

How AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean helps researchers become authors

by Karen Shashok

The publication playing field is not level for non-native users of English or for researchers in developing countries, and this problem has been discussed from many angles [1]. What can be done? Hooman Momen, director of Knowledge Management and Sharing at WHO Press (World Health Organization), has noted the recent growth in efforts to help developing-country researchers become authors, while recognising that the current capacity of these initiatives is far from sufficient:

...an array of editors (language editors, author's editors, copy editors, technical editors and manuscript editors) is valiantly bridging the gap by trying to harness the output of scientist, whose mother tongue is often not English, within the syntax and grammar of the English language. They often succeed brilliantly, but the demand is so great and is increasing so quickly for the small and stagnating number of editors, that change needs to occur [2].

In most developing countries, access to high-quality on-site editorial mentoring is limited. AuthorAID projects (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AuthorAID>) are designed to overcome this inequity and thus improve researchers' chances of becoming successful authors. These projects facilitate contacts between aspiring research authors and volunteer advisors who can help scientists get published, e.g., scientific experts, journal gatekeepers (editors and peer reviewers), professional language editors and author's editors. By putting researchers (often in the East and South) in contact with mentors (often from the West and North), AuthorAID projects help ensure that developing-country researchers are as well equipped as their peers in better-endowed research environments to participate in the international scientific knowledge community. Below I describe how AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean equips researchers with two types of skills needed to become an author: practical (manuscript preparation) and social (identifying the community of peers and joining the community).

Authorship skills: Writing and revising manuscripts

AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean (AAEM) [3] began in January 2009 as an on-site project hosted by Shiraz University of Medical Sciences in Shiraz, Iran (www.sums.ac.ir/english/shiraz/university.html), an institution known for its high academic standards and innovative teaching methods. Researchers and I worked face-to-face

while I edited their manuscript on a PC, explaining the reason for each change. Live editing, interrupted frequently by explanations and responses to the author's questions, meant that it took many more hours to edit a manuscript than if I had simply worked on it alone, but also enabled researchers (as well as author's editors-in-training who observed the sessions) to learn first-hand how to identify problems in the text and decide on the best solution.

Gatekeepers may have "low tolerance for ways of defending an argument or emphasising a point that depart from how the reviewer expects these elements of scientific writing to be handled", and unfortunately, text that 'sounds unusual' to reviewers may bias their judgment of the scientific content even when the content itself is understandable [4]. Language professionals, I feel, are often more knowledgeable about good research writing than gatekeepers are, and more sensitive to researchers' efforts to write as well as possible. Burrough-Boenisch recommended that, "language professionals could refrain from 'correcting' unambiguous, non-standard English" and instead "could empower the author to make the final decision, by explaining our 'native speaker' reactions to the original and suggesting an alternative" [5].

To provide authors with written feedback they could use to revise their texts, I typed notes in the text on specific problems and possible ways to solve them. In accordance with Burrough-Boenisch's author-empowering approach, I usually framed these notes as a warning about negative reactions by gatekeepers, an explanation of why the negative reaction was likely and a recommended solution (e.g., to add, delete or move something or to rethink and rewrite part of the text). Although authors sometimes asked me to write or rewrite text for them, I declined politely and reminded them that as researchers, they needed to become self-sufficient authors. More than once I feared authors would struggle with large numbers of suggestions for substantial changes, yet invariably I was impressed by how quickly they learned to implement the feedback and produce a greatly improved manuscript.

Researchers whose first language is not English sometimes use published research articles as models and imitate text features that author's editors consider vices rather than virtues. This write-by-imitation strategy can result in overuse of the passive voice, very long sentences and too much hedging. Although hedging is a useful rhetorical strategy in the right circumstances, excessive hedging >

AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean

- > often lengthens sentences and makes them hard to read. In terms of the reader's reactions, overhedging has the further undesirable effect of suggesting that the researchers lack confidence in their results. If the researchers themselves sound uncertain about the value of their findings, readers may suspect that their uncertainty stems from insecurity about the quality of the work rather than from the difficulties of writing in a second language.

To avoid the chance that the researchers would be victims of their own modesty, I explained that too much hedging might lead readers to question the validity of their findings. I reminded them that it is acceptable, and more persuasive, to sound confident about claims that are based on solid data and evidence, and advisable to reserve hedging for when they proposed novel interpretations and suggested new research directions.

