your house style. Make sure it meets your needs and takes account of the problems you encounter regularly. If you are an author's editor, you will have to adapt, to some degree, to the house styles of a variety of publishers. However, you may also have the benefit of working with the same authors repeatedly and becoming familiar with their personal styles and idiosyncrasies.

Your subject expertise will determine how quickly you can edit a particular manuscript. An editor working on manuscripts for only one highly specialized journal will get to know the subject in great depth; this makes a shift to unfamiliar topics difficult but speeds the editorial process for documents in that field. An editor who knows a broader subject in less depth will have greater flexibility but may need more time to handle some documents.

General Principles
Know yourself

Know what you can do, and promise only the things that are under your control—try to underpromise and overdeliver.

Know when your best times are for different types of work. If you are a morning person, do your "creative editing" early in the day, leaving more mundane tasks for later on.

Learn what terms or topics consistently create confusion for you. Keep a crib sheet close at hand, refer to it, make the right editorial choice, and move on.

Know your client

A "client" is anyone to whom you are accountable, be it your journal's managing editor, a project manager, or an author.

Discuss priorities and establish contingencies. Is the client subject to deadlines imposed by others that will affect your project? Will the resources for printing disappear if the project is not completed by a particular date? Make sure that the client knows the consequences of missing a deadline (for example, for returning corrections on proof).

Ensure that you and the client agree on what you will do. There is no point in undertaking full-scale editing when the document has been approved by a committee and cannot be substantially revised.

Establish some level of rapport with the client. Focus criticisms on the content, not the author. Give the author the benefit of the doubt; after all, he or she is the subject expert. Find out the author's preferred mode of communication (fax, phone, or e-mail) and try to honor it. These small steps may not save much time in the short term, but they should make the author more receptive to any substantive changes you suggest.

Know the schedule

Working with the client, use the final deadline as a starting point, and develop a project schedule. Check to ensure that others will be available when you need them or make alternative arrangements.

Set priorities and follow them

To set your priorities, determine the impact of each task (the value of accomplishing it, combined with the risk of not doing so) and its urgency (usually expressed as the deadline) (1).

Urgent tasks should be done today because they have high value and carry substantial risk if not completed (for example, reviewing bluelines). Important tasks have high value but carry less risk and should be done this week (for example, manuscript editing). Low-value, low-risk tasks (such as filing) should be done only if time permits. If 2 items have the same relative priority, use their deadlines to choose which comes first. Remember, you can do only one thing at a time.

Do the most difficult or most important task first each day. Not completing high-value tasks is stressful, especially if it is one that is distasteful to you.

Batch tasks

Look for opportunities to achieve economies of scale. Process illustrations in batches; work on tables with a similar structure as a group, incorporating the same changes in all to ensure a consistent style of presentation.

Combine tasks that require a similar level of focus. For example, check for figure, table, and reference citations in a single reading, but don't try to do substantive editing at the same time (if something jumps out from

the text, flag it and return to it later).

Write it all down

Publishing work is so complex these days that we can't rely on our memories to keep track of what should be done and what has already been done. So make "to do" lists (complete with indications of priority—see above), and refer to them often.

Create a mechanism for tracking all the "accessories" (such as figures, tables, translations, indexes, and text boxes) that accompany the text. You may be able to use an electronic manuscript-tracking system, or you may want to create a chart that will allow you to see at a glance the status of these components.

Know what paperwork you are responsible for generating or overseeing (such as copyright transfer, financial disclosure, permissions, translation requests, sizing and reproduction of artwork, and reprint order forms), and create checklists. Set the wheels in motion as early as possible to avoid a delay caused by a missing signature.

Use your checklists to keep track of elements that will be created or handled by other people, so that you will know when an item is overdue and follow-up is needed.

Cutting Corners

Two tenets of time management are to delegate and eliminate. What can be omitted altogether depends on what stage you've reached in the project; you may sometimes have to forgo a step in your usual routine if the project is running behind schedule. If you have an opportunity to review overall procedures, identify the component that takes the most time and see whether part or all of it can be omitted—you may find that something is a tradition rather than an essential activity.

Refer problems with references to the author rather than checking them yourself; see whether formatting and checking can be done by a junior editor. Consider minimizing figure-editing to reduce time and expense in processing.

If possible, insist that you receive a document in the form you need to avoid conversion or scanning of a hard copy. But if a paper is late in arriving from the author and the deadline is immutable, it may be more productive to generate the electronic version yourself than to hound the author for a diskette.

Working Smart
Instructions to authors

If you are a publisher's editor, keep your instructions to authors up to date.

Timing

Perform each task at the appropriate stage: Edit thoroughly before the manuscript is set into type and the pages are laid out. When you are looking at proofs, confine your review to ensuring that everything is in place—this is not the time to edit.

Filing and organization

Keep your work area organized so that you can easily lay your hands on what you need to finish the work at hand (2). Develop a filing system that makes sense to you, and use it. And don't file anything that should be discarded (2). Have your most frequently used references close at hand, and keep track of sources and resources available elsewhere.

Technology

Many high-technology tools are available to editors these days, including advanced options in your word-processing program, electronic calendars, and a variety of online resources. To use them effectively, you may need training or at least some time to explore the software yourself.

Spelling checkers are not infallible, but they do have their place. Run the spell checker at a late stage to avoid having to repeat this step later. Confirm technical terms that are not in the software's dictionary, and add them to the dictionary file. Use "search and replace", but remember that the word or fragment you want to change may form part of a term that should not be altered; therefore, verify each instance, rather than running a global "replace" command. Create macros and templates for tasks performed frequently. Build button bars for inserting special characters and codes. Compile tips about items that turn up in editing newsletters and elsewhere. Ask your colleagues how they do things that you find cumbersome.

Conclusion

There is no magic, but there are lots of things you can do to improve your use of time. And remember that just because others are practicing poor time management is no reason for you to do so. Dare to set an example! ♦

References

1. Managing multiple priorities [seminar manual]. New York: Dun and Bradstreet Business Education Services; 1991.
2. Mayer JJ. Time management for dummies. Foster City (CA): IDG Books Worldwide; 1995.