

Use of Freelance Science Editors by Chinese Authors: An Exploratory Study

LIU Wei

Every year, journals reject many manuscripts because of poor writing. It is a pity, not only for the authors but also for the scientific world! The situation is especially severe in developing countries. Help from freelance science editors may be a way to solve the problem.

In the Western world, especially the United States, freelance science editing is a relatively established career; many people know what freelance science editors do and know how to find a suitable freelance when in need. In China, however, even editors of science journals seldom know anything about freelance science editors. In fact, there seems to be misunderstanding in this regard. For example, some people seem to view use of such freelances as somehow dishonest.

To find out more about perceptions of freelance science editors in China, I sent a questionnaire in 2004 and in 2006 to some authors who had submitted their papers to the *Chinese Journal of Cancer*. The questionnaire contained 11 questions:

- 1) Whom have you consulted with when drafting your manuscripts?
- 2) What kind of suggestions did they make for revision?
- 3) Did you pay for their work?
- 4) Did you ever receive help from a freelance science editor in revising, translating, or writing papers?
- 5) How did you find the freelance science editor?
- 6) Is he/she a full-time freelance or a part-time freelance with a regular job?
- 7) What kind of suggestions did the freelance make for revision?

- 8) What did the freelance charge for the work?
- 9) Will you consider getting help from freelances in the future?
- 10) In your opinion, does the demand for freelance science writers and editors in China exceed the supply, or does the supply exceed the demand?
- 11) What do you expect freelances to do? Do you have any comments on their service?

The first 10 questions were closed ended, with three or more options offered. The last question was open ended. Copies of the questionnaire are available on request.

In 2004, I received 24 replies from authors; in 2006, I received 40 replies. The two groups of respondents did not overlap.

Most authors had asked their coauthors (10 in 2004 and 12 in 2006), supervisors (6 and 25), statistical experts (9 and 4), or colleagues (7 and 7) to review their papers; only a few (2 and 1) had asked English-language teachers to revise the papers. The reviewers gave them suggestions mainly on study design (6 and 9), statistical analysis (13 and 10), logical structure of the whole paper (7 and 25), and English writing (15 and 16). Although writing in English is difficult for most Chinese authors, they think that language is not the most important thing for writing scientific papers. They prefer their reviewers to pay more attention to the scientific content. American authors tend to have the same preference, according to Tom Lang, of Tom Lang Communications (personal communication, February 2008).

Usually, consultation was free; only three authors had paid for it. Because in China most people find it embarrassing to charge their acquaintances or friends, both the authors and the reviewers usually treat such cases as a kind of help. Authors sometimes repay the reviewers in other ways, for example, by inviting them to dinner.

In 2004, no author had tried to get help from a freelance science editor; however, in 2006, six authors had found freelance science editors for help through advertisements (1) or through someone's recommendation (5). Possible reasons for the increase may include increases in number of freelances, in awareness of freelances, and in willingness to contact freelances. Although some freelance science editors advertise on the Internet, a direct personal recommendation appears to be the most common way for scientific authors to find suitable freelance editors. The same situation exists in the United States, according to Lang (personal communication, February 2008).

Of the six freelance science editors, two worked exclusively as freelances, and two were full-time editors at journals and also did freelance editing; in two cases, the respondent did not specify. It seems that the number of freelance science editors is increasing. In China, most freelance editing is provided in their spare time by editors who have full-time employment at journals. Having worked with journals for several years, full-time editors usually are skilled in communicating with authors, and they may have opportunities to impress the authors with their editing experience. Therefore, some authors might ask them to edit submissions to other journals. Sometimes, publishers recruit editors from journals for occasional freelance editing. For instance, the Beijing office of the Charlesworth Group has outsourced some editing to journal copyeditors.

The six freelance editors had made revisions or given comments on aspects of English writing (4), statistical analysis (1), and logical structure of the paper (1). Because many freelance editors in China are teachers or editors with a background in language or literature, lack of scientific knowledge is sometimes a shortcoming. The freelance editors charged on the basis

Use of Freelance Editors continued

of the paper length (4) or how long it took to edit the paper (2).

