

## Science Editors and Their Pet Peeves

### Jennifer Ann Hutt

If you've ever lost patience with an author who won't return phone calls, a reviewer who ignores deadlines, or a manuscript chock-full of grammatical errors, you are not alone. Most editors have a menagerie of "pet peeves"—those minor, and sometimes not-so-minor, grievances.

*Science Editor* recently asked an assortment of science editors about their favorite peeves. Whether working as editors-in-chief or managing editors or manuscript editors, staff or freelance, most were willing to share their biggest gripes. The following highlights reveal a wide array of peeves that can plague the life of an editor.

### Workplace Woes

Some pet peeves are specifically related to the type of entity an editor works for—be it a journal, magazine, newspaper, institution, or publishing house—or its geographic location. For example, *Nature* Managing Editor Peter Wrobel said he thinks the education system in Great Britain is a problem because it produces young authors who have little knowledge of English grammar.

For *Dallas Morning News* Science Editor Tom Siegfried, one of the biggest irritations is the embargo system used by some journals. "It's an enormous annoyance for those of us trying to do real science journalism", he said. "It's really outrageous archaic nonsense. The embargo system is dead, it just doesn't know it yet."

Meanwhile, editors at small journals may have difficulty in attracting submissions, and at publishing companies, textbook editors are constantly explaining to professors why new editions are necessary despite the higher cost. Then for a children's book editor, there is the frustration of people who think writing for children is easier than writing for adults.

At small publications, there also is a con-

stant struggle to make the most out of limited resources. "My number one pet peeve, because I work at a small magazine, is the struggle to pay freelance writers what they deserve", *Geotimes* Editor Christina Reed said. "So I end up working with writers who are younger and inexperienced."

### People Peeves

Regardless of the publication, interacting with people who don't fulfill their obligations is arguably among the most frustrating aspects of any editing position. Siegfried calls it "writers who don't obey", but of course the principle also applies to peer reviewers and others. Science editors occasionally deal with peer reviewers who submit their reviews late or not at all, said Marvin Bauer, editor-in-chief of the journal *Remote Sensing of Environment*. In addition, he said, the authors who press most for timely reviews of their own articles are often unwilling to also serve as reviewers.

Getting people to meet deadlines is a problem for editors at many publications. For example, special editions of *Psychiatric Quarterly* are often published behind schedule, said editor Stephen Rachlin, because guest authors and editors submit material late. Reed, of *Geotimes*, said she is particularly irritated by people who do not call her when they say they will.

Another sticky point is the loose use of the term *author*. Although it is a common practice in science, some editors are frustrated by the inclusion of all contributors in the list of authors. "An author should be someone who writes something", said Wrobel, of *Nature*. He also complained about people who agree to write something, but then, rather than submitting original writing with a unique voice and tone, submit an existing publication that simply has been "rehashed"—a gripe echoed by Diana Lutz, editor of the children's magazine *Muse*.

A common plea among editors is for authors to invest time when preparing a manuscript. For example, journal and magazine editors both complained about authors

who submit manuscripts without first reading copies of the publication or thinking about the intended audience.

### Manuscript Messes

For author's editors and copyeditors, a writer's lack of effort may contribute to another batch of peeves—those found in a manuscript.

"As a copyeditor, one always takes a delight in seeing something poorly written", Wrobel said. "Otherwise, we wouldn't have a job." Such delight, however, can quickly turn to frustration, according to Lutz and Bauer. They complain about authors who don't fact-check and submit first drafts filled with factual errors. Occasionally, conclusions in the abstract of a submitted journal article won't even match those in the rest of the manuscript, said Walter Pagel, director of scientific publications at the University of Texas M D Anderson Cancer Center.

Ignoring length requirements is another grievance common to many science editors. When *Science News* articles must be cut drastically to meet length requirements, Editor Julie Miller said, they can lose coherence. Although journal articles are much longer than the pieces that appear in *Science News*, Rachlin said length requirements are still a problem. "I give an absolute space limitation, and the number of people who follow the guidelines is small indeed", he said. He also complained about submissions that don't conform to the journal's citation style. As editor of a small journal, Rachlin said he doesn't have the staff necessary to impose consistent style.

Other specific irritations include freelance magazine articles that should have quotations but don't and journal manuscripts that don't explain why the research was done. Magazine and journal editors were both irked by manuscripts that are poorly structured and that use overtechnical language or offer too many details. *BioScience* Editor Tim Beardsley also complained about authors who "decline to use the active voice under any circumstances".

