

Composing Author Queries to Get the Answers You Need

Speaker:

Shelley Potler

Lippincott Williams & Wilkins
Baltimore, Maryland

Reporter:

Jennifer Ann Hutt

Texas A&M University Press
College Station, Texas

When writing queries, how can editors be sure to get the information they need from their authors? “I’m not sure there are any foolproof ways, but we’ll see what we can do to put the odds in our favor”, speaker Shelley Potler said as she began this session on composing effective author queries.

Manager of the journal-editing department at Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, Potler focused on the ins and outs of writing queries that balance concision with clarity. Session attendees included an assortment of copyeditors, developmental editors, and managing editors.

Who, what, when, and how to query depend in part on the type of editing being done. For example, copyeditors may include three to five queries per six pages of printed manuscript and proofreaders only one or two per six pages. However, developmental editors may query the author repeatedly as a project evolves.

Queries and notes to the author come in many varieties. They can be informative, simply explaining why a change was made, or they can ask authors to clarify something unclear, supply missing information, or verify the accuracy of a change. “As often as not, you are asking the author to confirm that the changes you’ve made are OK”, Potler said.

The following are some of Potler’s suggestions for manuscript editors who want to write effective queries:

- Maintain a polite, professional, constructive tone. People respond better when they are treated with respect.
- Separate and number your comments. It is easier for an author to respond to a bulleted list or a numbered list than to questions buried within a paragraph.
- Cite page numbers when referring to specific sections of the manuscript. This

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will help authors know exactly what portion of the text needs their attention.

- Query missing information, as well as any information that is unclear.
- Query only if the author’s answer matters. For example, don’t query if a necessary change has no alternative, and don’t ask for extra information that will not be used.
- Query only if you can’t find the information yourself. If the information can be found in a dictionary, a quick Google search, or other ready reference, don’t waste the author’s time.
- Finally, remember the 3 Bs: be concise, be specific, and be consistent. Potler got a good laugh from the audience when she cautioned against such vague queries

as “What does this mean?” and “Please clarify.”

After outlining those basic querying tips, Potler asked audience members to brainstorm possible queries for a sample manuscript excerpt containing a patient case report. In the discussion that followed, editors stressed the importance of knowing the intended audience when deciding how much to query.

Most people agreed to query basic problems, such as inconsistent spelling and incorrect punctuation. But there was an interesting variety of responses when it came to less-superficial queries. For example, several people disagreed about how to treat a long list of seemingly unrelated symptoms that appeared in the excerpt. The discussion focused on the challenge of finding a balance between general written clarity and accepted conventions in the field of specialty.

One editor with a clinical background suggested that the list was acceptable as written because it was standard format for a case report. Others argued that the structure was unclear. “Even if people are experienced with unorganized, unrelated sentences and know what they mean, they still appreciate clear writing”, said session attendee Walter Pagel.

In addition to discussing issues like how much to query and when, attendees at this session had a chance to practice crafting queries that will obtain needed information from the author to turn a confusing manuscript into clear writing. 🔥