According to the 24 replies in 2004, most authors would consider asking freelances to edit (14) or write (2) papers when they wanted to submit papers to journals outside China; only a few would consider asking freelances to edit (4) or write (1) regardless of whether the journals were inside or outside China. Four would not consider asking for help from freelances, and one did not answer question 9. In 2006, I added two options to question 9. According to the 40 replies, most authors would consider asking freelances to edit (13), translate (11), or write (1) papers when they wanted to submit papers to journals outside China; some would consider asking freelances to edit (8), translate (8), or write (1) papers regardless of whether the journals were inside or outside China; four would not consider asking for help from freelances; and one did not answer the question.

The demand for freelance editing seems to be increasing in China, especially when authors want to submit to journals outside China. In China, submission to journals indexed in the *Science Citation Index (SCI)* is encouraged, and publication in these journals helps authors to get higher scores when they apply for promotions or grants. Therefore, authors pay more attention to their submissions to *SCI*-indexed journals, especially journals of high quality and authority.

When asked in 2004 about the need for freelance science editors, six authors who had never used them indicated that there is no need for them, one that supply exceeds demand, and 16 that demand exceeds supply. In 2006, four authors indicated that there is no need for freelances, one that supply exceeds demand, and 31 that demand exceeds supply. The general opinion is that the demand for freelance science editors exceeds the supply in China. There are bright prospects for freelance science editors in China because the potential market is huge.

The authors indicated some requirements for freelance science editors. Among the respondents, 24 authors wanted free-

lance editors to know science (knowing the authors' own fields was preferred), 22 wanted them to have good English communication skills, eight wanted them to be able to diminish the likelihood of rejection, six wanted them to charge a reasonable rate, and three wanted them to have some statistical knowledge. Clearly, a suitable science background and good English communication skills are the two main requirements.

In the opinion of some authors, if freelances do not understand the science, they cannot understand their clients' investigations and are greatly limited in how much they can contribute. That view is debated in the editorial world.

Although more and more authors, especially young authors in large research institutions or hospitals, can write English-language papers well, many researchers in China have trouble writing in English. Those researchers need help with the language. As nonnative-English speakers, most freelance science editors in China face particular challenges. Both fluent English and wide science knowledge are required, but it is difficult to achieve perfection in both. Editors should seek a balance between practicing language and widening scientific knowledge of research design, statistical analysis, standard data displays, and so on. In my opinion, paying more attention to the latter may be wiser because a freelance editor should not only be a language consultant.

Because freelance science editing is a relatively young field in China, rates of pay vary, and people have no idea what rate is reasonable. (Even in Western countries, some experienced freelances probably have difficulty in evaluating their work and determining a suitable rate.) A high rate will probably discourage potential clients, and so "working for less money than usual to get publicity"¹ is a good idea for freelances just beginning their careers.

Demand for freelance editors who are knowledgeable about statistical reporting seems to be increasing; authors hope that freelances can help them to interpret their data with suitable statistical methods.

That is a new challenge for freelances in China. Knowing statistical reporting can help freelances to give clients more than they expected. Such knowledge can attract more clients and justify charging higher rates.

There apparently are no professional associations of freelance editors in China, although there are some government associations of editors of journals, such as the China Editology Society of Science Periodicals. Many members of the Council of Science Editors and the American Medical Writers Association are freelancers, and they play active roles in the associations. However, freelance science editors in China seldom have opportunities to meet each other and to attend editorial conferences; this isolation limits their progress. Freelance editors in China should try to establish or join editorial associations to exchange ideas, share information, and build cooperation with each other. There is an old Chinese saying, "The people of the same occupation are your enemy." However, freelance science editors can help one another gain needed knowledge and skills and can introduce new clients to one another.

My study was relatively small, and the data were obtained from authors of a single journal. A broader study might yield results that could be generalized more confidently. It does appear, however, that freelance science editing is an increasingly recognized activity in China. It will be interesting to watch how this field develops. Increased exchange between freelance science editors in China and those in other countries may prove mutually productive. 🔥

Acknowledgment

I thank Tom Lang and Barbara Gastel for their comments.

Reference

1. Robillard RR. Freelancing in the computer age: the more things change. . . . *Sci Ed* 2001;24(5):161.