

Interview with MaryKate Sullivan, Journal Manager

Mary K Billingsley

Name: MaryKate Sullivan

Title: Journal Manager

Company: Elsevier

Years in current position: about 1½

When I have a question about an article in production, I turn to MaryKate Sullivan. From copyediting to typesetting to proofing, MaryKate coordinates the process that turns sets of accepted manuscripts into published journal issues. What follows are excerpts from my conversation with her about her role as a journal manager for Elsevier.

MKB: How would you describe your role and what you do?

MKS: I'm a journal manager, which means I receive manuscripts and am in charge of shepherding them through productions until they are published online and in print. I work with authors, editorial offices, and internal colleagues to make sure that process happens smoothly.

MKB: How many different journals do you manage?

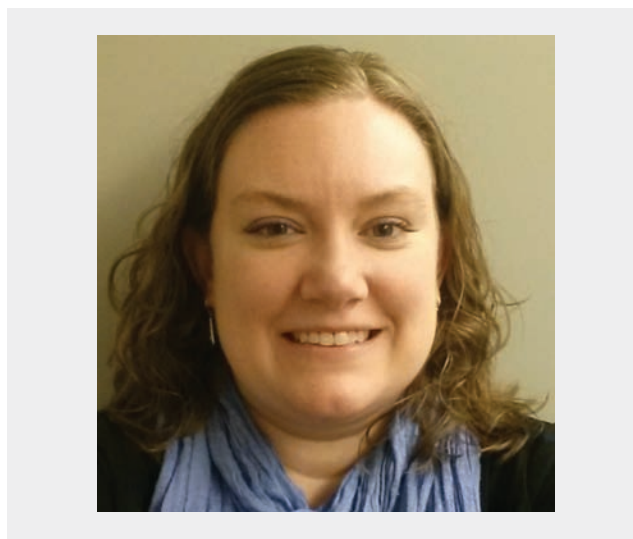
MKS: Right now I have two journals. That is pretty typical. Elsevier really tries to determine how much time individual journals will take up in your day, assign a balanced workload, and make sure you have enough time to spend with each journal.

MKB: How long have you been in the field?

MKS: Almost 4 years.

MKB: How did you end up in this role?

MKS: When I was first out of graduate school, I felt a bit stuck: I had originally gone to get my master's degree in English literature because I wanted to eventually become a professor and teach. Sometime during my two years in grad school, I decided I no longer wanted to teach and then I was faced with looking for a job that I hadn't given any thought to previously. I eventually found a job with a company as a production editor where I worked on various journals in science and the humanities. After I had been there for some time, I was looking for opportunities to grow in my career and I had heard positive things about Elsevier. I looked around, found a job listing for my current role, and immediately applied. I was so grateful they decided to hire me!



MaryKate Sullivan

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

MKS: I get in to the office and get my coffee (always my first task!), then I open my email. I hate a cluttered inbox, so I try to address the low-hanging fruit and delegate what needs to be sent along to someone else as soon as I come in. I want to make sure authors, editors, and colleagues know that their questions are important to me, so I try to respond within a reasonable time frame. Then, depending on where my journals are in their publication cycles, I may work on article proofs, review copyediting work, or compile an issue. I may have a meeting or two scheduled as well, so I typically have a pretty full day.

MKB: What do you like best about your job?

MKS: I like knowing what I'm doing is making a difference in people's lives. The article proof I'm working on may be helpful to a physician looking for information to help patients. I feel empowered that I'm not just working a desk job—what I do helps people every day. It's rewarding to know I'm doing something that matters. I also enjoy completing tasks and checking to-dos off my list during the course of my day so that when I leave the office in the afternoon, I feel I have actually accomplished something. I consider myself lucky.

MKB: What are the most challenging aspects?

MKS: Personalities. The most challenging aspect of my job is working with people who may not necessarily

see things the way I do. This is true for colleagues [at Elsevier] as well as authors or editors who work outside Elsevier. Sometimes, I have to step back from an email exchange or phone call with someone in order to try to see a situation from their perspective. Maybe I need to realign my outlook on a certain subject or take a new approach, but it's so rewarding to be able to help someone who thought a problem or issue would not be solved to their liking. In this job, you really have to talk to a lot of people—authors, editors, colleagues—and dealing with other personalities and perspectives can be challenging.

MKB: What was the biggest surprise to you about your job, Elsevier, the field?

MKS: I think the biggest surprise about my company is that it is so caring and concerned for its employees' well-being. I think most people have a view of a large company like Elsevier as a corporate entity whose employees are anonymous and that doesn't care as long as it makes money, and that's not true at all. I feel supported in my role every day here, and I also feel confident in exploring other potential trajectories for my career. Elsevier wants each of its employees to develop skills that will help them now and in the future, whether in their current role or another. I feel valued as an employee, and I think everyone should feel that way in their career. In such a large company, the size is an asset and we have so many human resources available to us—people with other expertise who can answer questions quickly.

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

MKS: Impeccable attention to detail. I work on manuscripts and articles every day that authors and other editors may have been looking at for weeks or months. In some ways, I'm the last line of defense before an article is published, so it's important for me to approach each article with fresh eyes and to catch what others before me may have missed. Also, good people skills. That sounds incredibly cliché but it's very true! I am an introvert and I never would have thought I would communicate with the number of people I do every day in my job. It was intimidating at first, but I think developing those people skills has helped me grow in confidence.

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

MKS: The push for more and better technology. It is becoming so important for Elsevier to provide the best technology for its customers so they are better

equipped to treat patients, prepare for a career in health care, or participate in important research. People ask, with all this technology, am I worried about my role, and I'm absolutely not. Although parts of the process are relatively automated, human involvement and a personal touch adds so much value. We provide the human element that an automated process never will.

MKB: Do you have any predictions for the future?

MKS: Since I've only been working in this industry for a little less than 4 years, it's hard to say whether I have predictions for its future. I do, however, have predictions for my own future: I will continue working to learn new things, improve my current skills, and develop new ones. Who knows where that will lead me! I'll make sure I'm happy and fulfilled in whatever my current role is in my career. I feel happy and fulfilled now and I believe that's what matters.

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

MKS: Not specifically this job, but it became clearer as a real possibility the older I became, especially after talking to people who had worked in the publishing industry before. I love the power of words and I think I just want an opportunity to work with them in every stage of my career.

MKB: If there was something you'd like others in the workflow or pipeline to know about working with a journal manager or production editor, what would it be?

MKS: I would like everyone to have a better sense of what each of us does. For example, I don't really know what the typesetters do. I receive work back from them, but I don't really know how they do what they do, or how articles are posted online, or how files sent to the printer become a print issue. For all of us, it would be helpful to have a stronger understanding of what each of us does and how it affects others throughout the workflow. It sounds like this issue of *Science Editor* may help with that!

MKB: If you had to give one piece of advice to someone who's interested in working as a journal manager or production editor, what would it be?

MKS: Make sure you're well versed in English grammar and pay attention to the details. If you believe you would like a career in academic publishing, try it out. If it's not for you, don't sweat it! This career, like every other career out there, isn't for everyone and it's important for you to be happy.