

Confessions of an Accidental Editor

Peter J Olson

“So, how is it that an English major wound up editing science journals?”

I’m often asked this question, and the answer is quite simple: Completely by accident.

The year was 1987. As a bright-eyed, bushy-tailed college freshman who had graduated from a math and science center the previous spring, I was bound and determined to pursue a degree in the biological sciences. Yet after a decidedly uninspired, subpar performance in Biology 101 and concomitant success in my humanities courses (a dichotomy that, incidentally, was consistent with my high school experience), a shift in trajectory was in order. Four years later, I had a BA in English Literature—and, like so many others who have received the same degree, walked away wondering just what it was that I should do with it.

Copyediting is referred to by some as “the accidental profession,” and this pretty much sums up my own odyssey—and I’m not alone. If you were to survey the legion of copyeditors working today, many of them would reveal their secret identities as English Literature majors who, in sidestepping a career in academia, fell backwards into the vortex of copyediting—only to find that it was their true calling all along. This is not to suggest that there’s always a single, epiphanic moment that makes someone turn on a dime and pick up a red pen; in fact, my journey spanned several years. Shortly after graduation, a foot-in-the-door gig as a fact checker for a Chicago-area publisher morphed into a full-time production editor position, which ultimately allowed me to make a lateral move to Sheridan Journal Services. I took on the role of Copyediting Coordinator during my fifth year at Sheridan—and two years after that, the experience I had garnered opened the door to an ancillary career as a freelance STEM journal copyeditor. I had come full circle from my freshman year of college, albeit in an ironic way.

Once my origin story is out of the way, a common follow-up question is:

“So if you don’t have a science degree, how do you understand what you’re reading?”

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That’s a tad more complicated. Being an English major in a world of scientists is by far the most challenging aspect of my chosen profession, and it makes the job an interesting if not paradoxical one. STEM journal copyeditors are not only expected to uphold every sacred rule of English grammar and syntax, they’re expected to do so in scientific texts that are often so foreign as to be indecipherable. A careful reading of a scientific passage may reveal that it has a missing verb or nonparallel structure; however, as a STEM copyeditor, the trick is knowing *what* verb should be inserted or *how* to make the structure parallel when, in all likelihood, you lack an in-depth knowledge of the subject matter. Over my many years editing STEM journal content, I’ve gleaned a fair amount of information and have familiarized myself with certain terms, concepts, word origins, and industry standards (sometimes the hard way) to broaden my skills and strengthen my capabilities; nevertheless, one of the greatest challenges is to avoid inadvertently changing the scientific meaning of a sentence when attempting to make it grammatically correct or syntactically sound. I have to recognize and acknowledge when I’m in over my head so that I can request the author’s input and have them verify that my edits have not altered their intent.

For the select few who haven’t tuned out completely by this point and are actually somewhat intrigued, I may receive one more question:

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“So if I wanted to be a STEM journal copyeditor, where would I start?”

There are several answers here.

1. **Make sure you know what you’re getting into.** Take an online course or two. Read or at least scan any number of the copyediting-themed books that are out there to get a general sense of the trade. And if you have any friends, acquaintances, or family members who copyedit for a living, talk with them about what it really means to be a copyeditor to help you discern whether it’s actually something you would want to do. This is particularly important for anyone who is interested in pursuing a career in STEM journal copyediting, which can sound intriguing and exotic to an aspiring editor but requires a niche skill set as well as a combination of mental tenacity, fastidiousness, and endurance that is not for the faint of heart.
2. **Sharpen your tech skills.** We’re well into the electronic age, and most STEM publishing institutions require that copyeditors have advanced knowledge of various software tools and programs and possess at least a basic understanding of XML coding, how to apply it, and the potential ramifications of incorrect application. In addition, STEM journal publishers are reducing publication times further and further, so copyeditors need to adopt technological means of working quickly and efficiently now more than ever. Also, if you want to freelance, be prepared to be your own IT department. Institutions that contract with freelancer copyeditors are certainly responsible for providing you with their technological requirements—but as a nonemployee, you generally won’t have access to a help desk when your computer isn’t cooperating.
3. **Stock your bookshelves.** Speaking of being on your own, as a freelance copyeditor, you will almost always be responsible for acquiring any publicly available reference manuals that are required to perform the work. Whether it be *The Associated Press Stylebook*, *The Chicago Manual of Style*, *The AMA Manual of Style*, or any other combination of canonical guides that publishers prescribe, it’s prudent to have some of the more commonly used manuals at your fingertips, and it’s doubly wise to familiarize yourself with them in your spare time. If you’re short on space, or if you

just want to save a tree, many manuals offer an online subscription in lieu of a hardcopy.

4. **Pound the pavement.** Many copyediting opportunities are freelance ones, and a good percentage of them aren’t advertised. Publishers and publishing vendors often rely on established rosters of copyeditors that have been cultivated via referrals, erstwhile employees, and other internal connections, so you may have to knock on a few doors to let people know you’re out there. Membership organizations such as the Editorial Freelancers Association can help you get a leg up by posting your resume online for potential clients to discover, but if you’re just getting started, you might need to cast a wide net by cold-calling several publishing houses.
5. **Know what you don’t know.** As a STEM journal copyeditor, you’ll likely be editing content that’s extremely advanced and unfamiliar to you, so it’s critical to acknowledge your situation and avoid over-confidence. If you aren’t 100% certain something is correct or accurate, look it up and/or add a query, particularly if you find yourself making an edit that’s based on an assumption or a hunch. (In one early-career head-smacker, I changed a reference to the collection of folk tales known as *The Arabian Nights* to *The Arabian Knights* based solely on my childhood memory of a derivative TV cartoon that bore the latter spelling.) One of my favorite proverbs (its gender exclusivity notwithstanding) is from José Saramago’s novel *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*: “He who does not know should have the humility to ask.” Later in that same passage, Saramago effectively states that hubris “rather than ignorance is the cause of the greatest blunders.” These are tenets that any copyeditor should espouse, but they’re especially important for nonscientists who are editing scientific material.

Over the course of my nearly 25-year involvement with the STEM community, I have become fiercely committed to the task of helping authors and other editors communicate scientific research quickly, accurately, and effectively. What’s more, I’ve realized that this responsibility is only becoming more and more critical as time marches on. And although I’m not a scientist (and was perhaps never destined to be one), the role I have been allowed to play in this endeavor continues to be a deeply satisfying one for me—even if it did happen by accident.