

Joseph Mills: An Author's Editor

Anna Cho Walker

Joseph Mills is a senior editor in the Neuroscience Publications Department at the Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix, Arizona, where he lends his editorial expertise to assist authors with preparing manuscripts for journals, surgical textbooks, videos, and presentations. During a recent phone conversation, Mills shared his career path as a science editor, and we discussed matters about substantive editing for authors and publication ethics.

After finishing graduate school for English, Mills started his first editorial job with Pfizer, where he copyedited internal laboratory reports and other scientific materials. This led him to his next opportunity editing medical journals for the University of Chicago Press. Following the closure of the medical journals department, he briefly worked supervising freelancers for American Journal Experts before returning to the press to work on scientific journals including *American Naturalist*, *Current Anthropology*, and others. Eventually relocating to Arizona, he was a freelance editor for the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) network for a year before taking his current position at Barrow in 2018.

There is visceral satisfaction that Mills finds in making something better—to contribute to the texts he edits by improving clarity that will in turn communicate important knowledge to the medical community and directly help patients. The instruments and devices, research findings, and surgical techniques being developed at Barrow are incredibly specialized and important, and while the surgeons are skillfully trained to execute precise procedures in complex areas of anatomy, they can be less experienced in expressing their ideas clearly or presenting findings in a compelling and consistent way, similar to other experts in any industry. “Part of the job is teaching the less experienced how to do it: writing clear methods, presenting results properly, constructing tables correctly—things they are not especially cognizant of. It is extremely satisfying to start with an unclear mess and help the authors shape it into something that conveys what they want to express.”

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However, Mills admits it can also be challenging or frustrating to work with an author who is not sympathetic to changes. Working directly for the authors, rather than for a journal or publisher, means ultimately deferring the final decision to the author. “You can make suggestions; the suggestions are not always going to be taken.”

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“When dealing with authors, you have to occupy 2 positions simultaneously. First, be the smartest reader in the world—decipher what they mean even when they’re saying it in an unclear way and identify contradictions or issues that most readers might not notice. At the same time, you have to think like the most easily confused reader in the world and help the author to make the writing as clear as possible.” Although authors usually imagine that they are writing to their peers who understand the material as well as they do, editors need to be able to refocus the language so that it becomes clear, specific, and unambiguous. Even when writing on a specialized topic, such as neurosurgery, the writing needs to be accessible to a broad, global audience.

Ethical issues Mills has encountered during his career were equally important to discuss as the benefits and challenges

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of being a science editor. “You have obligations because of the knowledge you have. If you’re working in this field, you become aware of certain ethical issues that aren’t necessarily going to be clear to the author. Authors are usually not deliberately trying to fool people or be unethical.”

Most cases will be inadvertent. On occasion, there can be instances of plagiarism and self-plagiarism. Pharmaceutical or medical companies may hire medical writers and editors to assist in publishing studies that essentially become thinly veiled advertisements for their products. Case reports can risk identifiable information being revealed.

To prevent many of these instances, there are systems in place. Programs such as iThenticate are available, which will detect potential plagiarism by producing a report showing a percentage of similarity when compared to other articles and texts. Transparency in where funding comes from has grown over the years. Significant improvements have also been made with patient consent and internal review board approval.

Authors may try to make results seem more impressive than they actually are. They may try to steer the conclusions to state a claim not fully justified by the science. When it comes to certain rules regarding the correct presentation of data in graphs and charts, “authors will sometimes flout those rules.”

Mills reasons that authors may overstate their findings or present data in a misleading fashion simply because they want their data to make an impact. Authors are excited about what they are doing, and they want to get their findings published.

Although working directly on behalf of authors somewhat limits his editorial authority, Mills explains his role is to draw attention to potentially misleading aspects of the author’s

work rather than police it. “If you are working for the author, you have ethical obligations to the science. Just be aware of broader implications of how the material is presented that authors might not be aware of themselves.”

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Most ethical questions are queried back to the author. If working for a journal, editors have a greater ability to push back and reject or revise the manuscript. Generally, when it comes to editors and ethics, “Editors notice when authors are going too far, when they’re overstepping, and need to hold the authors accountable. Authors may see something and think it’s okay; editors tell them that they see a problem and others could as well.”

As our conversation concluded, Mills described his approach to querying authors and how he chooses his tone carefully, depending on the personality of the author. He explained that he puts the author’s intent and substance of the content first and thinks of the editorial process as revising, not changing, what is written. He provides the author with logic and gives reasons for his edits with his feedback. He tailors his comments to the individual, asking them for their help and thanking them for their help during the process.

“When writing comments, instead of ‘This is incorrect/confusing/terrible’, try to use the Columbo approach: ‘Maybe I’m confused, but it looks to me like this patient group here has x number, but over here seems to be different... Is there something I’m missing? Can you help me understand what’s going on here?’”