Solution Corner

by Della Mundy

A Question of Font

A consultant retained to work on a health services project that includes submitting articles for publication is asked to send a completed manuscript to a journal for publication. The journal has just launched its new Web site, and the online instructions for authors ask for submission of all articles via the Web site. The consultant proceeds to cut and paste segments of the text to the sequential templates provided but finds that several special characters—for example, frequently used mathematical symbols "≥" and "≅" and Greek symbols "α", "β", and others—are not accurately reflected by fonts available at the site. The solution of spelling these out as "greater than or equal to" and "approximately equal to" in the statistical notation or "alpha-adrenergic" and "beta-adrenergic" does not fit within the allowed word count. What recourse can the publisher or webmaster recommend to the consultant in these instances?

Solutions

The important factor in this situation is the protection of the scientific accuracy of the article. If there is no immediate technologic solution to the problem, if submission via Web site alters signs and symbols in the report, and if spelled-out versions of them produce a report that is too long (and that, in all likelihood, its readers will find harder to read), then the only sensible response by the publisher would be to accept submission on disk with accompanying hard copy so that the accuracy of conversions of the symbols in the file can be checked carefully during refereeing and production. A publisher who insists that the science be "bent" to fit the quirks and kinks in production procedures has got the cart before the horse, it seems to me. Our computers are supposed to make scientific communication easier and more efficient, not harder and more cumbersome. Moreover, a publisher or a society that publishes journals and books should pride itself on working well with authors, not against them. After all, it depends on them.

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I have been involved in such a site for our company, and there is only one solution to missing symbols: submit a PDF file (or PS file) with the fonts embedded. If that is not possible, and the Web site allows only a submission format that depends on fonts and symbols available at that site, the submitter is lost. Of course, the publisher has a clear course of action: Make sure that the missing fonts and symbols are added to the site. The related work of the STIX* project, sponsored by six major publishers, will make it easier to ensure that any such submission site has a vast array of mathematical symbols available, in a package that is easy to install and thus helps to prevent such awkward situations.

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STIX* is related to this question in that authors who possess the STIX fonts will have more than 7500 characters; if the publisher also has STIX fonts (as hoped), there is a high likelihood that nothing will be missing when documents are transmitted. The STIX project will enable implementation of a TeX computer language designed for typesetting of mathematical and other technical characters with full PostScript Type 1 and OpenType font sets. All characters and glyphs will be incorporated into Unicode representation, and browsers should include program logic to fully use the STIX font set in electronic representation of scholarly scientific documents. By fall 2003, the STIX fonts should be made available, under royalty-free license, to publishers, software developers, scientists, students, and the general public.

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** Note: For more information about the Scientific and Technical Information Exchange (STIX) font project, see page 49 of this issue.*

The problem occurs because special symbols, which cannot be typed directly from the keyboard, are mistranslated when pasted from Microsoft Word (or other programs) into Web browsers, as you have described. The good news is that there are reliable ways to represent most of these symbols. For example, in HTML, a lowercase Greek beta can be displayed correctly if a code is entered like

b

The bad news is that getting authors to insert special characters with the use of direct HTML code like this can be quite difficult.

We have seen a variety of solutions to solve this user-interface problem. From the perspective of an author submitting a manuscript, we believe the most reliable way to collect special-character information is to provide a palette of special-character buttons on the HTML form. After the author copies from the manuscript and pastes in the body of the text, it is necessary to proofread the text, deleting the incorrect characters and reinserting them by pressing the correct buttons on the form. A button can show a picture of the character, and its action will insert the HTML code for the character.

If the solution is to be run at the editorial or production level (rather than on the individual author’s, desktop), alternative workflow solutions are available. We recently solved this specific problem for an editorial and production group by building a custom module that automatically converts text from Microsoft Word into the correct HTML format, including the correct HTML codes for both special characters and face markup (such as italic and superscript).

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New Question: A Question of Time Management

A freelance editor who has modest part-time assistance and typically works on several projects simultaneously has a new client who asks the editor to edit a long document and submit it to a publisher within a few days. The author describes the document as well written and needing little editing, so the editor agrees to accept it; the document’s basic premise is credibly presented, but the text is poorly organized, references are missing or inaccurately cited, tables and figures need reformatting, and the publisher’s word count is greatly exceeded. Just as that document is received and examined, a current client, whose near-complete document was due back to him for approval, e-mails a heavily revised version, which must now be edited anew, and a publisher sends galley proofs, which must be transmitted to the author for scientific review, read by the editor for technical errors, and returned within 48 hours. While the editor is contemplating those two projects, another new client calls to ask whether a book chapter with many digital photographs can be edited by the beginning of the next week. What approach might the editor take to determine whether this last project is feasible? If it is not, how might the editor say no to the project but retain this new client?

The situations described as new questions in this column are not necessarily based on actual situations, and the ones that are may have been modified to focus the question. Send your responses to the new question to Della Mundy, Department of Medical Editing, Kaiser Foundation Research Institute, 1800 Harrison Street, 16th Floor, Oakland CA 94712-3429. Telephone 510-625-2373; fax 510-625-5231; e-mail *della.mundy@kp.org*.