



## Author-Editor Relationship Quiz

by Laura King, MA, ELS

The *AMA Manual of Style* states, “After acceptance for publication, a manuscript undergoes copyediting, now often referred to as *manuscript editing*....The manuscript editor sends the edited manuscript, including online-only content, with proposed additions and deletions clearly indicated, as well as queries, along with a cover letter and the edited art and tables, to the reviewing editor and the author for approval. After the author responds, the manuscript editor incorporates the author’s changes” (§6.2.1, Manuscript Editing, p 309 in print). Sounds easy enough, but the truth is the relationship between authors and editors can vary from harmonious to neutral to adversarial.

This month’s quiz branches out from the traditional format of identifying and correcting errors based on your knowledge of the *AMA Manual of Style*. This quiz provides historical snippets of famous author-editor relationships as a jumping-off point for exploring ways for editors to effectively work with authors.

*Vladimir Nabokov, author of Lolita, notoriously and wittily disdained editors. In a 1967 interview in The Paris Review, he said, “By ‘editor’ I suppose you mean proofreader. Among these I have known limpid creatures of limitless tact and tenderness who would discuss with me a semicolon as if it were a point of honor—which, indeed, a point of art often is. But I have also come across a few pompous avuncular brutes who would attempt to ‘make suggestions’ which I countered with a thunderous ‘stet!’”<sup>1</sup>*

1. What is the best way for editors to communicate with authors who balk at the suggestions made to improve the manuscript?
  - a. E-mail the author to tell him/her that all the edits are based on the *AMA Manual of Style* and therefore not subject to change.
  - b. Telephone the author to discuss the edits, iterating the rationale and providing resource support for the changes.
  - c. Do not respond to the author.
  - d. Eliminate all the edits and publish the paper as the author originally submitted it.

**Editor’s Note:** Usually, an author’s insistence to overrule all editorial changes is a knee-jerk reaction to extensive editing. Many authors are aware of the process as outlined in the *AMA Manual of Style*: “After acceptance for publication, a manuscript undergoes copyediting, now often referred to as *manuscript editing*. Extensive editing for clarity, accuracy, and internal consistency may be necessary for some manuscripts. Manuscript editors incorporate suggestions of the reviewing editor; correct grammar, spelling, and usage; query ambiguities and inconsistencies; verify mathematical calculations; verify reference citations; and edit to journal style. Tables, boxes, and figures are also edited for style, accuracy, and consistency with the text” (§6.2.1, Manuscript Editing, p 309 in print). Communicating with the author and explaining the reason for the changes (as well as providing resource support when necessary) can often defuse this potentially volatile situation.

*The relationship between Emily Dickinson, poet, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, clergyman, activist, and man of letters, began when she wrote to him asking him to read her poems. The New Yorker writes, “Dickinson’s letter concluded with a request not to ‘betray’ her. Higginson never did, but many scholars ... consider that, through an excess of caution and a deficit of imagination, he betrayed her art.”<sup>2</sup>*



2. What is the best way for editors to ensure that they are “on the same page” as the authors of the manuscripts they are editing?

- a. Explain to the author the types of tasks that will be performed on the manuscript (eg, a straightforward copyedit or a more substantive content edit).
- b. Share with the author some samples of previous edited manuscripts.
- c. Explain to the author that the editor is required to follow particular style guides and provide the author with a list of those resources.
- d. Invite the author out to lunch to chat about the work.

**Editor’s Note:** Many authors are not familiar with the concept of different levels of editing. Such authors expect the editor to simply “fix the typos.” This misunderstanding of the role of the editor can lead to a contentious author-editor relationship. By explaining to the author the types of tasks that will be performed on the manuscript (eg, a straightforward copyedit or a more substantive content edit), the editor can lessen the likelihood of angering the author. In a post on the *AMA Style Insider* blog from October 19, 2012, “Authors and editors have the same goal: a polished, published, accurate manuscript” (<http://blog.amamanualofstyle.com/2012/10/19/top-10-mistakes-authors-make/>).

