Starting Off on the Right Foot

Welcome to the first installment of Between Author and Editor, a series about building and maintaining good author–editor relationships. Although many of the skills and behaviors needed to build good author–editor relationships are matters of common sense and common courtesy, I think that we editors can probably learn some useful new strategies and behaviors if we share our experiences and insights with each other. I hope this series will be a forum in which to do so.

I would like this to be a series not only for author's editors but also for other types of editors—managing editors of journals, manuscript editors working for journals or book publishers, acquisitions editors, and so on.

For this first article, I decided to begin at the beginning—I interviewed several editors by phone or e-mail about how they work to ensure that their relationships with authors start well. Following is a summary of their responses. I hope you find it useful to see how some other editors' practices and experiences compare with your own, and I hope you find at least one new idea here to help you in your own author–editor relationships.

First Editor at an Institution

Two editors I spoke with—David Nadziejka and Nancy Taylor—had the experience of being the first editor at an institution.

Nadziejka came to the Van Andel Institute in 2002, and he has always been the only editor there. The institute has 19 laboratories engaged in basic-science research. When Nadziejka arrived, he said, "almost all [the investigators] had never used an editor before. ... So I sat in on a staff meeting and told the people what my background was, in terms of science and mathematics, my language and English capabilities, and the fact that my concerns were that technical material get transmitted clearly and accurately. I wasn't just looking at the language—I was looking at the science, and I could understand most of it. I think the fact that I told them that I had a science background and was going to be looking at the science content helped

make them feel as though I wasn't going to just meddle with their writing."

As for working with individual authors, Nadziejka finds that little up-front education is needed. "Probably 8 to 10 minutes is the most I've ever spent trying to give somebody a picture of what I was doing," he said. "I've never had anybody who wanted to sit down for an hour and talk about my philosophy or what I was going to do." He also finds that "once I ask a few questions and they recognize that I do understand a fair amount, I get a free pass on the English stuff—no one complains about recasting a whole sentence."

He noted that because everyone at Van Andel is in the same building, he knows most of the researchers, and "it's easy to bump into each other and ask questions." He also noted that "I can go almost any place I want and get a minitutorial" if he needs to learn about a field of research he is not familiar with.

Nadziejka is selective in soliciting feedback from authors. "I don't really go see everybody after I edit something for them," he said, "unless there were particular problems that I saw or I thought maybe I had changed something that maybe I shouldn't have. Most of the time, I'm going to go talk to them right after I send them back the manuscript and let them know that there was something that I wasn't too sure about. And then I'll check back a couple of days later and find out what their opinion was—whether it was a problem or was okay." Nadziejka has found that if there are particular issues for an author, "they usually come to the surface pretty early."

Nadziejka also contrasted his experiences at Van Andel with his earlier experiences in working with engineers and then later biologists at Argonne National Laboratory. At Argonne, he said, "engineers just said, 'You can help me? Here's the manuscript. Go to it.' They were so appreciative of having the help." In contrast, he said, in the biology division, "a lot of the PhDs didn't think they needed an editor. But the organization required that stuff get edited. It was a little harder there sometimes. But once you explained why

you were doing things, it was fairly easy. There were only one or two researchers out of about 2 dozen who just didn't want the help."

Taylor came to the Greenville Hospital System, a community hospital in Greenville, South Carolina, in 1991, hired by an academic vice president who was establishing a department of research to help the residents and faculty in the six residency programs. In this new department, Taylor joined a biostatistician, a couple of research nurses, and an epidemiologist. Taylor had not previously edited medical or scientific material (she has a PhD in English and had taught at the college level and in high school and middle school), and the residents at the hospital had little or no publication experience. Over the course of several months, Taylor taught herself how to be a medical editor. "It was very slow at first, because nobody knew that I was there," Taylor says. "I spent that time in reading medical articles because I didn't even know how they were organized."

