

# English-Language Editing Services for Researchers

## Misha Kidambi

If only researchers had it as easy as Archimedes—shouting out “Eureka” to announce their results to the world. Far from that, they have to meet the standards of journals before their results can be published. With English as the global language of science communication, putting forth research results in English has become imperative for many researchers. Researchers aiming to reach a global audience through journals published in English have spawned the growth of an industry that provides English-language editing services. This article takes a peek into the workings of some companies that provide professional editing services to researchers.

### The Editors

Editing a scientific manuscript has two main aspects: presenting the science in the document clearly without altering the meaning and correcting the grammatical and mechanical errors. In that sense, an editor working at such editing companies is a cross between a technical editor and a copyeditor. “Scientific editing aims to revise text not only to fix basic mistakes in grammar but to convey the science behind that text more clearly and simply,” says Sean T Kim, managing editor of Blue Pencil Science, an Internet-based US company that provides scientific and medical editing.

The editors working on a scientific manuscript therefore should be familiar with the subject matter as well as proficient in English. Familiarity with the

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subject is important because most documents submitted for editing are original research manuscripts, and without a basic understanding of the subject, one would find it impossible to clarify the science in the manuscript. It appears that most editors hold at least a bachelor’s degree in the field in which they edit, and many companies employ only editors who have master’s or doctoral degrees.

Mary Anne Baynes, sales and marketing manager of American Journal Experts, based in North Carolina, says that “each editor [working for American Journal Experts] has completed or is in a PhD or MD program.” Some of the editors employed by a London-based editing company, The Document Clinic, have peer-reviewed articles for scientific journals. Says Kim, of Blue Pencil Science, “all our editors hold doctorate degrees in a science or medical degrees. In addition, they have significant experience in composition . . . through university- or graduate-level coursework or through writing scientific journal articles and theses as part of their graduate training.”

### Subjects

Many professional editing companies offer editing services to researchers in life sciences and medicine, and a few offer such services to researchers in engineering, physical sciences, and humanities. Kim says that the expertise of Blue Pencil Science is in editing life-sciences documents, but the company’s editors have also edited documents in petroleum sciences and electromagnetics. Cactus Communications, an editing company based in India, has three specialized teams: one for medicine and life sciences, one for engineering and physical sciences, and one for social sciences and humanities.

Basil D’Souza, managing editor of the medicine and life-sciences team in Cactus Communications, which has two offices

in Mumbai, India, and a subsidiary in Tokyo, Japan, has experience in working with documents in various fields. “There is a lot of emphasis on styles, conventions, and language in medical documents. In the engineering documents, the focus is more on conceptual understanding. Editing for both disciplines, however, requires extensive referencing and online research,” he says. D’Souza thinks that the greater demand for editing of life-sciences and medical papers is related to the type of work being published in the fields. “Many papers in medicine and life sciences are intended for journal publication, and this involves peer reviews and strict language requirements,” he says. “In the engineering fields, however, a lot of work is published in manuals; this is mostly done in-house by many companies. And many of the companies, such as software companies, have their own technical writers and editors.”

### Training

To ensure the standard and quality of editing, some companies train their new editors before they start editing documents for researchers. Such training includes familiarization with various style manuals, for example, CSE’s *Scientific Style and Format*, the *Chicago Manual of Style*, and the *AMA Manual of Style*. Anurag Goel, chief executive officer of Cactus Communications, says that “irrespective of their experience, all editors undergo a 3-week training program. For those new to editing, our training program introduces them to the profession and equips them with the tools they need, such as specialized style guides. For more seasoned hires, the program orients them to our editing process and style. We also have extensive grammar resources, most of which were developed in house, that trainees take as short courses.”

Not all companies, however, train their editors. Says Kim, "Editing can be subjective, and we enjoy the different approaches our editors use to tackle a particular problem. Aside from the mechanical aspects of proofreading and some style guidelines, we give our editors freedom to edit as they see fit." Patrick Romano, of The Document Clinic, says that his company has not yet introduced any specialized training for its editors.

### Business Models

The nature of the editing service allows companies to be flexible in the business models they use; some companies employ in-house editors, others contract freelance editors, and some use both. Blue Pencil Science, for example, does not have a free-standing corporate office; it is exclusively Internet based, and all its editors are freelancers who accept work on a contractual basis. Cactus Communications employs around 70 full-time editors but also works with a select group of freelancers. The Document Clinic employs only in-house editors, and American Journal Experts has an in-house staff of managing editors and more than 200 contract editors for subject-expert editing.

