

◆ *Learning From Each Other: Manuscript Editor's Roundtable*

Moderator:

Edward J Huth

Annals of Internal Medicine
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania

Panelists:

Susan Eastwood

University of California, San
Francisco
Oakland, California

MaryAnn Foote

Amgen Inc
Thousand Oaks, California

Elaine Iles

American Psychological Association
Washington, DC

David E Nadziejka

Van Andel Research Institute
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Reporter:

Susan T Duhon

Rujuke Editorial Service
Bloomington, Indiana

The manuscript editor is an interface between the author and the journal. In this role, manuscript editors must satisfy two masters. The roundtable panelists—variously employed in academe, industry, a journal office, and an independent research institute—shared their experiences and perspectives on working with authors.

The relationship between the author and the editor is crucial if the editor is to be effective. Susan Eastwood sees herself as a teacher. Although she leads seminars for authors at her university, she is a proponent of a one-on-one author-editor relationship. David E Nadziejka also noted that it is important to establish a personal relationship with the author, beforehand if

possible. Eastwood concurred, adding that it is best not to send the edited manuscript back cold, but to call and confer with the author first, explaining your changes. Elaine Iles also finds it helpful to enlist the author's help in revising a grammatically incorrect sentence.

Nadziejka stressed the importance of gaining the confidence of the author. As a science editor, he asserted, you must show the author that you have done your homework and “can do more than change commas to semicolons and *which* to *that*”. Most authors, he said, don't care about grammar, punctuation, or heading consistency. By doing your homework in the field you are editing in, you will not waste the author's time with simple questions, and you will be able to ask serious questions about content and perhaps catch errors that are more important to the authors, ones they wouldn't want to see in print. If you develop the confidence of the authors and watch over the science, they'll trust you on the English, he said.

A common problem is an author's unwillingness to accept corrections. Iles pointed out that you should “choose your battles”. If the problem is one of hyphenation style only, for example, acceding to the author's preference may be the best course of action. In other cases, compromise may be possible. For example, if the author is reluctant to seek copyright permission for reprinted material, suggest alternatives that do not include that material. But it is important to remember, Iles said, that the author is the final authority on the article.

MaryAnn Foote discussed some things that are not open to compromise, such as the inclusion of conflict-of-interest statements, and CONSORT (Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials) statements, which are not uniformly required. She

stressed that it is important that journals establish and enforce uniform policies and guidelines. She said that drug sponsors are generally interested in working with journals to have high-quality research published so that it might benefit humans and animals. All agreed that those with authority—the journal editors—should make authors adhere to established standards.

Eastwood is also concerned about authorship problems, such as listing scientists as authors on papers to which they contributed little. She wants to know how to promote good practice in the face of the “academic imperative to publish ‘no matter what’”. Foote noted that when this is a problem, the journal should ask the authors to submit notarized forms verifying each author's contribution and acceptance of responsibility for the paper's conclusions. Eastwood said that editors can forestall problems by establishing policies that address possible problems—and letting authors know about them—before trouble arises.

During the discussion, a member of the audience wanted to know how to persuade researchers to make changes that serve the readers. Generally, the manuscript editor can only suggest and advise, Nadziejka said. Another audience member asked how to distinguish between essential changes and changes that are only desirable. Eastwood stressed the teaching role of the editor in this situation and suggested explaining changes in the margins. She reiterated the advantage of a one-on-one relationship. Sometimes, however, when explaining and teaching are not enough, “you just have to step in and take charge”, Foote said. Tell the author, “You're in charge of the science, but you better label your axes.” 🗣️