Linguistic bias is manifested when reviewers ask authors to have a native-English speaker revise the manuscript even when there are no errors in English usage. Gatekeepers' criteria for good scientific English style vary widely and are not always trustworthy [6]. Kourilova noted that, "[i]n some instances, [reviewers] may be biased against non-native speakers and feel compelled to criticize the language". By way of example, she described the case of a manuscript by a Slovak doctor in which the English was "thoroughly subedited by his friend, a British scientist, whose name however did not appear in the paper. One reviewer acknowledged the high level of language and style, while the other one asked for complete language revision by a native speaker" [7]. As many TWS readers may know from experience, some reviewers criticise the English even when a native-English-speaking coauthor has checked the manuscript or when a native-English-speaking editor or medical writer is thanked in the Acknowledgments.

Fear of negative reactions because of poor English leads some researchers to copy chunks of text from published articles or textbooks. Authors I worked with explained that the reasons for resorting to copy-and-paste writing were to speed the writing process and avoid complaints by reviewers and editors about the language. In other words, they copied text not to steal ideas or words, but for convenience to save time and avoid rejection [8,9].

Gatekeepers, however, have little sympathy for the motives that lead non-native English authors to copy and paste, so it is important to educate researchers about the risks of copying and inaccurate citation (the latter a frequent though probably unintended result of copy-and-paste maneuvers). First, correct usage and readability are not guaranteed by copying from previous publications. English is not the first language for an increasing proportion of published authors, and the current trend to skimp on good copy-editing has led to a decline in the quality of the editing in much of what gets into print [6,10]. As a result, published articles in English—even in high-impact-factor journals—may not be gold-standard models of good

scientific English style. Second, inexact citation breaks the chain of accurate attribution and due credit, and is considered a serious ethical issue [11]. Third, if reviewers and editors detect segments of copied text, they will be biased against the authors because gatekeepers perceive copying to be a violation of professional ethics, not a practical solution for limited English proficiency. Fourth, because awareness of the problems of plagiarism and lax citation has increased in recent years, editors are increasingly likely to take measures against authors who are caught. So copy-and-paste writing may not only prevent acceptance of a manuscript, but may have serious consequences for the first or corresponding author's career, their coauthors' reputations and their institution's prestige.

At the heart of the writing process is the writer's identification with his or her words. To give researchers confidence in their own words, I explained the importance of engaging readers by offering not only new information, but a new interpretation of what their findings might mean. Researchers have no time for rehashes of other writers' words, and expect something new from each article they read—something that will inspire readers to think about their own research in a new way. Inspiration can only happen if the authors use new words—their own authorial voice—to reflect their insights. Helping researchers to understand that their readers care more about what *they* have to say than about what others have already said contributed, I feel, to the increased confidence in their work researchers reported after they received AAEM help with their manuscripts.

Social skills: Joining the international knowledge-sharing community

A better understanding of the expectations for courteous, respectful behaviour within the research culture helps researchers from 'the periphery' avoid rejection and ostracism when they inadvertently break the rules of etiquette. During AAEM author-editing sessions, researchers and I spent much time discussing these expectations and what they mean for authors.

For example, some researchers are unaware of the taboos against multiple simultaneous manuscript submittal and duplicate publication [12,13], and argue that it is unfair for journals to make them wait months for a rejection before they are allowed to resubmit their work elsewhere. Peer reviewers do not always detect duplicated material in a manuscript, so the literature already contains many instances of inappropriately copied material. Confusingly, there is no consensus among gatekeepers as to whether reviewers should be expected to check for and flag plagiarism, and many editors say they do not have the resources for this task. When aspiring authors point to examples of duplicate publication and plagiarism by prestigious colleagues in their research field, they may wonder why predecessors have got away with it whereas less well known authors are criticised or punished when caught [14]. As pressure to

AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean



Shiraz University of Medical Sciences

publish goes global, it propagates the motivation to cheat by reproducing the same research environment and evaluation criteria that have led to widespread ethical abuses in English-speaking and industrialised countries.

Educating authors about the long-term advantages of not cheating is a challenge in the current research environment. During AAEM author-editing sessions I explained the reasoning behind current editorial policies and tried to motivate authors to accept them—if for no other reason than to avoid potentially damaging retribution from editors for infractions. Moreover, authors who don’t waste reviewing resources or bore their readers by overloading the system with papers that contribute little or nothing to the knowledge pool are more likely to earn the respect of their peers in the long run.

For research to have an impact, it needs to be seen by readers who will use the new information. Many researchers I’ve worked with found their readers by trial (submitting initially to the highest-impact-factor journal) and error (being rejected and submitting to the next-highest-impact-factor journal until the manuscript was eventually accepted). But an article may be overlooked or ignored even if it appears in a high-impact-factor journal. Choosing the ‘right’ journal—ideally, a decision made before or while the manuscript is being written, not after it has been drafted—takes time and some thought.