Researchers who want manuscripts edited usually contact the customer-service department of a professional editing company. Once the researchers specify the date by which they wish to receive the edited manuscript and provide details about it (such as number of words, subject, and journal to which it is being submitted), the customer-service department sends them a quote. After the quote is accepted, the document is assigned to an editor familiar with the subject. The quote depends on how soon the researcher wants the edited document (the expected turnaround time), the complexity and length of the document, and the level of editing required. Most companies seem to charge by the word, but some charge by the hour.

### The Process

The editing process itself may depend on the company (and even the editor) that handles the job. The basic process, however, usually involves two rounds of editing and then proofreading of the edited document. Some companies format the document according to specific journal guidelines when the researcher asks them to. But the level of editing depends largely on the client's requirements. Some clients request only a basic proofreading, and others opt for the "premium" services offered by companies. The premium services vary by company. In the American Journal Experts premium service, for example, two subject-matter expert editors edit the document. "With our premium document editing, [the client] can expect more suggestions regarding the finer points of language and style," says Baynes.

Some companies offer the client an opportunity to ask the editor questions about the edited manuscript. Such interchange can help ensure correction of inadvertent changes in meaning that occurred during editing.

Although many manuscripts are sent in for editing before submission to a journal, sometimes a document is sent for editing after a journal editor or reviewer recommends professional editing to the authors. In such cases, reviewer comments and suggestions may be provided with the manuscripts. The editors working on such documents must go through the reviewer suggestions carefully and incorporate suggested changes into the manuscript.

Maintaining the quality of editing is woven into the editing process. The quality of an edited document might be checked by a managing editor before it is sent out to a client. Some companies have a dedicated quality team that periodically checks editing quality and gives the editors comments on their work. Another



**Editors at Cactus Communications**

way in which they ascertain quality is to obtain comments directly from the clients; the clients are sent a questionnaire in which they rate their satisfaction with the editing quality.

### Maintaining Confidentiality

One crucial factor for professional editing companies is maintaining the confidentiality of the documents that are sent for editing. As mentioned earlier, many of the manuscripts are original research papers, and the researchers are cautious about disclosing the contents of their manuscripts (occasionally, they provide only portions of them to be edited). The measures taken by a company to maintain confidentiality are considered as important as its turnaround time and fees.

Most companies have a confidentiality policy in place. Cactus Communications uses secure information-technology systems, and the editors must sign confidentiality agreements. "Each editor has access only to the files that she or he needs to edit. And these files are periodically deleted from their systems," says Goel. The editors hired by American Journal Experts are also required to sign a confidentiality agreement. "This document is a legally binding contract that goes a step beyond the trust-based system of peer-reviewed journal submission. The confidentiality agreement ensures that our editors cannot, under any circumstances,

## *Editing Services continued*

share personal details or manuscripts. If an editor reveals any part of the submission to a third party, legal action based on this contract can be taken,” says Baynes. Blue Pencil Science stipulates its editors’ strict adherence to confidentiality guidelines when they are first hired.

### **The Clients**

Although English editing services might appear to be of value only for nonnative English speakers, some native-English-speaking researchers also use these services. “Perhaps 30% of [Blue Pencil Science’s] proofreading projects come from native-English-speaking clients; they include individuals and some institutional clients, such as journal publishers and biotechnology companies,” says Kim. Not surprisingly, however, many companies’ core client base consists of researchers in Asia (Japan, Korea, and

China), Europe (Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands), and South American (for example, Brazil).

As mentioned, most of the clients are individual researchers, but some are institutions, such as universities, communication departments in industry (especially pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies), and government departments. Institutional clients usually set specific guidelines for editing their documents, and the editors must follow them. The advantage of having such a client base is a steady work flow whose pace is already defined. But a large chunk of the client base of many companies remains individual researchers.

### **The Challenges**

Editors in different companies identify different challenges. “[There are] situations [when] the author’s meaning is unclear

from the sentence, [and] trying to use context clues to build a better sentence [is a challenge],” says Baynes; “that is why it’s so vital that we have editors in the proper field of study.” Managing Editor Kim says that “my biggest challenge is securing an editor in time to meet the deadline estimates that we give to prospective clients or that our clients request.” D’Souza says that the most challenging part of his job is “continuously upgrading [his editing] skills and keeping abreast of the latest occurrences in [science]”. Notwithstanding the challenges, many of the editors find the experience rewarding—it offers both a chance of being involved in some of the most current research and an opportunity for financial satisfaction. 🔥