A Question of Guidance

Question

Those of us in science editing sometimes are asked to edit application essays, for instance, for admission to graduate programs in the sciences. Especially because application essays are used in part to evaluate writing proficiency, an ethical quandary can arise. Should one agree to edit such essays? Why or why not? If one agrees to edit such essays, what sorts of revisions or suggestions are appropriate? Why?

Solutions

The activity of editing involves many ethical dilemmas, including whether one should agree to edit student essays that are part of an admission application. Words are powerful. It is often said that vocabulary and writing proficiency are the best predictors of one's success and income in life. How you describe something, including yourself on an application, makes a big difference—sometimes the difference between acceptance and rejection.

When a student asks an editor, or anyone, to edit an essay for an application, the situation can be described or interpreted in two ways. First, it can be interpreted as the student's asking you to help him or her to cheat and present himself or herself falsely or dishonestly as different from who the person really is. I do not think that many students consciously see it this way when they request assistance.

Second, the situation can be interpreted as the student's asking you to help him or her to present himself or herself as the best or highest self so that the person's true radiance shows through and he or she does not accidentally or unintentionally present a false impression. I doubt that many students consciously see it that way, either, when they request assistance.

The moral issue involved is one of intention. Is it the intent of the student to deceive or trick the admissions committee into accepting someone who has not presented himself or herself accurately or truthfully? Or is it the intent of the student to allow or assist the admissions committee to see the true self free of its occasional flaws or shortcomings? I suspect that usually the student is somewhere along that continuum. As editors, of course, we find it difficult to determine the true intentions of students. Perhaps we should ask more explicitly what a student is trying to accomplish in asking for our assistance. That could be rather awkward unless done carefully and thoughtfully. But what exactly is your role? Are you a helper teaching students how to improve their writing proficiency? Or are you a judge and critic pointing out the misuse or at least poor use of language? That judgment is always up to you when you agree to edit students' essays. You would not just write essays for them; that would entail plagiarism. So how much can you do, or say, or help and have an essay still be the student's? Here, as always in ethics, the question is, Where do you draw the line? We each have to determine the answer to that question for ourselves as to where we draw *our line* with regard to editing students' essays.

Once again, moral philosophy has not given us all the answers, but rather helped us to focus on the important questions. When Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living, he included the examination of moral issues, such as the ones that editors face regularly.

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Like the solution to so many professionalism dilemmas, ethical management of requests to "please look over my admissions essay" begins with honest conversation before the essay is written.

When someone comes with this request, I say, "I'll be happy to talk with you about it." If the petitioner is taken aback, I explain that once I have read the essay I will be restricted in suggesting substantive changes—an awkward position. The editor in me would be uncomfortable in performing a simple "grammar and punctuation" check, but the professional in me would not alter the thoughts and voice of the writer.

Solution Corner

continued

So here's how that conversation typically goes.

"Before you write anything, look at the school's objectives and courses of study carefully so that you can state how its program will fulfill your career goals better than other programs that you've looked at." [They've done that, they say.]

"Tell me what you're thinking of saying." [They do.]

Here I may push them for connections between their goals and the offerings of the program to which they are applying. I want to see the practical side of this application essay. Their desire to be the best-ever doctor (bacteriologist, geneticist, public-health servant) is generally exposed in embarrassing excess. Inasmuch as these essays are always word limited, emphasizing practical matters forces the applicant to cut down on the "history of my inspiration" section.

"How will you arrange those thoughts on paper?" [They list them for me in order.] I'm looking for coherence here.

"That sounds good. Try not to start all your sentences with 'I' or 'my', and 'Then I' or 'Next, I' is not a solution. Sometimes the coursework you took, the person you met, or the experience you had will be the most important thing you can talk about; that will be the subject of the sentence." [A return look that says either "Really?" or "Give me some credit, lady."]

"Stop by with questions before you send me the essay, ok? I expect to hear from you at least once." ["Rrmglrg."]

"Because once I see it, it's a grammar and punctuation deal." ["Then, uh, can we talk about that connection thing you mentioned?"]

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If you are a professional editor, it is reasonable to assume that at some point a student will ask for your assistance in editing a collegiate admissions essay. In my mind, "editing" is somewhere between "proofreading" and "writing". On the one hand, it is difficult, particularly if we are fond of the supplicant, to limit ourselves to proofreading. On the other hand, it is unethical, in my opinion, to rewrite such an essay in whole or in part. I can only deal in hypotheticals at this point because I have yet to be presented with the situation, but I know the time is coming—certainly when my own kids are trying to get into college. My approach would be to determine from the student a priori what he or she feels is essential to communicate in the essay. After doing a basic proofreading, I would let the student know whether I felt that the message came through clearly and concisely. If not, I would say how the essay did not reflect the stated intent and suggest that the student write another draft that would more effectively communicate the message to be conveyed. In that way, the student would iteratively arrive at a version of the essay that would be appropriate to submit. My job, then, would merely be to act as a "mirror". At the end of the process, the student would thank me profusely, but I would make sure that the student understood that he or she had been the one doing the heavy lifting all along. And that's as it should be.

Ken Heideman
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Should you edit applications or contest submissions?

I'm reminded of the dilemma that parents must face when their children ask for help on graded homework. How do you respond to requests for editing such as this? Almost surely, only clients who know you well would make the request, so the situation is delicate, I think.

In the Department of Scientific Publications at the University of Texas M D Anderson Cancer Center, we do not edit internal applications or internal writing-contest submissions, because almost certainly the true quality of writing and thinking of the individual applicant (which the application is designed to discover) would be disguised. The policy is known and strongly supported by the senior vice president for academic affairs and the dean of the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, the two officers most directly involved in this ethical question.

How about external applications and contests? Yes, we edit those. The same dilemma holds: We give our applicants and contestants advantages that may not be available to scientists in other institutions, so their applications and contest entries are not solely their own work. But unless the application process or contest rules specifically exclude our help, I don't know how to distinguish the help that we give our institution's faculty and trainees in applications and contests from the help that we give them on grant proposals and manuscripts. Having proposals funded and getting manuscripts published are contests, too, and our department (and editors everywhere) exists to help writers succeed in these contests and to strengthen the scientific reputation of the institution for which we work.

How might an editor who is highly sensitive to those ethical dilemmas help authors without disguising the writing and reasoning power of the identified author? I'd say by reviewing with the author ahead of time the application or contest rules, by describing the typical errors of applicants and contestants, and by suggesting ways to avoid these errors. It would then be up to the scientist to take the editor's advice and execute it in his or her own words. A slightly more aggressive intervention is for an editor to review a completed application or contest piece and to suggest how it might be strengthened without actually naming specific deletions or additions.

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