

● An editor should be able to adapt to the author's world, to understand what the author is thinking, to dig beneath the surface.

● Writers are always willing to talk about their ideas and find it hard to pay attention to what others are saying. They become furious when their ideas, words, or sentences are questioned. They feel that editors are attacking their integrity—castrating them. But most "good" authors come to realize that editors are critics and friends, not necessary evils.

A prolific writer told me that editors are manipulative, narcissistic, and exploitative; he also used the words 'seductive' and 'envious', and noted that editors work out their envy by attacking authors. But most of the attacks are permeated with love and so, over time, a symbiotic relationship usually develops between an author and editor. In a few cases, authors have even married their editors; for example, the *Almans*, the *Newmans*, the *Karl Menningers*. I know that all editors are in love with the beauty of words and language. One reason they become editors may be annoyance with the way authors express themselves, and the editor's desire to change things for the better. Could this be the reason editors marry authors?

I have hypothesized that the choice of a career is based on developmental processes. For the one who has made the choice, responded to the accidents, taken advantage of the opportunities, acted on impulse, and chosen a career, development does not mean an end. In fact, the word implies an ongoing process. Throughout our lives we experience a variety of beginnings. Choosing a career, however one makes that choice, is only another of these beginnings.

Once a person has opted for a career in medical communications, as all of us in AMWA have done, the development of our personalities and skills is only beginning. As medical communicators we must continue to study, learn, improve, grow, inspire, and be inspired. Only by improving the state of the art of medical communication, do we improve the state of our own well being.

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The Code of an Author's Editor

by Martha M. Tacker, Ph.D.



Just how well do you, as the editor, work with your authors? Some seem to have a knack for generating a warm glow of enthusiastic cooperation; others spend most of their time fighting little fires touched off by avoidable misunderstandings; still others simply smolder for the duration of the frustrating project.

What makes the difference? For one thing, the consistently successful author's editor will depend on a set of guidelines, written or unwritten. Some are handed a set of institutional guidelines with their letter of appointment and quickly adapt them to perform the job. Others develop a code after a series of painful experiences reveals a need for guiding standards. My case falls somewhere between these two categories: as a freelance editor I received no institutional guidelines, and my series of experiences has been reasonably free of pain. However, not long ago, I became aware of my need for a set of principles to guide my relationships with my authors. This has resulted in my code of the author's editor.

This code is stated in broad terms and, translating the ideas into specific actions, has been of particular value. I present this code with some interpretive comments as a challenge for you to crystallize your own experience into principles to guide you or to evaluate those guidelines you now use.

THE CODE: I will, as an author's editor:

- . . . help the author guide his reader confidently, logically, and persuasively from the beginning of his story to the end.¹ In pursuit of this goal, I will apply my skill with the English language and my knowledge of science to help produce a clear and accurate message, conveyed through appropriate language, format, and technical style;
- seek to establish a productive relationship with the author by initiating and maintaining a courteous, honest, and open dialogue from the initial analysis of the manuscript to the final evaluation of the editorial service provided;
- reach a mutual agreement with the author about the extent of the editing required, and make only those changes that are within the limit of that agreement, so as to justify an efficient use of my time; I will present my changes with confidence and my queries and suggestions with tact;

- regard the manuscript and all related correspondence and conferences as confidential;
- take professional responsibility for my work and expect to receive appropriate credit for my contributions;
- make available to the author my knowledge of other aspects of scientific publishing as well as my ability to help him or her improve the quality of writing;
- constantly strive to improve my editorial skills, increase my understanding of the English language, maintain and broaden my scientific knowledge, and develop my comprehension and appreciation of all facets of scientific publishing, in order to provide my services with competence.

INTERPRETATION:

As a freelance editor, my primary responsibility is to the author. The ultimate goal of this code is to create a productive relationship with that author, a synergistic relationship in which both author and author's editor combine their efforts to produce a document that is better than either could produce alone. A courteous, honest, and open dialogue is essential to creating this relationship; such a dialogue helps to avoid the danger to which Eleanor Harmon has alerted us, i.e., that of creating an artificial mystique of editing.² Such a state can be reached by an agreement at the beginning of a project, as to what the author expects or desires and what the author's editor can provide. Before starting a project with an author, I state in writing the various levels of editing I can do, then agree on the best approach for that particular manuscript. Such a statement is prepared for any subsequent project with that author.

The expectation of credit brings up a controversial issue, even among author's editors. My own expectations include:

- remuneration for technical editing (correction of grammar, punctuation, and styling);
- acknowledgement and payment for substantive editing (technical editing plus revision directed toward clarity and brevity) or creative editing (critical analysis of content, organization of the manuscript directed toward presentation of the data and concepts as effectively as possible, with ultimate production of a manuscript suitable for submission);
- designation as coauthor and payment for making a significant scientific and editorial contribution.

Appropriate credit for an author's editor is important for two reasons. The first is based on the intellectual honesty of the authors and the author's editor. Decisions that relate to academic promotion, invitations to write or edit books, or application for financial support involve the evaluation of a scientist's publications. Therefore, many suggest that scientific publications should be written only by the scientist. This, of course, is ideal. But there is no reason why a scientist has to deny himself the assistance of an effective communicator for that reason alone. I suggest the alternative of acknowledging editorial assistance. An alert promotions committee, book or journal editor, or a committee that

evaluates a grant request can quickly discern whether the author has had editorial assistance and can use that information selectively.

The second reason for appropriate credit is for the author-editor's own self-image. An illustrator signs his work; a colleague's contribution of advice or data is recognized; the assistance of a laboratory technician is acknowledged (if the technician is not already designated as coauthor). Surely, affirmation of editorial assistance is also warranted, and will serve to increase an editor's pride in his or her work and stimulate the production of high quality results.

Some editors insist that, because they are paid to edit they should not be acknowledged. I have yet to meet an illustrator, fellow scientist, or laboratory technician who worked without fee. Other editors shy away from what they interpret to be undue self-glorification. If an editor prefers to remain unnamed, acknowledgement of an institutional publications department or an editorial business would convey the same information to readers.

Some editors have found that inappropriate credit, such as being co-editor of a scientific book, has made them instant experts on subjects with which they have had no experience. For this reason, an author's editor should develop some specific guidelines as to what constitutes a contribution that should be credited and what form or credit is appropriate. These should be outlined for the author at the outset of the project.

The soul-searching that produced my code and its practical interpretations has given me more self-confidence as an author's editor, forced me to evaluate my abilities, establish my goals, develop a perspective of my work, and define my responsibilities to my authors and myself. I now have a written set of principles that will help me treat each author fairly and consistently. This code, based on my own experience and that of others, is expected to be modified over the years.

Now, are your pencils sharpened? Is your paper handy? I am relying on your editorial instincts to drive you to criticize my ideas, interpretations, words, syntax and organization, and to rewrite this statement until you have composed a code of your own.

References:

1. Cox, B. G.: The author's editor. *Mayo Clin. Proc.* 49:314-317, 1974.
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