

## Author-Friendly Onscreen Editing: Part 2

In my previous column on onscreen editing, I offered some advice for starting off well. In this column, I offer advice for actually putting in changes and some interesting thoughts on efficiency from an onscreen-editing expert.

**Make sure it's clear what your queries refer to.** If you're not careful, it can sometimes be hard for authors to tell which word, phrase, sentence, or passage your comment or query refers to. If there's any danger of confusion, including phrases like "In the preceding sentence" or "In the highlighted passage" can help authors to confirm what you're talking about; another method that can be effective is adding visual clues in the form of arrows (←, →). In Microsoft Word, it's easy to set up keyboard shortcuts that allow quick insertion of such arrows.

**Place new text consistently before or after the original text.** Being consistent about where you place new text can make your recommendations easier for authors to follow. Consider the following example, which I find a bit awkward.

From ~~this~~ these database, we selected patients who ~~meet~~ met the following criteria: stage I-II HER2-~~overexpressing~~ overexpression ~~mam-~~ mary breast cancer, no previous breast cancer treatment. . . .

I always put new text after the original because this order seems more natural to me, and I've never had an author comment about it. Another reason to place new text after the original is that if you highlight text in Microsoft Word and then begin typing on top of it, the new text automatically appears to the right of the original. However, consistency in placement is probably more important than where the new text appears.

**Track it only once.** If you need to make the same change multiple times throughout a document, track it only the first time, and at that point in the paper write a note explaining that you've made the same change throughout the rest of the document but haven't marked it. (Of course,

if you're not sure that a change is actually needed, it's better to just query the author and let the author make the change if it's necessary.)

**Minimize the number of tracked changes in phrases and sentences.** Whether an author will be clicking through your changes one by one or reading through a number of changes and then accepting or rejecting them as a group, you will generally do the author a favor by minimizing the number of changes that have to be processed. For example, in each set of examples below, the second option is simpler.

[1] technology ~~to~~ for assessing outcomes (3 changes)

[2] technology ~~to assess~~ for assessing outcomes (2 changes)

[1] in ~~small-group~~ and ~~large-~~groups settings (5 changes)

[2] in ~~small and large groups~~ small-group and large-group settings (2 changes)

Some editors might be reluctant to retype longer phrases or sentences because doing so could take longer than simply inserting whatever corrections are needed. However, as onscreen-editing expert Geoff Hart points out, retyping isn't necessary: With revision tracking turned on, select the original sentence, cut it, and then immediately, without hitting any other keys first, paste the sentence. Then make whatever corrections are needed.<sup>1, p 167-8</sup> The select, cut, and paste steps can be performed in a couple of seconds.

**Avoid "puzzle words."** Hart notes that "a retyped word is easier to understand at a single glance than a puzzle word that contains several tiny corrections."<sup>1, p167</sup> I agree, and I've started retyping entire words instead of just correcting individual letters. One caveat: Other editors have pointed out to me that some authors might think that we made a mistake—they'll think that we deleted a perfectly good word and replaced it with itself. And if authors think this, they may retain the original and reject our change. However, I think that if we're

# Between Author and Editor

*continued*

careful with how we mark other changes, authors who see that we've crossed out a word will believe that we've done so for a good reason, not because we were careless.

**Be careful when you suggest moving large blocks of text.** When you believe that a large block of text would fit better in another part of a manuscript, and when you also need to edit that text block, I recommend following a procedure outlined by Hart: “turn off revision tracking, cut the text from its original location, insert a comment to explain the disappearance of the text (i.e., its move to a new location), paste the text in its new location, insert a comment to explain the sudden appearance of the new text, then turn on revision tracking again so you can edit the moved text.”<sup>1, p 170</sup> With that procedure, because revision tracking is not turned back on until after the text has been moved to its new position, your editorial suggestions for the moved text block will be clear to the author. (In contrast, if revision tracking is turned on at the time when the text is moved to its new position, “the software will track all of the inserted text as a single insertion and all your changes will become part of the same insertion, forcing the author to examine it carefully, looking for changes.”<sup>1, p 170</sup>) Because there is no “suggested-deletion” version of the passage hanging around in its original position, there should be no risk that the author will accidentally end up with two versions of

the passage in the final document.<sup>1, p 170</sup>

**Check documents before returning them to the author.** Before sending an edited document back to the author, scan through it with tracked changes showing and with tracked changes hidden. You might be surprised by what shows up in the changes-hidden view. A common problem is for adjacent words to run together (“runtogether”). Also, if you tend to toggle revision tracking on and off as you work, you might find that some of your queries are composed of a mix of tracked changes and standard text—hard for an author to deal with. Another problem I often find is that the format for inline queries is not consistent. I usually format such queries as bold and underlined, but sometimes I'll type my keyboard shortcuts sloppily and the underlining will get left out, a fact that doesn't become apparent until I switch to changes-hidden view. This is not a big deal, but documents look nicer and queries are easier to spot if the query formatting is consistent throughout.

**Help authors understand how to use revision tracking efficiently.** Several of my colleagues have standard “tips on using Track Changes” instructions that they e-mail to authors when they return edited papers. I think that's a great idea. Also, if authors express interest, you can offer to serve as a resource for software-related questions. One author I worked with expressed more gratitude for my show-

ing him how to turn off the balloons in Microsoft Word than he did for all the editorial work I had ever done for him.

**Spend an extra 15 minutes to save an author 45.** An important point that I hadn't thought about until I read Hart's book is that for those of us who are paid by institutions or departments, it may be appropriate for us to spend a few minutes extra in making revisions easier to handle rather than to work as quickly as possible.<sup>1, p 173</sup> Why? Our extra 15 minutes might save an author an hour's worth of work because many authors aren't as proficient with word processing as we are.<sup>1, p 173</sup> Some clearly are—like the authors who send me beautifully formatted documents with fancy use of styles and embedded graphics—but most aren't. And any author will appreciate spending less time on revision and having more time for other pursuits—or maybe just to relax!

## **Additional Suggestions?**

If you have additional tips for editing offscreen in an author-friendly manner, I'd love to receive them for possible inclusion in a future column.

## **Reference**

1. Hart G. Effective onscreen editing: new tools for an old profession. Quebec: Diaskeuasis Publishing; 2008. Available from: <http://www.geoff-hart.com/books/eoe/onscreen-book.htm>.

### **Erratum**

On page 175 of the September–October 2009 issue of *Science Editor*, the wording at the end of the last full paragraph in the first column should be “May–June 2005, p 106–107”.