

How to Explain Your Role to Non-Editors: Production and Copyediting

Becky Rivard and Jessica LaPointe

“What do you do?”

We’ve all been asked this at one point or another. It is a question that often comes up at social gatherings. For editors, it is not always easy to explain what we do and why. Here at CSE, we are lucky to be surrounded by fellow scholarly editors who “get it.” But to someone who works in a different field, the world of editing can be a mystery. We hope that this series of articles can serve as a basis on how to describe your role to non-editor colleagues. First up: production and copyediting.

What Is Scholarly Publishing?

One place to start is by describing scholarly publishing. You can explain that the basis of scholarly publishing is peer review, wherein experts in a given field review an author’s work to determine whether it is an appropriate fit for their journal. Ideally, during peer review the editors provide helpful comments to assist authors in refining their writing and preparing it for publication. This process can result in several rounds of revisions, each of which may introduce new material to the paper while increasing the possibility for errors and inconsistencies. Describing the basics of scholarly publishing can provide a transition to describing your role as an editor since one of the key areas editors provide value is in resolving these errors and inconsistencies once the final round of revisions is complete and the paper has been accepted for publication.

Production Editing

It is a good idea to draft a one- to three-sentence elevator speech describing what you do. For production editors, this could be that you serve as a project manager or administrative professional who shepherds manuscripts from acceptance to publication—including overseeing copyediting, working with authors, and keeping things on schedule. Another way to summarize your role is that of serving as a liaison among

authors, copyeditors, typesetters, printers, graphic designers, and marketing professionals. To others, “production” and “editor” can mean many different things.

As production editors, we often are asked questions about our job. It is not uncommon to be asked what the value of using a publisher is when self-publishing online or posting to a preprint server are now options. You can mention the value of peer-reviewed works, which is very different from self-publishing. Inquiring minds may also bring up digital publishing, thinking this means that the production editor role is not needed. To address this, you can say that there are many steps to be completed to create an ebook, PDF, or HTML article, including checking metadata, creating linked cross-references, testing hyperlinks, and then posting the publication online. Because the world of publishing is changing, so is the role of the production editor. Bringing up digital trends is a way to open up the discussion and make it relatable to people in other fields.

Copyediting

Copy editors, too, are often met with a blank stare upon explaining what they do. We often are asked, “Can’t you just use spell check?” and “But how can you edit if you are not a subject-matter expert?” To address some of these frequently asked questions, you can start by describing the background of a typical copy editor, or even how you ended up as one yourself. You can explain that copy editors often come from publishing backgrounds, with educations in English language and literature or related humanities or social sciences.

Non-editors may not know that to competently edit medical, chemistry, physics, and other scientific publications, copy editors rely on style guides like the *Chicago Manual of Style*, the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA style), and CSE’s own *Scientific Style and Format*, and that publishers also have their own in-house style guides. These style guides allow copy editors to ensure their publications are formatted correctly for their specific disciplines. Explaining what a style guide is and how copy editors use it can be a good way to explain copyediting.

Specific Examples

If you would like to give specific examples of your work, you can explain that oftentimes during peer review the reviewers will suggest new references the author should cite, and they

BECKY RIVARD is an Associate Production Editor at the American Mathematical Society. JESSICA LAPOINTE is the Managing Copy Editor at the American Meteorological Society.

CONTINUED

may suggest sections that can be cut or moved within the paper to improve readability and organizational flow. These changes sometimes mean references are no longer cited in the text or in-text citations no longer have matching references in the bibliography. This is where copy editors step in to confirm which references the author wishes to cite and where, and which citations need a new reference to be added to the reference list. Making sure credit is correctly given where it is due is part of a copy editor's purview.

When paragraphs and sections are moved or altered during peer review, it is not uncommon to find sentences that have been accidentally cut off in the middle and now make no sense. It is the copy editor's job to help authors refine their writing for final publication, while retaining their unique way of expression—their authorial “voice.” A copy editor also acts on behalf of readers to make sure the text is comprehensible and confusing wording is clarified. Particularly when English is not an author's first language, there can be syntax or grammar errors that can inhibit comprehension and readability. Copy editors are charged with writing direct, simple, and clear queries to the authors so they may edit the text as needed to improve clarity.

For production editors, it might be helpful to give some examples of tasks that you handle on a daily basis, such as monitoring schedules, assessing figure quality, preparing and sending proofs to authors (then collecting and incorporating the author's corrections), gathering signed forms, and in some cases working with marketing to make sure everything is in place to publish and promote the publication. You can mention non-routine topics that you and your team receive training in, such as impact factors

and other metrics, working with ESL authors, learning new software to track your manuscripts, or deciphering copyright laws and permissions.

Defending Your Work

Some editors may find themselves having to defend their work, especially to non-editors who may not understand the value of production or copyediting. In this case, it is best to focus on what a copy editor can provide: not only correct grammar and punctuation, but also consistency, professional tone, and factually correct information. A well-written document or publication can demonstrate meticulousness and commitment to detail. Conversely, publications with punctuation, spelling, or grammar errors can give the impression of sloppiness, or worse, incompetence, even if the content is of high quality. At its best, copyediting is invisible: only noticed when it is absent, and otherwise undetectable. Likewise, the work of a production editor is sometimes hidden until there is a problem that needs to be resolved—a quickly approaching deadline (or one that has already passed), a missing copyright form, or a graphic that needs permission to be printed.

In Summary

It is always interesting to learn about what other people “do,” and we encourage scholarly editors to think about your role and how you would explain it to someone who has no background in publishing. It can be a good opportunity to let others know about the importance of peer review and copyediting, and how publishing trends affect your role in ways that are not so different from other career fields.

CONTACT US FOR A FREE CONSULTATION

YOUR SCIENCE MATTERS

Publishing Tools & Services
Built for Society Publishers

COMPOSITION // EDITORIAL SERVICES // PRINTING // ONLINE PUBLISHING // MARKETING SERVICES



allenpress.com // sales@allenpress.com // (800) 627-0326