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*Pet Peeves continued***Grammar Gripes**

Then there is grammar. “As editors, we are the last guardians of the English language, which makes us conservative with grammar”, Wrobel said. Several editors acknowledged that they are more forgiving of scientist authors than professional writers when it comes to grammatical errors. But there are still some mistakes that almost always bug editors because they lead to confusion or add unnecessary words.

Misplaced modifiers are a good example. “When a phrase isn’t next to the noun it modifies and sounds like it modifies something else—that’s something I’m a stickler for”, said Miller. For Carol Kornblith, an author’s editor at the Mayo Foundation, one pet peeve is the useless phrase “the truth of the matter is”.

As frustrating as superfluous words may be, Pagel said he is irked by authors who attempt to shorten a manuscript at the expense of clarity.

“It bugs me when people invent constructions that can’t be figured out with a dictionary and are hard for international readers to understand”, he said. This is often the case when authors try to use intransitive verbs as though they were transitive. For example, Pagel said, many chemistry manuscripts use the phrase “A competes B” in place of “A competes with B”.

Another example is the misuse of initialisms and other abbreviations. At M D Anderson Cancer Center, where Pagel works, the radiotherapy department coined the abbreviation NED to mean “no evidence of disease”. From clinical shorthand, this otherwise unknown term gradually began appearing in more formal manuscripts, Pagel said. It also began appearing as an adjective, as in “the patient was NED”, rather than as the noun phrase it represented, as in “the patient had NED”. When the original phrase is put back into this nonsense sentence, it reads “the patient was no evidence of disease”.

“People just take words from the middle of a sentence, turn them into an initialism, and then use them in a way the syntax doesn’t allow”, Pagel said.

## An Author’s Perspective on Editing

**Jennifer Ann Hutt**

A manuscript lands on the editor’s desk. Will it become the next victim of a ruthless blue pencil, or will it escape with only minor revisions? An editor may consider such factors as the article’s organization, accuracy, and clarity to determine how much revision is needed. But to writers it can seem as though another, more arbitrary factor is at work—the editor’s mood.

Because writers and editors can have different perspectives on the editing process, *Science Editor* asked some writers for their points of view.

Carol Gentry is director of the Knight Journalism Fellowship Program at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and is a former health reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*; Sandra Shumway, editor of the *Journal of Shellfish Research*, is author of more than 100 publications; and Elizabeth Whalen is a freelance writer and editor.

Experienced in both writing and editing, they suggested several ways editors might improve their relationships with authors:

- Listen to authors and recognize their individual strengths, weaknesses, and working styles.
- Respond in a timely manner. “My pet peeve is editors who take too long to respond to authors”, Shumway said.
- Don’t introduce errors into a manuscript or substantially change the wording without checking with the author. “It’s difficult to write about science, medicine, and health policy, making sure that the

copy is both accurate enough to satisfy the experts and understandable enough for the lay readers. And interesting, to boot”, Gentry said. “The best editors always took the time to check with me before making changes”.

- Encourage authors. Show them they have your confidence and pass along praise from others.
- Be forgiving. “If I made a mistake”, Gentry said, “[my editors] accepted my apology cheerfully and didn’t rag on me, because they knew I was harder on myself than they could be.”
- Be an advocate for the authors and protect them when you can. For example, Shumway said, try not to let authors get caught between multiple editors who have different ideas of what the article should be about and how it should be written.
- Provide clear reasons for the decision to reject a paper.

Finally, Whalen offers these words of encouragement and appreciation to science editors dedicated to excellence:

“I think that an editor needs to be a bridge between the writer and the reader”, she said. “My vision is that we are all working together toward a common goal. I may disagree with an editor’s changes and change them right back, but that doesn’t mean I value any less the times that editor corrects horrendous mistakes (which I cannot believe I could make as a writer) and focuses my attention on problem areas.”

**Final Frustrations**

The challenge doesn’t end once editors wade through the manuscript, because some authors are less responsive to correction than others. For author’s editors like Kornblith, especially frustrating are the authors who she says “won’t let you keep them from shooting themselves in the foot”.

Pet peeves of science editors are diverse and abundant, but they do not constitute all of editing. As one editor pointed out, helpful

colleagues and well-written drafts are what make these peeves so noticeable.

“All [my] pet peeves can be subsumed under one pet peeve: writers who do only half the work, leaving me to either kill or rescue the article”, Lutz said. “As the editor, I have the opportunity to compare their performance with that of the dedicated few who pour in time and effort and work not until the money runs out, but until the thing is done right. Those people have my undying gratitude.” 