

Hiring and Training Copyeditors

Panelists:

Stacy Christiansen

Journal of the American Medical Association

Chicago, Illinois

Karen Hellekson

Freelance Editor

Jay, Maine

Reporter:

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Journal of the American Medical Association

Chicago, Illinois

The panelists began the session by defining the role of a copyeditor from in-house and freelance perspectives. According to Stacy Christiansen, director of copyediting at the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA), copyediting is the last quality-assurance phase in the publishing process. A good copyeditor pays attention to detail, works independently under (sometimes) crushing deadlines, and possesses strong grammar and punctuation skills.

Freelance Karen Hellekson stressed that it is more fundamental that copyeditors have an “eye” for detecting spelling errors than to have a science or English background. Copyeditors polish writing, clarify ambiguities, and ensure consistency and house style primarily via electronic editing systems. She stated that we are seeing a movement to online editing as it becomes increasingly difficult to meet production deadlines.

The responsibilities of Christiansen’s staff of seven copyeditors often overlap those of the content editors, authors, and peer reviewers. They verify data, edit substantively, and perform online research.

Hellekson finds that freelances often typeset, code in proprietary settings like SGML, and create macros. Freelances rarely have direct contact with the authors.

Unless requested or offered more money, they do not fact-check, confirm percentages, verify references, write or structure abstracts, or cut for length.

Christiansen teaches in the University of Chicago’s Medical Writing and Editing Certificate program and has hired excellent candidates from the program. The program awards certificates for completion of four courses covering such topics as medical editing and interpreting and reporting biostatistics.

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The American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) education program also offers course certification for science editors. Hellekson recommends the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences (BELS) examination; BELS certifies editors who pass a 3-hour multiple-choice examination.

Hellekson believes that candidates should be tested to assess their ability to meet deadlines, write clearly, and comprehend standard proof marks. A test can determine whether a candidate can code, tag, and typeset; follow directions; interact; and act autonomously.

It is essential to provide regular appraisals during a 3- to 6-month training process. It is time-consuming, but Hellekson believes that it eventually saves time because the editor becomes autonomous sooner. She stressed back reading to prevent production mishaps.

JAMA copyeditors require about a year’s worth of training to learn a 700-page style manual and work with rapid turnaround

times. Christiansen believes it imperative to select high-quality candidates to ensure the cost-effectiveness of time spent in training them. After 3 months, she expects an editor to know basic style, how to work with authors professionally and appropriately, and to understand such policies as the embargo process. Copyeditors are given checklists to aid in establishing progress and are reviewed again after 6 months.

Freelance copyeditors are paid per page (typically \$1-4 per page) or per hour (\$20-65). It is standard for freelances to complete W-9 forms and sign such documents as nondisclosure agreements. Freelances do not have taxes deducted from their paychecks, and they must obtain health care and retirement savings on their own. Despite those differences, Hellekson believes that freelances have a big advantage because they control their own time.

Clients should provide free access to their journal’s Web site, examples of acceptable work, documentation for coded work, style information, and feedback. They should pay promptly and provide for printed samples and courier fees.

Some freelances work directly for an organization, others for an intermediary company. The better-paying opportunities involve working directly for an organization; there is no middleman, but the work is less stable. An intermediary company will provide steady work and prompt payment.

Hellekson named AMWA and www.copyeditors.com as the best sources for finding copyeditors and freelance work. AMWA focuses on the medical market and sends out a job-information sheet. Freelances can also find work through word of mouth and professional contacts.

This informative session provided a thorough and revealing description of the important functions of copyediting and how we can maintain these positions.