*Sometimes the line between author and editor becomes blurred. Take the relationship between Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. Pound edited Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, cutting the poem from more than 1000 lines to 434, limiting the poem’s message, and eliminating Eliot’s sarcastic tone. Eliot acquiesced to almost all of Pound’s revisions and suggestions, leading some scholars to suggest that Pound should have received credit as coauthor rather than editor of *The Waste Land*.<sup>3</sup>*

3. What should editors do when they think a manuscript requires rewriting rather than editing?

- a. Try to edit the manuscript anyway.
- b. Have a colleague edit the manuscript.
- c. Work closely with the author and/or editor to determine what level of editing should be performed.
- d. Partially edit the manuscript, ignoring the sections that are out of your comfort zone.

**Editor’s Note:** An editor should never edit a manuscript that he/she is uncomfortable with, but that doesn’t mean an editor can shirk his/her editorial duties, which require a full, thorough edit of every manuscript. The editor’s job is to get comfortable with the manuscript, and to do that the editor should consult with the author to determine how the editorial process should proceed. As a post on the *AMA Style Insider* states, “But what happens when an editor isn’t sure what he or she is communicating? Medicine is complex, full of specialized words and obscure concepts. What happens when we don’t realize that a word is being used incorrectly, because our understanding of the concept being communicated is limited? ... This is why I’m grateful for the author-assisted editing process. Each author who carefully sorts through my myriad comments and questions, who assesses the edits I make and comments on them, is my ally in making sure any reader, regardless of their experience with English or level of medical expertise, can use our journals in their work” (<http://blog.amamanualofstyle.com/2011/04/08/what-are-you-trying-to-say/>).

*Even editors who have a history of working successfully with authors can stumble into a difficult author-editor relationship. Maxwell Perkins, the famed Scribner’s editor, helped cement the careers of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings. However, his relationship with Thomas Wolfe proved challenging. Wolfe and Perkins worked closely together, but Wolfe eventually bristled at the theory that he owed his success to Perkins. He left Scribner’s in November 1936, writing to Perkins, “the editorial relation between us, which began, it seems to me, so hopefully, and for me so wonderfully, has now lost its initial substance. It has become a myth—and what is worse than that, an untrue myth—and it seems to me that both of us are victims of that myth. You know the terms of the myth well enough—it was venomously recorded by a man named De Voto in the Saturday Review of Literature during this past summer—and the terms of the myth are these: that I cannot write my books without your assistance, that there exists at Scribners an ‘assembly line’ that must fit the great dismembered portions of my manuscript together into a semblance of unity, that I am unable to perform the functions of an artist for myself.”<sup>4</sup>*



4. Sometimes editors edit so extensively that questions of authorship arise. An editor should receive credit as an author if he/she performs which of the following duties?

- a. conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of the data
- b. drafting the manuscript or revising it critically for important intellectual content
- c. approval of the version of the manuscript to be published
- d. all of the above

**Editor's Note:** According to the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) guidelines, all authors should have participated sufficiently in the work to take public responsibility for the content, either all of the work or an important part of it. Sufficient participation means that substantial contributions have been made in each of the following areas: (1) conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of the data; (2) drafting the manuscript or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and (3) approval of the version of the manuscript to be published (§5.1.1, Authorship Definition and Criteria, p 128 in print).

*There are, however, some well-known successful author-editor relationships. Ursula Nordstrom edited children's books for Harper & Row and had satisfying relationships with the authors Maurice Sendak, E. B. White, Margaret Wise Brown, and Shel Silverstein, among many others.*

5. Which of the following makes for a successful author-editor relationship?

- a. flexibility
- b. tact
- c. respect
- d. all of the above

**Editor's Note:** Authors and editors who follow the tenets of flexibility, tact, and respect are most likely to engage in successful working relationships, and such successful relationships lead to successful publications. As Catherine D. DeAngelis writes in the Foreword of the *AMA Manual of Style*, "The issue of communicating well in writing is certainly not new, and good writing will become even more important but perhaps more challenging as the use of online written communication becomes the norm" (Foreword, pp v, vi in print). A solid author-editor relationship is the key to navigating the rough waters of scientific communication that lie ahead.

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