I encouraged researchers to think about ways to expose their research to the greatest number of most interested readers. Who needs to know what you have found in order to become a better practitioner or researcher? This question helped researchers identify their audience. The next step was to find out which journals were read by the intended audience. If there was little overlap between readers’ preferred journals and the journals cited in the manuscript, this usually meant that either substantial editing was needed before the article could meet readers’ expectations for relevance and interest, or the intended audience and target journal needed to be reconsidered.

Once candidate journals had been identified, it was time to research their editorial board, recent publications, geographical coverage and citation patterns. Editorial board

members and recent publications from the writers’ own country or region were a positive sign that the journal would be prepared to review the manuscript. At this stage the impact factor and average time between manuscript submittal and publication might be checked as ‘tie-breakers’ between equally appropriate journals.

One of the most important outcomes of the AAEM project according to authors was increased confidence in the value of their research. This was a surprise for me because researchers at Shiraz University of Medical Sciences have an admirable publication record. But it may be a reflection of the insecurity many Eastern Mediterranean researchers feel in the context of problematic East-West relations. The issue of non-science-related biases [7,15-21] was frequently mentioned as a barrier to manuscript acceptance. Confidence-building is one of a publication mentor’s most important roles, and motivating researchers to be persistent is one useful way to prepare them for the challenges that new authors inevitably face as they learn how to gain the attention and respect of international readers.

The Catch-22 of writing for an international readership

Social, cultural and political factors unrelated to scientific quality can influence how readers react to articles [15,16,21-26]. In addition to these biases, unknown authors face the hurdle of readers’ reluctance to ‘make friends’ with new colleagues whom they haven’t yet ‘met’. Curry and Lillis [17] described researchers’ reticence to accept publications from unfamiliar authors as “the relegation of periphery scholars to roles in which they consume and confirm center-based research but are not allowed access to platforms from which to contribute different perspectives and findings”. When non-native English-speaking researchers seek help from those more familiar with the priorities and preferences of the main journals in their field, they hope this help will make their contributions more acceptable to gatekeepers. But in response to this guidance authors may sacrifice information about potentially interesting research questions in favour of “the preferences of center-based journals” [17]. Moreover, feedback from native-English-speaking peers—usually perceived by aspiring authors as more powerful members of their scientific community—can contribute to the ‘creative destruction’ of a text by obliging authors to make changes in the content and writing that satisfy gatekeepers’ personal preferences without actually improving the article [6,27].

The dilemma for authors from emerging research communities is therefore how much to ‘sacrifice’ to gain acceptance by international readers, and which novel ideas to publish in national or regional journals that may have more tolerance for novelty. Unfortunately, novel ideas published in ‘small’ journals are often overlooked by researchers in the ‘centre’, who then proceed to make the same discovery, publish it in a ‘more international’ journal and claim priority for it [20]. Although acceptance by an international audience necessarily means investigating questions >

AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean

- > with global implications, this acceptance often comes at the price of deleting more original aspects of the discussion and emphasising issues that interest key gatekeepers. The need to follow current research fashions to join the international knowledge community can thus influence choices about what to include in a particular manuscript. As a result, scientific self-censorship can limit the variety of viewpoints and insights relatively unknown authors can contribute—a situation that represents one of the most frustrating paradoxes of international research publication.

Obstacles to publication faced by non-native users of English from developing regions are barriers to authorship and knowledge-sharing [21]. AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean improves writing and publication skills, and empowers authors to feel confident in their data, their own words and their right to be a respected member of their international scientific community. By helping researchers become authors, AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean, like other AuthorAID projects, helps to level the playing field for researchers in emerging scientific communities who wish to be contributors to as well as consumers of scientific knowledge.

Revisit the EMWA website www.emwa.org

The EMWA website is continuously being developed to provide more resources, information and networking opportunities for the medical writing community. Check it out if you have not looked it up in the past few months. You will find:

- general and specialist discussion forums, the freelance support centre, member blogs, EMWA's WikiEncyclopaedia
- a monthly webeditorial, useful reading and useful links for medical writers
- job advertisements
- freelancer and company listings
- information about the upcoming EMWA conference, including the conference brochure, an online conference planner, online registration for EMWA members and important travel and accommodation information
- details of past EMWA conferences, including a photo gallery of pictures from some of the more recent conferences
- Information about the benefits of EMWA membership and easy membership application through an online application form
- EMWA news and other news relevant to our profession, including a newsdesk for latest news items, press releases and an events calendar

And coming up shortly **fully searchable** access to all TWS past issues.