Once people found out about her, Taylor said, "they were happy to use my services." Eventually, Taylor said, "people started calling me and asking me to come to them, to their offices. At that meeting, they would say, essentially, 'What is it, exactly, that you do?'" And Taylor would describe her services and then ask the author some questions about the manuscript to be edited. She would emphasize that her training was in English, not science, and that the author must therefore review all her suggestions carefully.

The first time she edits for any author, Taylor said, "I would always prefer to meet with the author again to go over the manuscript. They would almost always do this with me once but hardly ever a second or third time. Most of the people just wanted to get on with it—to have me give the manuscript back to them and let them look at it." She did, however, have a couple of clients who enjoyed meeting to talk about their edited manuscripts. One of them, she says, would record her advice in a notebook, "and then when he would

give me the next manuscript, he would go back through his notebook and make sure he wasn't making the same mistakes. Talk about a dream author to work with!"

Working in an Editorial Group

Two other author's editors whom I interviewed, Karen Klein and David Galloway, are members of multiperson groups devoted to assisting authors with their publishing efforts.

Klein manages the Research Support Core at Wake Forest University Health Sciences (WFUHS), which provides the WFUHS faculty with a variety of voluntary, free services related to grants and manuscripts. She is the author's editor for the Core and edits primarily grant proposals but also manuscripts for journals and book chapters. According to Klein, the Core has an online request form on which authors list their needs, but they "have an 'open-door' policy and keep things pretty informal because we want to encourage faculty not to be intimidated about seeking us out."

Klein said, "I do try to meet face to face with authors whom I don't know. We review what they need, what I can provide, how our system works, a rough schedule for turnaround, and so on." In addition, she said, "I always emphasize that I'm not a scientist and thus will not rewrite their grants to 'improve' the science."

She explained that most authors at WFUHS have not worked with a medical editor before coming to WFUHS and that "this is the main reason I try to meet with authors, who usually don't know the difference between a journal editor, a managing editor, and an author's editor, not to mention the difference between a writer and an editor." Because she is part of the WFUHS Office of Research, she rarely needs to convince authors of her credentials, she said, adding that "there seems to be a tacit acknowledgment of professional knowledge, for which I'm very grateful."

Klein's group asks for formal feedback on everything they do (not just editing), and evaluations are provided anonymously via an online system. Klein said that they have

tweaked some services (such as workshops) on the basis of feedback but almost never receive suggestions for improvement to the main grant-related services. "Usually people comment that more faculty should use the Core!" she noted. However, said Klein, "I suspect we don't always hear from people who may have more critical feedback—the evaluations are not required. Also, given that our services are voluntary, we are sought out by faculty who want help and are thus inclined to be grateful from the start."

Galloway has worked as a scientific editor since 2002—first in the Department of Scientific Publications at the University of Texas M D Anderson Cancer Center and since 2006 in the Department of Scientific Editing at St Jude Children's Research Hospital. According to Galloway, "most of the face-to-face contacts I have are with postdocs or junior faculty who don't know about our department or our services and come over asking, 'What does an editor do and what do you want from me?' because some supervisor has said, 'Take this paper to Scientific Editing.' They come over to find out what it is that we can offer."

In one case, said Galloway, "I had a postdoc who was just about to start writing a manuscript come over and ask, 'How do I do this? How do I start?' So I sat down with him and said, 'Okay, tell me what your research is,' and then we talked about how to go about writing that." In general, he said, the great majority of communication is by e-mail, and "most of the significant face-to-face interactions are initiated by authors." Galloway doesn't routinely solicit feedback, and hearing back from authors is pretty rare.

Galloway does contact authors when he needs clarification. He cites as an example a paper that was baffling to him—"I looked and looked and looked and could not for the life of me figure out what the point was. It seemed as though there were five different things going on that were apparently unrelated." He called the author and arranged to meet, and "after 20 minutes of our going around and around in circles, I finally figured out how all of this stuff was

supposed to fit together. And once we got to that point, I was able to tell her how she should rewrite her paper to make all that clear. And she very happily did that and came up with a wonderful manuscript. So that was a very satisfying author encounter." However, Galloway said, that kind of encounter is rare.

