

Revising Research: Preparing Academics for Publication

Paper given at the Editors' Association of Canada Conference, June 2008

Erla Anderson

Introduction

I am a freelance language editor who works on academic papers and books. My clients are typically professors or students at universities.

The lifecycle of a paper

Let me tell you about how a paper goes from start to finish in my world. In general, in my freelance work, an academic author who asks me for editing has to have several things happening. They have to know that they need their writing edited. They may have asked a colleague to read over their work, and that colleague or their supervisor may have told them that they need help. A journal editor may have told them that they need to have their paper edited before re-submitting it for peer review. In this case, the journal editor may have rejected the paper because, as one researcher said, "it is manifestly of such low quality that it cannot be considered at all."¹ Alternatively, an author may just know that they need help with their writing. In addition, an author needs to be able to know where to find an editor and have a source of funding to pay for editing services.

I like to put a face to the author's name, to make some kind of connection. Therefore, at this point, I search the Website of the university in question for a picture of the author. I like to know my client.

¹ Rowland, Fytton (2002). "The peer-review process." *Learned Publishing* 15, 4 (October): 247.

When authors e-mail me to ask me to edit their papers, I need to clarify some points with them before I start editing:

- 1) *What they need done.* Usually this is a copy and stylistic edit. Occasionally, an author will ask me to look at their notes or references and edit them to conform to a particular style, like Chicago or APA for US journals. The authors know my educational level and that unless their area is education, theatre, or Icelandic literature, I am not versed in their field. Therefore, they know that I cannot make suggestions on their content.
- 2) *What the process will be.* I tell the author how many rounds of *editing* the paper will need and that I will edit for both grammar and style (I refer to this as “copy and stylistic editing” in my invoices).

After I clarify these points, I ask the following questions in my e-mail:

- 1) *What is the format of the paper?* Academic editors are not always lucky enough to receive their manuscripts in an editable format like Microsoft Word. Clients may ask me to edit documents in Word, PDF, and LaTeX (I will get into LaTeX later). I decided to purchase software to allow me to mark up PDF documents directly on my computer after an author told me that he would be sending me several papers in PDF. It cost about \$300. With PDF and LaTeX documents, the author has to make the changes themselves. In Word, they can “accept all” or see a clear document, but in a PDF document, they have to copy the changes they want into their original file (which could be LaTeX) and then generate another PDF. PDF and LaTeX documents are slower to edit, but it forces me to think through every change thoroughly

before I make it. LaTeX is a text file that includes the text and computer code that controls the formatting of the document. These are harder to edit, because of the codes (I imagine it is a bit like editing HTML). Sometimes that is the only format the paper is in, however. I have made myself receptive to editing LaTeX, because it is commonly used in some of the fields I edit in – business, engineering, and science, for example; in these fields, it is used because it's good at handling math and it makes it easier to deal with things like references and citations and with internal references to tables, figures, and equations. Because you cannot use "Track Changes" in a LaTeX document, I convert it to a Word document. This makes more work for the author, however.

2) *What journal will they submit their paper to?* Typically, the author should be writing the article to match the topics and approaches that their target journal emphasizes. The main things I need to know are

- a. the spelling preferred by the journal – most European journals want British English and most US journals want US English
- b. the style manual required by the journal – which is not only important for formatting references and notes, but for telling me things like whether to use the series comma, how to write punctuation with quotes, when to use hyphenation, and whether to use an en-dash or an em-dash – wouldn't you know it, UK and US English differ on these points! With references and notes, I tend not to offer to format them. I have found that even if a journal uses a particular style guide – such as Chicago – their in-house style sheet may not be consistent with this

guide. It is hard to format references or notes perfectly. In addition, it is usually not even necessary or productive to do this until a journal has accepted their paper. Therefore, although I have done this service, it can be a headache, and I do not promote it.

3) *What is their deadline?* I have made it a practice to edit some of the document beforehand, to estimate the time it will require. I will ask for the whole document, or whatever parts they are ready to send, and then I will tell the author how long it will take me. Regarding fee, I like to give the author a fixed-fee quote based on my calculation of my time.

4) *Are they familiar with using “Track Changes” in Word or the editing function in a PDF document?* One author sent me a notepad document and said that she could not use “Track Changes” in it. Therefore, I highlighted everywhere I made a change. That is not something I will do again! I have a one-page document that I send to authors who are not familiar with using “Track Changes.” Most professors are, as they edit their own work and that of colleagues.