Acknowledgments

I thank Dr Farhad Handjani and Shiraz University of Medical Sciences for their support for AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the project's volunteer editors, who work with authors of research manuscripts on a pro bono basis.

Karen Shashok

*Translator and Editorial consultant
Coordinator, AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean
Granada, Spain
kshashok@kshashok.com*

References:

1. Freeman P, Robbins A: The publishing gap between rich and poor: the focus of AuthorAID. *J Public Health Policy* 2006; 27(2): 196-203.
2. Momen H. Language and multilingualism in scientific communication. *Singapore Med J* 2009; 50(7): 654-656.
3. Shashok K. AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean: A communication bridge between mainstream and emerging research communities. *Eur Sci Editing* 2009; 35(4), 106-108.
4. Shashok K. Standardization versus diversity: How can we push peer review research forward? *Medscape Gen Med* 2005; 7(1). Published: 02/16/2005. Available at <http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/498238>
5. Burrough-Boenisch J. The return of the native: A British perspective. *The Write Stuff* 2008; 17(2): 63-64.
6. Shashok K. Content and communication. How can peer review provide helpful feedback about the writing? *BMC Med Res Methodol* 2008; 8(3): DOI: 10.1186/1471-2288-8-3 (31 Jan 2008).
7. Kourilova M. Communicative characteristics of reviews of scientific papers written by non-native users of English. *Endocr Regul* 1998; 32: 107-114.
8. Habibzadeh F. On stealing words and ideas. *Hepatitis Monthly* 2008; 8(3): 171-172.
9. Vessal K, Habibzadeh F. Rules of the game of scientific writing: fair play and plagiarism. *Lancet* 2007; 369: 641.
10. Vasconcelos SMR. Writing up research in English: Choice or necessity? *Rev Col Bras Cir* 2007; 34:1-2
11. Patten I. The four-eyed tarantula and the barnacle goose: Accurate citation or the perpetuation of hearsay. *The Write Stuff* 2009; 18(2): 94-95.
12. Habibzadeh F, Winker MA. Duplicate publication and plagiarism: causes and cures. *Nofall + Rettungsmedizin* 2009; 6: 415-1417.
13. Molaei G. Measures urgently needed to prevent multiple submission (Correspondence). *Nature* 2009; 461: 723.
14. Mashta O. Doctors try to get speakers to boycott international conference chaired by plagiarist. *BMJ* 2009; 339: b3545.
15. Shashok K. An unhappy equation: mistrust + confusion + politics = interference with science information transfer. *Eur Sci Editing* 2004; 31(1): 11-14.
16. Kozak M, Cooter M, and various authors. A call from a non-native English speaker: Don't look at my affiliation (Viewpoint). *Eur Sci Editing* 2008; 34(4): 100-104
17. Curry MJ, Lillis T. The dominance of English in scholarly publishing. *International Higher Education* 2007; 46: 6-7.
18. Ferguson G. The global spread of English, science communication, and ESP: questions of equity, access and loss of domain. *Iberica* 2007; 13: 7-38.
19. Braun T, Dióspatonyi I. US Scientists dominate as journal gatekeepers. *The Scientist* 2005; March 14: 10.
20. Stolerman IP, Stenius K. The language barrier and institutional provincialism in science. *Drug Alcohol Depend* 2008; 92: 1-2.
21. Uzuner S. Multilingual scholars' participation in core/global academic communities: A literature review. *J English Acad Purp* 2008; 7: 250-263.
22. Leimu R, Koricheva J. What determines the citation frequency of ecological papers? *Trends Ecol Evol* 2005; 20(1): 28-32.
23. Victora CG, Moreira CB. North-South relations in scientific publications: editorial racism? *Rev Saude Publica* 2006; 40 Spec no: 36-42.
24. Campanario JM, Acedo E. Rejecting highly cited papers: The views of scientists who encounter resistance to their discoveries from other scientists. *J Am Soc Info Sci Technol* 2007; 58(5): 734-743.
25. Vasconcelos SMR, Sorenson MM, Leta J, Sant'Ana MC. Researchers' writing competence: a bottleneck in the publication of Latin-American science? *EMBO Reports* 2008; 9(8): 700-702.
26. Campanario JM. Rejecting and resisting Nobel class discoveries: accounts by Nobel Laureates. *Scientometrics* 2009; 81(2): 549-565.
27. Aalbers MB. Creative destruction through the Anglo-American hegemony: a non-Anglo-American view on publications, referees and language. *Area* 2004; 36(3): 319-322