Like Klein and Galloway, I work in an editorial department—the Department of Scientific Publications at the University of Texas M D Anderson Cancer Center. When I work with an author, I generally begin by reading through his or her manuscript and jotting down any concerns or questions that occur to me. Next, if I've already established a relationship with the author, I'm familiar with the subject matter, and the type of editing needed seems clear, I e-mail to propose a turnaround time and ask whether the author has special requests or concerns. Occasionally, I receive detailed guidance—for example, "You know, I don't think the Discussion section gets our points across as clearly as I'd like" or "I'd like to add another figure to my grant proposal, but I don't have room. Can you shorten the text by half a page?" Most authors, though, don't have special requests.

If I haven't worked with an author, I call to make sure that the author is familiar with our editorial process and to establish a turnaround time and whether the author wants on-paper or on-screen editing (only two in the last year have chosen on-paper editing). I also call authors if I have a major concern (for example, if a grant proposal does not seem to conform with the granting agency's basic requirements) or if I have questions about the subject matter that I haven't been able to answer by doing some preliminary research.

When I began working as a scientific editor, in the mid 1990s, I was afraid of calling or meeting with authors because I worried that the conversation would turn very technical and I would struggle to know what to ask (this almost never happened, thanks to very understanding authors). However, now that I'm more knowledgeable about medicine and science, I find

that telephone conversations with authors are sometimes enjoyable. Recently, for example, I called a "new" author to talk about a grant proposal, and he gave me an off-the-cuff, fascinating 20-minute tutorial about his field of research. His enthusiasm was infectious, and I enjoyed learning about a topic I previously knew nothing about.

(I would prefer face-to-face conversations, but since fall 2000, I have spent all but 6 weeks of the year telecommuting from El Paso, Texas, about 750 miles from M D Anderson. I plan to address author–editor relationships over long distances in a future article in this series.)

A Freelance Editor's Perspective

Flo Witte has worked as a department author's editor and now is a freelance author's editor. For freelances, she said, the most important topics to discuss at the beginning of an author–editor relationship are the hourly rate and the turnaround time. "Other things seem to fall into place once we've agreed on those two topics," she said. She also discusses confidentiality issues if needed, and, Witte noted, "I am careful to tell them that I edit according to a style guide (usually AMA, although I use the style guide recommended by the journal). I emphasize that because I want them to know that I have a reason for each editorial change that I make."

When she was working as a department editor, Witte said, "I always discussed turnaround time, but I also discussed ethical issues and my approach to editing." Witte also sometimes mentions up front that although she has extensive experience with biomedical editing, she doesn't have a science degree. She explains, she said, that "if they're willing to work with me and ensure that I understand the science, then I'll help them express it in the best way possible to get their meaning across."

Witte enjoys meeting with authors and the "back and forth" of working with authors on multiple drafts. However, as a freelance, Witte said, she rarely has the opportunity to sit down with an author, and with some authors, even telephone

conversations are difficult. She does, however, "let people know up front that I'm willing to look at however many versions I need to look at before we get it ready to go. And when it's a paper that's really needed a lot of work on my part, I'll tell the author, 'I'd really like to see this again before it goes to the journal.'" She finds, though, that only a tiny percentage of authors are actually willing to do the back and forth—most authors just want to review her suggestions, revise the paper, and send it in.

Witte said that she sometimes works with people who "don't even really believe that they need editing. They come into it kicking and screaming. But when we can demonstrate that we do a good job—and not just by saying 'It sounds better,' but knowing why we make a change and being able to defend it—they come to accept us as members of the team, and that's what I think we ought to be." She said that with younger authors or experienced authors who are using an editor for the first time, "I'll insert comments like 'the AMA manual recommends that,' and I'll tell them why I made the change." That helps to establish the editor's professionalism.

