

Journal Articles on Science Editing: An Assortment from '08

Articles on science editing appear in journals in many disciplines; therefore, finding them can be difficult. The following are some highlights of four articles found by broadly searching the literature from 2008; two are on peer review, one on effects of revisions, and one on sex composition of editorial boards.

Lu Y. Peer review and its contribution to manuscript quality: an Australian perspective. *Learned Publishing*. 2008;21(4):307–318.

Research on peer review has tended to come from the Northern Hemisphere and to focus on medicine and biology. For the current study, however, Yanping Lu surveyed Australian researchers in education, physics, and chemistry about their perspectives on peer review. Of a sample consisting of 232 academics, 84 (36.2%) returned usable responses to the survey questionnaire. The respondents came from 27 universities; all had PhDs, and 37 (44%) had received their doctorates more than 20 years ago.

The respondents generally rated peer review as very effective; on average, higher ratings came from reviewers in physics and chemistry and from those who had served longer as peer reviewers. When respondents were asked for two reasons for agreeing to be peer reviewers, the most common reasons stated were professional responsibility (48 responses; 35.8% of the total), personal professional development (29; 21.6%), and maintaining the quality of published papers (12; 9.0%). Among the 54 respondents who said that they had ever declined to be peer reviewers, the most common reasons stated were lack of expertise in the subject matter and lack of time. In response to an open-ended request for comments, several of the academics expressed concern about the lack of formal training in peer review, and many noted increasing difficulty in finding “time to review promptly and thoroughly”.

Shashok K. Content and communication: How can peer review provide helpful feedback about the writing? *BMC Med Res Methodol*. 2008; 8:3. Available from www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2288/8/3.

In this wide-ranging, nine-page article, translator and editorial consultant Karen Shashok offers a variety of observations and suggestions about how peer review might be able to provide more helpful feedback about the writing in research reports. Among her observations are the following: Some types of changes in writing that peer reviewers suggest can make the text harder to understand. Fewer journals are providing extensive copyediting, so some reviewers might feel more obliged to try to improve the writing. The suggestions include the following: In guidelines for reviewers, distinguish more clearly between requests for feedback on content and requests for feedback on writing, and provide more detailed instructions for giving feedback on writing. Obtain insights from “wordface professionals” (for example, author’s editors and translators) on types of feedback that authors find useful.

Shashok briefly reports a study of the perceptions of author’s editors regarding the usefulness of feedback received from “journal gatekeepers” about the language. Nine respondents provided numerical estimates; the percentage of comments or changes deemed correct ranged from 0% to 80–90% (mean, 46%; median, 50%). Among additional types of research Shashok calls for are studies in which “real target readers are asked to judge the quality of the texts”.

Hartley J, Betts L. Revising and polishing a structured abstract: Is it worth the time and effort? *J Am Soc Inf Sci Technol*. 2008;59(12):1870–1877.

The abstract of a research paper is like the entry hall to a house: It can either invite you in or put you off. In the eyes of an author, a revised abstract may appear more inviting than the original version. Do

readers of abstracts find the revised versions clearer? Hartley and Betts addressed this question through research in which, to use Shashok's term, "real readers" were asked to judge texts. In two electronically administered studies—one of academics in a variety of disciplines, the other mainly of information scientists—each participant was shown either an unrevised version of a structured abstract or a version that had been polished in keeping with widely accepted principles. The participants were then asked to rate the clarity of the abstract as a whole and the clarity of each part of the abstract. On average, among the 464 respondents, the revised abstract was rated as being somewhat clearer; significantly higher ratings for clarity also were received for the Aim, Results, and Conclusions sections (but not for the title and the Background and Methods sections).

This article includes as an appendix the original and revised abstracts. In addition, the article lists reasons for the revisions

made in each section of the abstract. These components of the article might aid in teaching scientific writing and editing.

Jagsi R, Tarbell NJ, Henault LE, Chang Y, Hylek EM. The representation of women on the editorial boards of major medical journals: a 35-year perspective. *Arch Intern Med.* 2008;168(5):544–548.

Traditionally, few women have served as editorial-board members or editors-in-chief of medical journals. Has the situation changed? In a study that helps answer that question, Jagsi and colleagues examined the sex distribution of editorial-board members and editors-in-chief of 16 prominent biomedical journals published in the United States, the UK, and Canada.

For each journal, names of the editorial-board members and editor-in-chief were obtained from the first issues published in 1970, 1975, 1980, 1985, 1990, 1995, 2000, and 2005. Sex was determined for 3218 of 3237 (99.4%) names of the former

group and 115 of 118 (97.5%) of the latter. Among the editorial-board members whose sex was known, 371 (11.5%) were female. That percentage increased from 1.4% in 1970 to 16.0% in 2005, but women remained in the minority on all the editorial boards. When all journals were weighted equally in the analysis, the overall percentage of women among editorial-board members increased from 1% in 1970 to 21% in 2005. Among the editors-in-chief listed, eight (7.0%) were women. The authors state that the study "suggests a need for a greater understanding of barriers that may have impeded (and may continue to impede) even greater participation by women in these critical leadership positions."

BERNARD APPIAH, a graduate student in science and technology journalism at Texas A&M University, is the current Science Editor intern. BARBARA GASTEL, a professor at Texas A&M University, is the editor of Science Editor.