

Editors Featured, Grossblatt Honored at AMWA Annual Conference

Barbara Gastel

For editors as well as writers, the 2008 American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) annual conference, held 23–25 October in Louisville, Kentucky, contained much of relevance. Among highlights were a description of worksheets to help to ensure from the start that research is suitable for publication, guidance on preparing tests to assess the editorial skills of prospective or current employees, and a lighthearted account of changes in the daily work of a manuscript editor over the last 5 decades. As usual, the conference also included many workshops on editing and related topics.

Editorial Perspectives on Scientific Writing

A session titled “Form and Function of Scientific Articles: Variations and Commonalities” featured three prominent science editors. The first speaker, Tom A Lang, of Tom Lang Communications and Training, noted possible functions of the parts of a scientific paper. He then listed journal-imposed limits that can interfere with function—for example, limitations on lengths of titles and abstracts and on the number of references cited. He also noted that standards apparently have not been established for reporting some types of content, such as experimental procedures in basic medical science. In closing, he called for more study of the forms and functions of scientific articles.

Martha Tacker, of Biomedical Communication Services, West Lafayette, Indiana, contrasted the traditional format of a scientific paper with the “variant” format. In the traditional format, used to report single

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Marianne Mallia and Norman Grossblatt

experiments, she noted, the Introduction does not state findings, the Methods section includes an overview of the study design, and the Results section presents each measured outcome. However, in the “variant” format, used to report series of experiments in which the outcome of one experiment determines the design of the next, the sections have somewhat different content. In particular, Tacker stated, the Introduction includes a statement of the findings, the Methods section lists materials and individual methods but does not present an overall design, and the Results section is a series of reports on individual experiments, each resembling a miniature scientific paper. Tacker said that the “variant” format seems to be becoming more common, and she recommended developing more guidelines for authors using this format.

The final speaker was Marianne Mallia, who heads the scientific publications section at the Texas Heart Institute. Mallia

described how her institution helps to ensure that investigators plan their research so that it will yield the information needed for publication. For example, early in the process, when their proposals go to the institutional review board, investigators must submit a completed prepublication worksheet in which the principal investigator–author specifies the audience and hypotheses, provides background information, indicates various aspects of the study design and analysis, states the significance or potential impact of the work, notes expected figures and tables, and lists key references. Mallia also recommended preparing outlines before writing. In addition, she suggested that before completing their research, investigators write a “zeroth draft”, containing much of the anticipated scientific paper other than the results. The prepublication worksheets that Mallia discussed are posted at www.texasheart.org/AboutUs/Depart/scipubdocuments.cfm.

AMWA *continued***Guidance on Testing**

A session on pre-employment and postemployment assessment of medical writers' and editors' skills included a presentation by Jeremy W Dugosh, senior editor at the American Board of Internal Medicine. Dugosh, who has a doctorate in psychology, identified strengths and weaknesses of various assessment methods and offered recommendations.

Assessing editorial skill by looking at an editor's usual work, Dugosh said, has the advantage of being clearly relevant but the disadvantages of being subjective and inconsistent. A test consisting of a piece of writing to edit, he said, is easy to administer, consistent, and realistic; but the evaluation is subjective and can be biased. The approach that Dugosh favored was use of a multiple-choice test. When well designed, such a test, he said, is the best means of simulating on-the-job decision making in a psychometrically sound way. Dugosh also noted that multiple-choice tests allow objective comparison of the knowledge and skills of different people.

Dugosh then offered advice for preparing multiple-choice examinations. Among his recommendations: Begin by surveying the content in the field, choosing specific subjects therein (for example, medical terminology, punctuation, and sentence structure), and identifying the most important items. Then write down specific points that those tested should know. Include in the examination not only questions that test knowledge but questions requiring synthesis and high-level judgment. Avoid

common pitfalls of question writing, such as making the questions too easy or too hard, not including an answer that definitely is best, testing more than one point in a single question, and including a clue to the answer, such as making the correct option longer than the others. Dugosh also advised against using questions that pivot on the word *except* and offering as an option *none of the above* or *all of the above*.

Dugosh said to "review—reflect—rewrite" after drafting an examination. He said to reread the examination from a test-taker's perspective and he recommended exchanging questions with a writing partner. In closing, Dugosh reiterated that multiple-choice testing was the soundest individual approach. He advised using multiple-choice testing as the core means of assessing knowledge and skills and supplementing it with other approaches.

The Swanberg Address

Norman Grossblatt, senior editor at the National Academies (and manuscript editor for *Science Editor*), received the Harold Swanberg Distinguished Service Award at the annual conference. The Swanberg Award, AMWA's highest honor, recognizes distinguished contributions to medical communication and the medical profession. Contributions for which Grossblatt was cited included his leadership in establishing the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences (BELS). "Without Norman, there would be no BELS exam," said the presenter of the award.

In his acceptance address, "A Life in the Day of a Manuscript Editor", Grossblatt recounted how various aspects of his daily work have changed during his 50 years as an editor. He recalled in lively detail receiving papers typed with typewriters, writing corrections by hand on manuscripts and sending the manuscripts for retyping, consulting thick reference books rather than looking up facts online, walking to the library to check references, and using carbon paper or messy, sometimes risky technologies to make multiple copies of documents. His remarks evoked chuckles of recognition from the more senior members of the audience—and giggles of amazement from the more junior.

Grossblatt noted that although computer technologies have greatly changed the mechanics of a manuscript editor's work, human judgment remains integral to editing. "The computer will never replace the human editor," he said—and then closed by asking, "Will it?"

And More

Other sessions of editorial interest included workshops on basic copyediting, microediting, macroediting, writing and editing grant applications, tables and graphs, statistics, and proofreading. Such workshops and much else will be offered at the 2009 AMWA annual conference, to be held 22–24 October in Dallas. For more information, please see www.amwa.org. 