

Short Course for Manuscript Editors

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Faculty and attendees of the Short Course for Manuscript Editors, CSE 2018.

Attendees of the 2018 CSE Short Course for Manuscript Editors came from all over the United States as well as from South America. There were two dozen attendees from a variety of backgrounds, primarily writing and editing disciplines in biomedical or earth science, and from academic, publishing, and industry settings.

Word Tips

The short course opened with a session by Elizabeth Blake called “Microsoft Word Tips for Manuscript Editors.” She noted that scholarly authors typically create documents in Word and thus that is the software editors primarily use. Blake talked about using Word to clean up and format documents. She explained how editors can use Word to convert text to tables and vice versa.

One of the most popular parts of Blake’s session was demonstrating useful shortcuts to help editors with formatting. Another helpful feature she demonstrated was the split screen, which facilitates comparison of different parts of the same document (e.g., to compare data in the abstract with those in the text). Blake also demonstrated tools useful for navigating and searching within a document.

Blake showed attendees how to customize the spell-check dictionary and how to build a library of comments to embed author queries. She also explained how to customize a wide variety of Word settings, including the ribbon and Word’s autocorrect tools.

Ethical and Legal Issues in Scientific Editing

Next up was Annette Flanagin to present ethical and legal issues that manuscript editors may encounter. She began by talking about authorship—who qualifies as an author

and what criteria they must meet. She discussed what to do with authorship problems after a paper is submitted and how to acknowledge individuals who are not authors but contributed to the work.

Flanagin then discussed conflicts of interest: financial, academic, ethical, or political. She talked about why disclosures of conflicts of interest matter and what and how potential conflicts of interest should be disclosed in scientific articles.

Next, she addressed copyright and permission issues, including basic legal information (e.g., what is covered by copyright and publication licenses), and provided some sources for editors on this topic. She talked about the difference between copyright and trademark. Patient confidentiality was presented next, including how journals are responsible for protecting patient confidentiality in publication.

The final part of Flanagin’s presentation focused on corrections, including different approaches based on the level of error. This session wrapped up with breakout groups that were tasked with wrestling with some of the ethical and legal issues that had been presented.

Manuscript Editor’s Guide to References

Stacy Christiansen presented the topic of references. She began by describing research on errors in citations, including how they happen and what the downstream effects are, emphasizing that this is why manuscript editors are crucial in the quality-assurance process.

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She shared suggestions for approaches to editing references, including checking for duplicates, identifying missing entries, verifying entries against a database (e.g., MEDLINE), and editing them for style. She reminded attendees that the goal of the reference list is to help readers locate sources.

Christiansen then talked about how to format various types of references, including journal articles, books, corrections, websites, social media, preprints, and legal citations. She then outlined some of the tools that manuscript editors have at their disposal, including specialized software, databases, catalogs (e.g., Library of Congress), and search engines. She talked briefly about tagging references, which helps correct formatting, linking, and matching to databases and aids in storage and searching, as well as web/print production.

She closed the session with some guidance on how to deal with content that does not have a formal reference list but must cite sources.

Statistical Errors Even You Can Query

Tom Lang opened his session by defining 5 levels of manuscript review. His presentation focused mainly on analytical editing or documentation review, a level of review that falls between substantive editing (logic-based review) and peer review (validity-based review). Analytical editing is concerned with ensuring that research designs and activities, including statistical methods and results, are accurately and completely documented according to accepted guidelines, usually those on the EQUATOR website.

Lang focused first on some general reporting issues, such as the fact that many authors use no statistics or only basic statistics in their reports, that many authors who do use statistics make lots of mistakes, and that many readers are unaware of the first 2 issues. He highlighted some common reporting errors, such as false precision when reporting numbers, reporting percentages without numerators and

denominators, and using the mean and standard deviation to describe data that are not normally distributed.

He also pointed out common errors in simple linear regression analysis, such as drawing the regression line beyond the data, not assessing the assumption of linearity, and not providing a measure of how well the model fits the data. He also discussed the pros and cons of *P* values, including errors in reporting and the current thinking that *P* values should generally be accompanied by, if not replaced with, confidence intervals, which focus on the clinical implications of the result and away from chance as an explanation for them.

Lang emphasized that manuscript editors do not need to be afraid of statistics. Although there is a small learning curve, manuscript and authors' editors can learn to query about statistical methods and results and, in so doing, improve the quality of research reports.

(Some) Best Practices of STM Editing

The short course wrapped up with a session led by Peter Olson. He opened by discussing abbreviation use in technical editing, especially vis-à-vis clarity and style. He then talked about ambiguous language, misplaced modifiers, and other examples of unclear writing.

Olson encouraged attendees to embrace and protect consistency regarding presentation. He emphasized that clear writing eliminates redundancy. He provided examples of poor (and better) word choice and usage, with an emphasis on patient-first language. He also discouraged the use of jargon in scientific papers.

Olson peppered his session with plenty of examples, often asking attendees to chime in with their thoughts on what could be improved. He provided tips for eliminating superfluous wording and provided guidance on the correct use of verb tenses.

The Short Course for Manuscript Editors was well received and the faculty members asked for feedback, eager to continue to hone the sessions for future CSE meetings.