

Copyediting in 2023: What Has Changed?

Jessica LaPointe

In the long-ago days of 2017, I wrote an article for *Science Editor* on the hiring and training of copy editors.¹ Since then, we've experienced a global pandemic, economic upheaval, and political and social changes that have affected every facet of society. Those of us in scholarly publishing have not been immune to these currents in the zeitgeist, and we have seen our jobs change dramatically as well. In this article, I cover 4 major changes that have characterized my experience managing copy editors over the past 6 years: 1) the rise of remote work, 2) using freelancers, 3) reliance on outsourcing, and 4) increased expectations for authors.

Rise of Remote Work

One of the advantages of science publishing is the fact that it largely can be done as effectively from home as in the office. Working from home is not a new concept—it has long existed for certain roles in some organizations—but it has increased notably over the past 6 years, accelerated by changes caused by the COVID pandemic.² Remote work has been shown to have substantial benefits, including allowing workers more autonomy and the ability to manage their time in a way that's best for them, which contributes to higher staff morale.³ Some folks are night owls while some are morning larks, but the traditional 9 to 5 workday doesn't allow for such personal variations. In the absence of a long morning commute, a lark like me can start the workday by 7:00am, when I am most alert and ready to tackle the day. While working from home, night owls don't need to force themselves out of bed and into the workplace while they are still in a state of fuzzy-headed sleepiness. There are standard working hours we are expected to be available, but remote work allows for a much greater degree of flexibility.

Even prior to 2017, my copyediting team was able to work from home a day or two per week. Thus, we were well

suited to moving to a full-time remote work model. Like many others in our industry, in March of 2020 we were advised by our managers to work from home until further notice. This period extended to 6 months, then a year, and finally it was decided that we may work remotely permanently. The desks in our former office have been converted to "floating" desks for staff who choose to work in the office occasionally as needed. Though not unwelcome, this was a major change that still involves a sense of loss. I miss sharing homemade cookies and chatting with my coworkers in person, but the benefits of working from home cannot be overstated.

While we copy editors are generally happy to move to a permanent remote-work model, this transition is not universally popular. Traditionalists have argued that requiring staff to work in the office promoted creativity and employee engagement, improved team cohesion and sense of belonging, and above all, increased productivity.⁴ Not all those claims are supported by solid evidence, however,⁵ and any potential benefits of working in the office would have to be weighed against its drawbacks, which skyrocketed during COVID. The ordinary daily stressors of long commutes and uncomfortable professional attire were dwarfed by the threat of severe, potentially chronic, illness and death. Increased flexibility of work requirements, along with the use of communication apps like Slack and Zoom, allows us to protect our health and the health of our loved ones while simultaneously staying in touch with our coworkers. In maintaining productivity and staff morale, this change has been a win-win.

Using Freelancers

Costs are an increasingly pressing consideration, and full-time in house staff are tremendously valuable, yet comparatively expensive. Freelance copy editors can be found through publishing-specific websites, like ACES,⁶ as well as general-purpose gig work sites like Upwork.com and Fiverr, but identifying qualified copy editors that best fit your needs can be a challenge. And finding them is only the beginning. Then there is the training period, which can be extremely time-consuming. For the process to be cost-effective, it is necessary to get a freelancer up to speed with a minimum of time spent in training. As we know, it can take a significant amount of time to develop proficiency in the unique and varied terms and practices that are common in the field, whether medical or other scientific publishing.

Jessica LaPointe (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2655-3776>) is Managing Copy Editor, American Meteorological Society.

Opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of the Council of Science Editors or the Editorial Board of Science Editor.

<https://doi.org/10.36591/SE-D-4601-08>

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In the past year, I have started to rely on freelance copy editors to help stay on top of the never-ending influx of submitted manuscripts. Fortunately, I was able to recruit a couple of talented copy editors I have previously worked with, and they were able to pick up the house style and get started fairly quickly. Nevertheless, unless your freelancers are working exclusively on your journals, you have to compete for their time with their full-time job, which naturally takes precedence. I've been lucky to work with freelancers who are experienced copy editors, but they are also busy people, so I've had to adjust my expectations of how much freelance work they are able to do. Using freelancers also involves a level of administrative support that differs from full-time in-house staff: hourly rates need to be negotiated and contracts signed, expectations must be clearly conveyed (ideally in writing), and productivity needs to be continually monitored.

The best relationships between publishers and freelancers are characterized by mutual respect and trust. Freelance work should be deployed where it can fulfill the needs of the organization and also provide the benefit of a flexible income stream to the freelancer.