My personal style of editing is to deal with the grammar before I go through and check for the flow. After I have answers to my questions, I save the file to my computer under a different name. When I have edited a portion and know my timeframe, I place the paper in queue and start recording my time on a spreadsheet. Then I begin. Often, the language gets in the way of my making sense of the meaning, so I need to start somewhere that is concrete. So I do a computer check for spelling and grammar and a check for sentence spacing; I get rid of the word “very” whenever possible; and I may ask

the author, for example, “What do you mean by ‘this’ or ‘it’ or ‘they’ in this sentence.” It is difficult to generalize one way of writing for my clients. Each language family is distinct. Once I have edited several papers from clients who have one native language in common, however, I am usually able to check for mistakes that these writers typically make, which can include article use, verb tense use, noun number use, and preposition use. The grammar check I do usually finds passive phrases, because they are considered unacceptable in many genres. Passive voice is generally acceptable in academic writing, nowadays. I tend to ignore passive phrases unless I can turn them into active ones without skewing the meaning. The spell check also highlights first person pronouns, which were once considered poor academic style, but are now acceptable.

After this preliminary check for grammar and spelling, I start reading. My style is to copy edit as I go. I like to be online while I am working, so that I can check reference materials easily, rather than taking the time to make comment cards to myself. I do a first round edit and then send it back to the author for “accepting” or “rejecting” my changes. After I receive it from them, I do at least one more round, as I say, to polish it up and find things I missed. During these rounds, it is helpful to see a previous version, especially if some time has passed between rounds. Moreover, sometimes an author will return a paper that I had considered finished but that the referees have requested be added to or changed. I keep each version of each paper I edit so that I can check my work in a previous version.

Electronic editing

Electronic editing differs from editing hard copy in that the author needs to have some technical skills. Depending on the program they are using, I ask them if they know

how to use “Track Changes” in Word or how to read editing marks in a PDF document. Most referees and publishers now require electronic submissions, so it is virtually impossible to work only on hard copy.²

With electronic editing, I like the speed at which I can accomplish work. At one point, I would print out a document to take it with me (when I had no laptop or to get a fresh view), but I soon discovered that I was doing nearly twice as much work. I like the availability of on-line resources. I like the freedom to work anytime, anywhere, although I have found that I need to stick to a daytime schedule without distraction and to a routine working spot in the house or at a local café. I like the ability to connect with people I would never have met otherwise or may never meet. In addition, I like language editing because its very nature gives me confidence in my abilities and makes me more willing to take on any contract. In my work with language editing, I often deal with papers from several disciplines, which keeps the work interesting.

In subsequent rounds, the author may have not made a change that I thought was necessary. I look at the circumstances again and decide if it is an important change. If so, I will gently ask the author to make the change again and indicate if I can why it is important – why it is actually grammatically incorrect rather than simply my preferred way of writing. I have found that the author is often able to guide me, in that they know the lingo of their subject area and can clarify terms that I do not know. They are often able to argue a point and clarify their meaning, when I have presumed a certain other meaning – I try not to presume, but to ask. I find this aspect of academic editing

² Odlyzko, Andrew. “The Economics of Electronic Journals.” First Monday: Peer-reviewed journal on the Internet. Website.

especially challenging and interesting, because I am being asked to reconsider my editing decisions.

This process has helped me grow as an editor and has reinforced the necessity of doing two or more rounds of editing. I need to get the author's feedback and then look at a paper with fresh eyes, as a whole piece. In addition, sometimes, I miss seeing the whole paper, for all the copyediting involved in the first round.

All of the papers that I receive have something in them that I need to follow up on – a term I do not know, a foreign word. If I need to clarify a term beyond an on-line dictionary or encyclopedia, I query the author. I have reminded myself of the danger of relying on on-line information. I do use an online dictionary and Wikipedia frequently, and I use the online subscription version of the Chicago Manual (at \$25 per year, why not?) For terms particular to a field of study, however, I will query the author.

Sometimes the papers are technical with formulas. I have learned how to read these parts and some of the common wording that goes along with them. For such technical pieces, I still ensure that sentence structure is intact, even if that means inserting punctuation around symbols or equations. I treat symbols as words (singular or plural, according to the context) and it seems to work fine for my reading comprehension.

Client relationships

Relationships with the authors I edit for are not easy to develop at a distance. I have never met any of my overseas clients, but I do try to make connections where I can. I keep a list of all the authors I have worked with in a spreadsheet and sometimes have repeat clients. I find these records helpful, because I get to know their writing style and see them grow as writers.

Conclusion

Editing electronically may be the only realistic way to edit at a distance. Without face-to-face contact, editors need to make an extra effort to connect with authors in order to form productive relationships. Editing electronic copy requires editors to be comfortable with computer work, online resources, and communicating with written words instead of speaking person-to-person. We need to clarify our role and the editing process to our clients to avoid miscommunication. Given the lack of visual and oral contact with authors, this connection is especially important, in order to convince our clients of our value and the need for our continued service, in a world of many electronic editing services.

Erla Anderson