

Interview with Erica Goodoff, Medical Editor

Lindsey Buscher

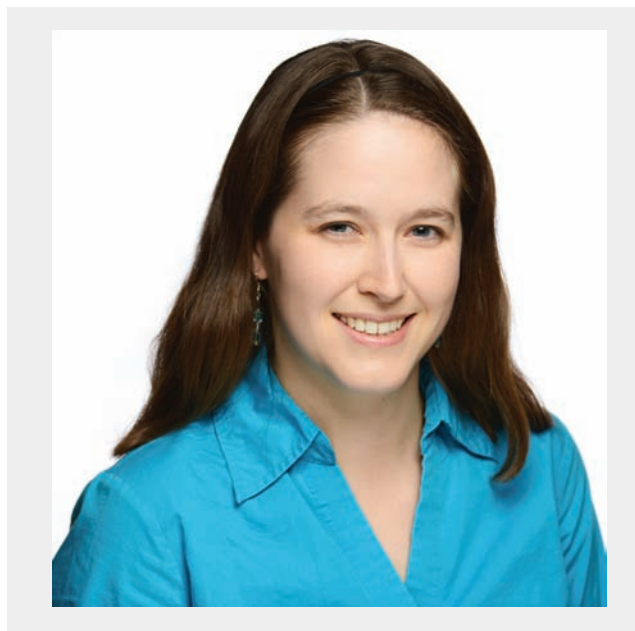
Erica Goodoff received her bachelor's degree in journalism and Russian language and literature in 2002 from the University of Missouri and continued studying Russian at the University of Kansas from 2005 to 2007 while working full time at Allen Press. She earned her Board of Editors in the Life Sciences certification in 2010 and has worked as a medical editor in the Department of Scientific Publications at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center for the past six years.

LB: How did you end up as a medical editor?

EG: Before I took this job, I worked for several years for a publisher of scientific journals, in roles ranging from proofreader to managing editor. I knew that eventually I wanted to edit text at a deeper level, and I found that medicine was the most interesting topic I read about as an editor. When my position with the publisher fell through during an economic downturn, I saw a description of my current job (on the CSE job board, actually) and I thought to myself, "that sounds like exactly what I want to do." And it is.

LB: What's a typical day like for you?

EG: My primary job is to edit research papers and grant proposals (e.g., requesting research funding from the National Institutes of Health) written by MD Anderson faculty or postdoctoral fellows. I work in a department with about 15 other editors, and faculty members send us their manuscripts prior to submission (to either a journal or funding agency). The manuscript may be a very early draft, in which case we can call or sit down with the author in person to refine or rework parts of the text, or it may be nearly ready to submit, in which case we mostly copyedit. I would say most manuscripts I see need at least a moderate copyedit and at least one or two suggestions to improve the flow or organization of the text. Most days I work alone in my office, poring over a manuscript. I typically spend about three days on each manuscript, and I usually have about three more manuscripts waiting in my "queue" on a given day. Although most editors work very independently in my department, it is handy to have other editors nearby when questions arise, and we have a strong internal training program in which we review the work of new editors. In addition to



Erica Goodoff

editing, our department offers writing workshops for our authors. I can be found presenting at one of these workshops about four or five times a year.

LB: What are the top three things you enjoy about your job?

EG: First, I like that it is intellectually challenging work. I have found that jobs that challenge me in this way help me stay engaged in doing quality work and improving my skills. Second, as a typical introvert, I like the quiet, independent work setting. Although I enjoy teaching the occasional workshop, the quiet office is definitely a good fit for me most days. Third, I like that I'm in a position to help ease the pressure of getting important research funded and published. Authors send us their work voluntarily and are happy to receive help from someone outside the role of reviewer or supervisor.

LB: What are the most challenging aspects?

EG: Although I appreciate the intellectual challenge, the work is undeniably hard. I do not have any formal training in medicine or science beyond basic undergraduate-level biology, so many of the manuscripts I edit contain concepts that may be

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unfamiliar to me. I have certainly learned a lot from my work, but mostly I have had to cultivate the ability to ask the right question, whether in the form of a Google search or an author query. This is all the more challenging when English is a nonnative language for the author, which is often the case. In addition, just in general, this type of editing requires heavy concentration. I believe my attention span is better than average, but let's just say that some days require an extra cup of coffee.

LB: What has been the biggest surprise to you about your job or company?

EG: To be honest, I didn't know that such a job existed until I read the job description. Many large institutions have editors working in individual departments, usually with some background in a specific field relevant to that department, but ours is one of few institutions with a centralized editing department.

LB: What particular skills are critical to be successful in your role?

EG: Aside from a solid grasp of grammar and attention to detail, which you need in any editing role, this job requires critical thinking and problem solving. Manuscripts in draft form are often missing pieces of information that are key to a reader's understanding of the content. This may be something as simple as a transition word or as complex as a description of a statistical test. Sometimes authors are "too close" to the research and forget that someone who has not been in the lab with them will need to know the right background information to understand why things were done a certain way. Of course, identifying the problem (i.e., critical thinking) is only the first step. The second is to ask the right question, as I described earlier, which is where the problem solving comes in.

LB: What are the biggest changes you've seen in the industry since you started?

EG: Publishers and journals in general have cut back on editing services, for a number of reasons. The internet has also changed the traditional publishing model. Unfortunately, with all of these changes, I think it

is easy to overlook how much work is really needed to produce a high-quality research paper, especially when it comes to editing, which is invisible when done well and notoriously difficult to quantify. Although our department is unusual among institutions, private editing groups with a similar service model have become more common as the "quality-gap" problem has become more noticeable in the world of online publishing.

LB: Do you have any predictions for the future?

EG: You know, despite all the tools and technology we have created to improve communication—from reference management software to autocorrect—I don't think robots will ever completely replace human editors. Language, or at least English, is way too inconsistent. That being said, the type of editing we do may become more complex as these tools are improved to help with the basics.

LB: When you were a kid, could you have imagined yourself doing this job?

EG: Well, as I said, I didn't know this job existed until I applied for it. When I was younger, I vaguely pictured myself working in an office on a daily basis and doing something kind of nerdy, but beyond that I had no idea where I would end up.

LB: If you had to give one piece of advice to someone who is interested in working as a medical editor or in the scholarly publishing industry, what would it be?

EG: Network. This is probably the most cliché answer to this question, and unfortunately many of us find it exhausting, but it is very important. Scholarly publishing is a broad field, but editors tend to spend a lot of time alone. This can make it especially difficult when the time comes to take the next step in your career. I have met a lot of medical editors and others doing similar work who ended up in their jobs largely by chance (or, as one of my colleagues puts it, they have "origin stories"). The best way to find the dream job you didn't know existed is to meet the people who do it.