

## Question: A Question of Testing

A recently appointed journal editor is thinking of giving applicants for some staff positions a test in copyediting and proofreading, and she wishes to identify appropriate tests. How would you suggest that the editor find or develop such a test? What issues, if any, should she consider with regard to giving such tests?

### Solutions

We have had good results with a combination of two testing approaches: aptitude testing and work samples. One part of the test should include spelling, punctuation, and typical grammar or proofreading questions. The other part should be a work sample consisting of a short passage to edit or proofread.

You can get ideas for the components of a test from a basic grammar handbook. Ask your current staff to provide samples; look for a badly organized paragraph and add your own typos to it. Professional proofreaders can tell you the most common errors.

The work sample gives you an indication of what the candidate thinks the job is all about. Heavy rewriting by a potential copyeditor or proofreading that focuses only on typography can warn you off a candidate or at least hint at where training should be concentrated.

Important points to consider are what the job being offered will entail and how much time can be spent on training. It's far better to spend your valuable time in telling a new staff member about your journal's demands than in reviewing grammar and spelling.

**Lynne Roney**

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Although the human resources department at our institution has no official policy regarding testing of applicants, the department's staff condone our having found a specific editing exercise that helps evaluate candidates. They state that the thing we need to be most careful about is that we give all candidates the same exer-

cise and that we evaluate the exercise in the same way for all candidates. Otherwise we could get into some discrimination issues. As long as we're treating every candidate in the same way, they state, we should be fine.

Here's what we do in our office: We send applicants two sample abstracts that contain lots of grammar and usage errors and some scientific terminology problems. We ask the applicants to edit these abstracts so that they can see the type of work we often perform and we can see how well they understand the language and some minor science issues. This process gives us an idea of the amount of training the applicant will require if hired. The applicant is encouraged to use either the AMA manual or *Scientific Style and Format* and to return the abstracts to us with online editing (using the "track changes" feature of Word). Once we receive the abstracts, all the editors in the department review them and submit their comments to me. I give them the final review and make the decision about whether the person should be brought in for an interview. We don't really call this an editing test, but in all honesty I guess that's what it is.

**Flo Witte**

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I suggest that the editor check with her co-workers to see whether they know of a test previously used at her journal. If that is not productive, she could contact the supervisor or manager of the redaction department of a large publisher. Those involved in training and supervising on a regular basis probably have some such tool. Several years ago such a test was mentioned at a session of a CBE meeting.

Another resource would be *Substance & Style: Instruction and Practice in Copyediting*, by Mary Stoughton, which was published in 1989 by Editorial Experts Inc, Alexandria, VA. Pages 195-205 show an article extensively reworked to

introduce errors. This sample is followed with the copyedited version and marginal notes about the rationale for the editorial changes. The journal editor could adapt other material in a similar manner.

From a human-resources standpoint, one caution would be that the instructions, test, and testing interval be the same for all applicants.

**Marion Stafford**

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### **New Question: A Question of Study Population**

Looking at citations in a review article being considered for publication, a peer reviewer encounters an article reporting a surgeon's series of patients treated with a

relatively new procedure. In general these patients did unusually well compared with those receiving the procedure in other studies. It is unclear from the article, however, whether some of the patients might have undergone the procedure first elsewhere and, if so, whether both the initial and the later outcomes were reported. In addition, it is unclear whether some of the patients were also reported in papers by colleagues of the surgeon. The reviewer tries to contact the author for clarification and learns that the author has died. The article has only one author, and his collaborators are acknowledged only as "my colleagues at the medical center". The answers to the reviewer's questions could substantially affect the conclusions to be drawn. What should be done?

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