

Jam Session for Manuscript Editors

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Over 30 science editors joined facilitator and storyteller extraordinaire Peter J Olson, Freelance Manuscript Editing Coordinator, JAMA Network, for an interactive presentation and discussion about the practical aspects of editing scientific manuscripts. Olson based the jam session format on a similar session at a recent American Medical Writers Association meeting, and it was a departure from the typical session format at a CSE annual meeting. The format seemed well received by attendees, as indicated by the lively conversations.

The goals of the session were four-fold: 1) have a structured, interactive discussion about the various characteristics, tenets, and practices of manuscript editing; 2) explore different backgrounds and perspectives; 3) share knowledge, ideas, and suggestions; and 4) build and bolster community.

The opening conversations were centered on how people got started in the field of manuscript editing. Advanced educational degrees in the sciences, English literature, and communications were common among the editors present. Many had formative experiences in college and graduate school, such as taking a science communications course or tutoring in a writing center. Others fell into this line of work later on in life while in fulfilling careers by providing editorial support to colleagues. Skills have been honed through on-the-job training, certification programs, and professional development opportunities. A fondness for the written word was readily apparent.

Next, the following topics were used to guide the discussion.

The Big Picture

Editors were encouraged to keep the big picture in mind, from the conception of new ideas to the publication of findings in scholarly journals and how they fit into the whole process and add value. Conversations explored the roles and responsibilities of editors and challenges inherent to the work. One comment explaining how editors ensure

consistency elicited many collective nods of agreement. Added responsibilities beyond just editing within editorial offices and the drive to reduce publication times were cited as current challenges editors are grappling with.

Editing With Style

Style guides are the *sine qua non* of manuscript editing (Figure), and many of the editors present have helped to develop supplemental house style guides for their organizations. Rare instances when an editor needs to deviate from the style guides were the focus of much amusement. Sage advice was offered: "If you're going to be incorrect, be consistently incorrect."

Know What You Don't Know

This segment was introduced with a quotation, "He who does not know should have the humility to ask," from the writings of José Saramago. Understandably, editors will occasionally have to query the author to ensure that the changes they have made are accurate or appropriate. Additionally, editors will occasionally need to fact-check particular text, for example, names, dates, statements of novelty, and technical terminology. The audience spent time here discussing their favorite online tools and databases for the latter work. Examples provided included the FDA-approved drugs database,¹ Integrated Taxonomic Information System (ITIS),² Pubmed,³ USGS's Geographic Names Information System (GNIS),⁴ UniProt (for proteins),⁵ and HUGO gene nomenclature database.⁶

To Change or Not to Change: That Is the Question

Experienced editors are acutely aware of the importance of maintaining the author's voice whenever possible, as exemplified by the many apropos comments from attendees: "if no one knows I exist, I did my job right"; "the longer I do this, the lighter my edits have become"; "[editors must] differentiate between changing a word because it's wrong and changing a word because it's different." Both showing restraint (e.g., not changing words merely on the basis of personal preferences) and knowing when the content is good enough (i.e., there are diminishing returns on effort) were cited as hallmarks of editorial experience. Conversely, editors must confidently execute revisions when changes are needed for clarity (e.g., defining acronyms, explaining jargon).

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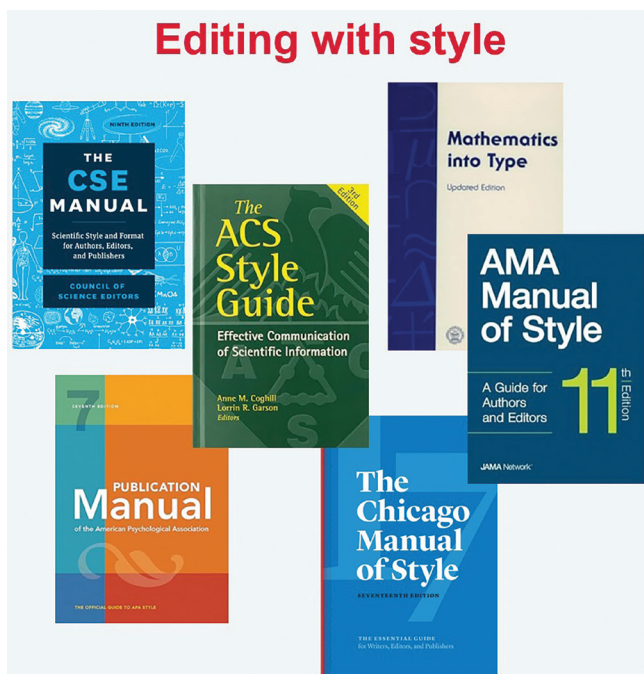


Figure. Commonly used style guides during the manuscript editing process. Image Credit: Peter J Olson.

To Err Is Human

Lastly, the attendees discussed strategies for error prevention and dealing with published errors. Questions that are important to ask include: how substantive is the error, how easy will it be to correct, who needs to be notified, are new procedures needed to prevent such errors in the future? The answers to those questions can help guide your next steps. Notably, there are vocations where certain errors must be treated as “never events” (i.e., serious, preventable errors that should never occur), such as in surgical specialties and the space industry. Could those fields help to inform the ways in which errors are dealt with in scholarly publishing?

Summary

All in all, there was a high level of engagement in the jam session for manuscript editors. For me, this opportunity to learn from and share experiences with colleagues was one of the most enjoyable parts of the CSE meeting.

Post-session Q&A

Do you think the jam session format worked well at CSE and will you consider using it again?

I think it worked exceptionally well. I was really pleased that so many felt comfortable sharing their stories, suggestions, and experiences, and I was equally happy for those attendees who felt content to simply soak it all in and hear what others had to say. Manuscript editors are often on the quiet side, but they’re also some of the most passionate people in the industry—so it was wonderful to see that passion translate into lively discussion. I would definitely attempt to use this format again for a topic that was conducive to it, and I received feedback from more than one person that it would be interesting to see other sessions adopt a similar format at future meetings.

Any advice for those who might want to begin editing for science journals?

I’d start by acquiring a couple of books, the first of which is *Essentials of Writing Biomedical Research Papers* by Mimi Zeiger. Although it’s tailored to researchers and is specific to the biomedical discipline, it nonetheless provides a good general overview of how a scientific research article is written. The second is *The Copyeditor’s Handbook: A Guide for Book Publishing and Corporate Communications* by Amy Einsohn and Marilyn Schwartz. As the title suggests, the target audience here is much broader, but much of the guidance is applicable to manuscript editing in the sciences. This book also has a companion, *The Copyeditor’s Workbook*, for those who want to independently practice the craft. Beyond that, I’d scan the Internet for online courses you can take to develop and hone your skills—and I’d also consider pursuing freelance work to pick up some experience and explore what the Editorial Freelancers Association (<https://www.the-efa.org/>) has to offer. Finally, I’d be remiss if I didn’t suggest joining CSE to take advantage of some of their educational content, including the Short Course for Manuscript Editing.

References and Links

1. <https://www.accessdata.fda.gov/scripts/cder/daf/>
2. <https://www.usgs.gov/tools/integrated-taxonomic-information-system-itis>
3. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>
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5. <https://www.uniprot.org/>
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