

Freelance Editor “Auditions”: A CSE Email List Discussion

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This column is part of an occasional series covering the Council of Science Editors’ email distribution list, in which members ask and answer one another’s questions. It’s a key member benefit and emphasizes the value of our expertise and experience—and provides a platform for members to help fellow members. The question and responses have been lightly edited for clarity and conciseness.

As a freelance editor, the prospect of new opportunities is always appealing to me, especially when that opportunity offers consistent and/or lucrative work. Many excellent and reputable companies are now relying on freelancers to handle the bulk of their editing obligations. But, alas, for every such company there always seems to be another seeking to take advantage of our interest in such opportunities.

A fascinating discussion on the CSE email listserv caught my eye recently. An individual who had been freelancing for some time related that a company had asked her to edit a very large, unpublished article as part of her “audition,” and she was quite suspicious of such a large sample edit. Now, freelance editors are often asked to edit a sample from a typical article without pay as part of an auditioning process; most will be relatively short (less than 2000 words) and have generally been previously published. This is not considered suspicious and is a very reasonable way to assess a freelance editor’s skill. However, this individual was given a 23-page article and was asked to edit it in its entirety without pay. The general consensus was that this was taking the auditioning process much too far.

On this point I can speak from experience, as I was recently asked to complete a large, unpublished paper as part of an assessment. It was 25 pages and just over 9000 words (an unusually large “sample” in my experience)! In addition, they had originally told me that they would provide examples for use during editing, but when I asked to see one they told me that none were available (unusual and suspicious). The company had every appearance

of a reputable one (a website, physical address, contact information, etc.), so I completed the assignment without question (giving up an entire weekend for the privilege). After I completed the assignment, I was told that my work was “not up to their standards” and was simply brushed aside with no further explanation. So, I was relieved when the CSE discussion began, as it suggested that not only was my work likely not sub-par, as I had been told, but that more likely this company had taken an unfair advantage.

The takeaway message is that asking a freelancer to edit a large, unpublished article without pay should raise a red flag, as it is a practice that should be considered exploitative. A more reasonable audition should consist of short excerpts from multiple, usually published articles, in general not exceeding 1000–2000 words.

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Original Question:

I am a longtime self-employed medical editor who is looking for opinions on a situation described in an editors’ discussion group. Full disclosure: I’ve been established as a freelancer for 24 years now, so it has been a long time since any potential clients have required me to provide a sample edit.

An editor in the group was seeking to be added to a journal’s roster of approved freelancers. She was given a 23-page manuscript to edit without pay to show her skills. It is my contention, and that of many self-employed editors I’ve known for years, that this is far too long for a sample edit. In my various editorial circles, it is considered fair for editors to be asked to edit a sample of 500 to 1000 words without being paid for their time. In fact, the Editorial Freelancers Association’s¹ suggested guidelines for editorial testing states: “A useful unpaid test of an editor’s or proofreader’s skill should not require any more than the equivalent of five standard (250-word, double-spaced) pages.” But some journals I’ve encountered will pay for editing of samples no matter their length.

What length sample do you consider it fair to ask freelance editors to edit without pay? Or do you consider it fair to ask for sample edits only when you pay freelancers for their time?

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Responses

A reasonable example

- This is a great question and one that I have wondered about. I did what I considered a medium sized test recently. The company provided 2 articles, one I was to edit the abstract only, the other I was to edit from the beginning (abstract, intro) through the first figure of the results (all of the part of the results related to that one figure). It seemed like a reasonable way to assess my skill and, in the end, the company did not have a free fully-edited manuscript. To me, it is inappropriate to request someone to edit a complete manuscript without payment of some type.

From the hiring side

- I can speak from the hiring side and would consider a 23-page article used in this way to be exploitative. I agree that a much shorter sample (500 to 1000 words) can be used to demonstrate an editor's skills. I would read this request as a red flag about that journal and avoid working for them.

Booby traps?

- I have given both "live" (not published) and old (already published in edited form) papers to be copyedited as part of the copyediting test. However, we have found that no one single paper will ever cover what we find when we copyedit mathematics, so we have created a booby-trapped three-page sample paper that has common errors inserted. Even if the candidate were to google the paper, it would be very different from the sample. We have put several types of errors: grammar, spelling, and, of course, mathematical errors that a copyeditor should be able to find and either fix or query the author. I agree that the test should not be that long, but should be able to test for common errors.
- Hate booby traps, which result in collateral damage of mistrust. Why not just look at copyeditor's track record, training, etc., and try out his/her performance on real manuscripts?

House styles

- At this point in my self-employment (24 years), I don't have to take tests anymore. Things are handled the way [the first response] suggests. I can understand, though, why journal staff members would want to give tests of some kind to less-experienced freelancers. And there is a problem in this situation: I think that what is scored as correct or incorrect on the "booby trap" type of tests is often subjective. That is, the style expected to be used on such tests is not always pure style manual (*The ACS Style Guide: Effective Communication of Scientific Information* [ACS],² *AMA Manual of Style* [AMA],³ *Scientific Style and Format: The CSE Manual for Authors, Editors, and Publishers* [SSF],⁴ etc.). Sometimes it's the house style of the creator of the test—which can be hard for test-takers to suss out unless they are given access to the house style sheet—or even the test creator's personal style, internalized after years of working with various journals and publishers.
- I no longer take editing tests (over 30 years editing, over 6 as a self-employed editor), but I heartedly agree about the possible subjectiveness of test reviewers. Everyone, not just test reviewers, have their own notions about what's proper in English, whether they are correct or not. On the flip side, when I worked as the Publications Team Lead for my Center, I was in a position to hire both salaried editors and freelancers. On a couple of occasions, I would have loved to test perspective editors, but didn't have the backing of upper management to do so. For the freelancers, I couldn't test them either, but at least I was familiar with these folks—they had been used prior to me being promoted—so I had an idea of who did what and what their quality levels were. (It was a set list of who I could go to for quotes on a given project.) There was one I vowed never to use if I could at all help it, and one I ALWAYS wanted to use.

Links

1. <https://www.the-efa.org/>
2. <https://pubs.acs.org/isbn/9780841239999>
3. <http://www.amamanualofstyle.com/>
4. <https://www.scientificstyleandformat.org/Home.html>