

The Value of Copyediting: An (Un)Necessary Evil?

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When it comes to copyediting in scholarly publishing, there are two main schools of thought:

1. It is an essential part of the publishing process that adds substantial value to the finished product.¹
2. It is unnecessary and injects an unacceptable time lag into the publishing process.²

There is also a third opinion that splits the difference between the first two:

3. Copyediting does improve the quality of the finished product and is appreciated by some readers, but it is inessential and most readers (and authors) neither notice nor care whether an article has been copyedited.

Copyediting falls under the wide umbrella of “scholarly publishing activities” that encompasses many things the average author, reader, or member of the public takes for granted.³ On the one hand, we editors like it that way: if a reader doesn’t notice the quality of the copyediting in a given article, it means we have done our jobs. Copyediting is like air: it’s not given much thought unless it is of poor quality or missing altogether (and sometimes not even then; see point 3 above). On the other hand, this invisibility makes it all too easy for the work that goes into copyediting to be dismissed, and the value it adds to the finished published product to be denied.

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All types of writing benefit from being checked by multiple sets of eyes. Most of us have had the startling experience of handing an article, white paper, or resume over to a trusted friend or advisor for feedback only to get it back with corrections to errors we simply did not see. “I

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can’t believe I missed that!” is a feeling most writers would recognize. It is not that every writer is sloppy or careless. If someone has been working on something for a while, he stops noticing the little things. It takes a fresh pair of eyes (ideally belonging to someone who is not personally invested in the content or at the very least hasn’t yet read the material) to catch the spelling, grammar, and punctuation mistakes that a writer cannot see. But when authors have already poured so much time and effort into their writing, they may have trouble seeing the value copyediting adds to their work.⁴

What Copy Editors Do

“The purpose of copy editing is not to detect serious flaws in theory, methodology, analysis or interpretation—that is the responsibility of peer review—but simply to make a paper more consistent and readable.”⁵

In addition to editing for spelling, grammar, and punctuation, copy editors apply the publisher’s house style, which is usually based on a combination of reputable dictionaries and style guides, and is often strongly influenced by tradition as well as the standards of the particular industry or discipline. Through proof queries and occasionally over email, copy editors work with authors to make sure their writing fits the publisher’s style and includes all the necessary information readers rely on: citations, references, footnotes, and the like. Copy editors enforce certain standards to ensure the material can be easily understood by its intended audience, which may include students and educated enthusiasts as well as professional scientists. They also help authors connect with their readers by enhancing the readability of published content: for some authors, English is not their native language, and copy editors use their knowledge and experience to polish the text of a paper so it reads clearly and smoothly. High-quality copyediting ensures that published papers are easily readable and citable, while retaining the author’s intended meaning.

Why it Matters

“Applying uniform style guides also aid readers while occasionally revealing problems in a manuscript.”³

As science editors, we know how crucial it is to maintain a reputation for accurate, authoritative information our readers can trust. Thorough copyediting makes for a consistent, first-rate experience for the reader. Consider

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the following sentence from a meteorologist's column on a major metropolitan news website: "The forecast for the rest of the month only gives southern New England about 25 percent of the normal rainfall we would expect."⁶ The glaring spelling error detracts from the quality of the writing, and an otherwise informative article appears less authoritative as a result.

Scholarly publishers face tight budgets and ever-increasing pressure to get more articles published faster than ever, and copyediting is often one of the casualties when the ideals of high-quality publishing hit the hard reality of less time and less money. But copyediting adds substantial value for the authors, readers, and publishers. Fred Vultee's lab experiment⁷ demonstrated that copyediting can improve an author's writing such that it appears "significantly more professional, more organized, and better written"⁸ than unedited material. For readers, copyediting improves the clarity and readability of the material while ensuring all sources are properly cited so they can be easily found for further study. For publishers, good copyediting helps uphold professional standards to maintain their reputation as an authoritative source for quality publications.

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