Relying on Outsourcing to Fill the Gaps

While the costs of publishing, along with everything else, have continued to rise, the amount of work continues also to increase. To balance these competing pressures, we need to find creative ways to tackle the incoming work with cost-effective means. Thus, it has become the norm to rely on checklists for style points that are deemed nonnegotiable while relaxing enforcement of other, less critical, elements. Long gone are the days of copy editors having the luxury of time to pore over a manuscript to carefully check spelling, correct punctuation, adjust grammar, and enforce formatting according to the style guide. Along with freelancing, we need to find other ways to keep up with the work efficiently. Automation and outsourcing have been adopted in scholarly publishing as in other industries. Standard operating procedures now include a large factor of trust: trust in automated processes and in the work of hired vendors.

Like many scholarly publishers, we rely on an outside vendor for composition and printing as well as pre-copyediting services. Using an experienced, qualified vendor can save time during copyediting and relieve copy editors of some of the more rote aspects of the work. Our vendor has teams based overseas that have been trained in our house style. They can apply basic formatting and enforce some general style rules using detailed instructions provided by the vendor. The abilities of such teams, especially if they are not proficient in English, can be limited, however, and it's wise to have reasonable expectations for their work.

Making any edits based on contextual meaning is likely to be beyond their skill sets. But with clear and thorough guidance, such pre-copyediting teams can prepare a manuscript so copy editors can spend their time focusing on the more complicated and tricky aspects of editing.

For anything that can be reduced to a simple rule (for example, a variable that must always appear in italics), automated processes can do it faster and with less chance for inconsistencies than making the change manually. Working with a vendor's automated system or simply setting up macros in Word can reduce the amount of time copy editors have to spend making small, yet necessary, edits in manuscripts. With a single click of a button, paragraph styles can be applied and unwanted characters deleted.

Over the past few years, I have seen increased reliance on both automated systems and outsourcing, with somewhat mixed results. It has taken at least 3 years for the offshore teams to produce work that is sufficiently error-free to be more helpful than not. Continually providing them with feedback and helping to refine the instructions they need, not to mention the challenges of ongoing training caused by turnover, has meant we have spent a lot of time fixing errors that may not have otherwise occurred. However, after the initial investment of time and training, it has been a positive development and has allowed our copy editors to focus on the nuances of editing, both for language and style.

Further Expectations for Authors

It seems like every year there are more guidelines from advisory bodies (like COPE⁷), countries, and funding organizations that address topics like data citation and author contributions. Consequently, author guidelines have expanded, and authors are repeatedly pointed toward them during the submission and revision process. The aim is to provide authors with virtually all the resources they need to

- organize their papers and cover all the necessary sections (abstract, introduction, data and methods, discussion, etc.),
- avoid plagiarism and text recycling,
- give credit to all authors and contributors as appropriate,
- cite and format references properly,
- supply figure files in the appropriate file types, and
- provide detailed yet concise figure captions and table headings, among many other topics.

Ideally, authors have all the information at their fingertips to craft a paper into an article that needs minimal editing after peer review. In reality, authors have busy lives and numerous responsibilities, including, in many cases, serving as editorial board members on various journals. Thus, it is unrealistic and perhaps unfair to expect them to wade through the many interlinked web pages to find the information they need.

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Copy editors still need to leave thoughtful, specific queries for authors to answer when they receive the composed proofs of their article and can make minor edits and corrections. When querying, we provide authors with links to web pages that describe our policies and provide copious examples in the hopes that authors will avail themselves of the relevant information. This has helped minimize the need for copy editors to contact authors again at proof stage to clarify our requirements and request corrections. Nevertheless, authors do not always thoroughly read the pages, and copy editors are still tasked with prodding authors to supply, for example, the dates a dataset was last accessed.

Our web designers have done their best to make the instructions for authors web pages user-friendly, and authors have become more accustomed to our editorial expectations. Asking authors to shoulder more of the responsibility for complying with editorial policies, with copy editors available to provide additional support where needed, is a delicate balancing act. The goal is not to overburden authors unduly, while relying on them to be aware of their responsibilities so copy editors do not have to chase after them.

Final Thoughts

I have not needed to hire a new full-time copy editor in the past 6 years. No doubt the process would look very different from the one I described in my 2017 article. My existing team is composed of veteran copy editors

I've worked with for many years, and we have an easy, effective working style born from experience. To hire and train a copy editor in 2023 would require even more reliance on apps like Slack, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom. Fortunately, I've now had plenty of time to get used to working entirely remotely, so I have a solid basis for hiring and training a copy editor remotely as well. The last few years have required copy editors to adapt to sea changes that have vastly and permanently altered our working lives. We now rely more on outside resources—freelancers, automated processes, and authors themselves—than ever before, and copyediting entails a greater level of trust in others. On balance, these changes have resulted in agile, interconnected teams that are well-positioned to thrive into the future, whatever it may bring.

References and Links

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