Insights from a Journal Manuscript Editor and an Acquisitions Editor

Because author's editors are not the only ones who regularly interact with authors, I also sought input from other kinds of editors. One of the people who shared their insights was Margaret Perkins, director of manuscript editing for the *New England Journal of Medicine*. She and the other members of her group tend to interact with authors for very short periods just before publication.

According to Perkins, up-front conversations with authors are rare: "We typically edit the articles first and then interact with authors by telephone and by e-mail." She went on to explain that "our style is fairly strict, our level of editing is heavy, and our turnaround times are short: authors have only a couple of days (and sometimes less) to respond to our queries and provide corrections. In general, I'd say that the

author and the manuscript editor need to agree on the goals of the editing. But here, because there's little time for negotiation, it's important for our authors to understand that we're editing for readers of a general medical journal, not specialists; that we edit for readability and clarity, including eliminating abbreviations and jargon where possible; and that we check everything, including all their mathematics. That is information that the authors gather during the process; it's not discussed directly very often."

Perkins reported that "most of our authors have worked with manuscript editors before, and in fact their articles have sometimes been edited fairly heavily by a scientific editor here before they reach our department. Many authors are familiar with a much lighter level of editing than ours, however, so even experienced authors are sometimes taken by surprise. But they are typically pleased that their articles are read so closely, and they're pleased to be publishing with us." She also noted that "our manuscript editors tend to develop good relationships with authors despite the constraints."

On a related note, Perkins said that "our editor-in-chief solicits comments from the authors of every research article and passes them along to the departments as appropriate. Most of the comments are favorable; I have been here for only a couple of years, and so far we have not needed to change anything in response to the comments."

Whereas Perkins works with authors over a very brief period and under intense deadline pressure, Elizabeth Knoll often works with authors for months or even years at a time. Knoll, senior acquisitions editor for behavioral sciences and law at Harvard University Press and a former science editor at the University of California Press, enjoys working with scientist authors because they are passionate about their work and write because they can, not because they have to. "My colleagues in history, literature, and so on are always dealing with authors a lot younger, because to get tenure in those fields, you have to publish," she said. "But in science, basi-

cally, people write books when they have the luxury of writing books."

And, she said, they are motivated by love for their subject matter: "As far as I can tell, there are two motivations to write books: love and money. And money is not something you are going to get from a university press. Love is a much better motivator because it will make the writing process a joyful process for you."

A critical part of Knoll's early work with authors is to decide up front whether a book is suitable for the press. Especially if an author does not have a track record of writing the kind of book he or she is proposing, Knoll carefully reviews sample chapters to get a sense of how the author intends to shape the book. "We're very careful," she noted. "We don't sign up people if we don't think the book will get past the peer reviewers or (less commonly) if we don't think it will turn out to be the book that we envisioned. We don't want to cancel contracts."

Once a book contract has been signed, Knoll spends time in talking with authors about the editorial process and what kinds of response they can expect. Because books published by university presses must pass academic peer review before publication, Knoll explains that she will warn authors early on if she senses that a book might not meet the press's standards. "Even though I'm not a specialist in the field", she notes, "I have sufficiently good intuition to know when something's not going to pass peer review. So I can warn the author."

Knoll also sometimes talks with authors about what she termed "the audience problem"—the difficulty of writing in a style appropriate for readers outside the scientist's narrow field of expertise. She explains that she will help authors to get the tone right: "An editor can say, I think this is too abstract. Can you give examples? Can you tell a story or two? If you're talking about a problem, can you break it down and show what the real-world consequences would be?" She said that "90% of the time, people like and appreciate what I'm going to do." Asked what she most enjoys about working with authors, Knoll replied, "get-

ting to know these people and their minds and getting them to think about what they want to say and how to shape it, getting in tune with them. Often it can become a very nice working relationship."

Acknowledgments and a Call for Suggestions