Challenges for non-native English science authors

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What is AuthorAID?

A concept:

to support health by supporting the publication and availability of important information

What is AuthorAID?

A goal:

to improve research and publication practices, and to level the publication playing field so all important information becomes available

What is AuthorAID?

A practical outcome:

a consortium of projects with different sources of support but common goals

What do AuthorAID projects do?

- find author's editors to help authors write manuscripts in English and get them published

- provide training for authors and for journal editors

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."

Burrough-Boenisch J. The return of the native: A British perspective. The Write Stuff 2008; 17(2): 63-64

More information about AuthorAID

AuthorAID

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From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

AuthorAID is the name given to a growing number of web-based activities that provide developmental editing assistance to scientists and researchers from developing countries who wish to prepare scientific articles for publication in peer reviewed journals. Phyllis Freeman[1] and Anthony Robbins,[2] co-editors of the *Journal of Public Health Policy (JPHP)*,[3] first suggested the name and concept in 2004 and published "Closing the 'publishing gap' between rich and poor" about AuthorAID on the Science and Development Network(SciDev Net)[4] in 2005 [5]

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AuthorAID

Three challenges

1. Becoming a good writer in English

2. Satisfying expectations for good scientific writing

3. Overcoming discrimination

Challenge 1

Becoming a good writer in English

Writing skills

Usage: grammar, vocabulary, syntax (objective)

Writing: logic, argumentation, persuasiveness (subjective)

Learning to write well in your *first* language takes years of practice.

Even manuscripts written by native English speakers are criticized for poor English.

Learning to write well in your *second* language takes years of practice, motivation, and discipline.

Is cut-and-paste a good solution for your readers?

Cut and paste?

1. Your own thinking and logic communicate your new ideas better to readers than a mixture of different voices.

Cut and paste?

2. The text you use may not be well written or well edited, even in a high-impact-factor journal.

Cut and paste?

3. Good copyediting is rare now. Many publishers use mediocre copyediting to save money.

Cut and paste?

4. Concerns about plagiarism and inaccurate citation.

How will the reviewer or reader react if they detect incorrectly cited material?

Challenge 2

Satisfying expectations for good scientific writing

Editorial interventions by gatekeepers (reviewers and editors) have 2 functions:

1. ensure that scientific content meets the journal's or publisher's editorial standards ("screening" function)
2. make the text more convincing as a written communication ("improving" function) [1].

Whose expectations should you try to satisfy?

The editor's?
The reviewer's?
The reader's?

We don't know exactly what the expectations are.

Diversity:

Editorial policies and practices differ widely, and there are no standard procedures accepted by all editors.

Confusion:

Many authors expect gatekeepers to help them with the English or writing, but many gatekeepers don't provide this help.

Uncertainty:

Gatekeepers think peer review *should* improve manuscripts but are not sure if it *can* [2].

Reviewers often provide contradictory feedback about the writing, or complain about the English even when native speakers of English wrote, translated or revised the text.

Feedback about the language and writing may be less likely to help authors improve their manuscripts than feedback about the specialized content [3].

Language and writing features are more likely to be judged subjectively because gatekeepers' expertise in *good scientific English* varies widely.

Their expertise is probably influenced by individual characteristics such as their training, experience, and native language and culture.

Unfortunately… .

Journals in some disciplines are abandoning manuscript editing, a trend which parallels a similar decline in editorial tolerance for imperfect English.

Many journals now reject manuscripts without peer review if an initial rapid evaluation shows problems with the English.

So errors in "the English" can be sufficient to lead to rejection.

Reviewers often claim that a manuscript requires "substantial review and editing by a native English speaker."

If the English is so bad that the content cannot be understood, major improvements are needed.

But…

The problem may be only minor copyediting errors that are easy to fix.

Or...

The problem may be that the usage or argumentation are appropriate, but different from the gatekeeper's preferred style or expectations.

Some changes made or requested by gatekeepers can make the text harder instead of easier to understand, or can introduce errors.

The reviewer's English skills may be weaker than the authors'!

Some changes reflect misunderstanding of the scientific content or lack of sufficient expertise by the reviewer or editor.

But...

There is pressure on authors to make changes suggested (or required) by gatekeepers even if the author considers them wrong [2].

Gatekeepers with limited time and motivation may look for reasons to reject a manuscript rather than try to provide substantial feedback.

What does this mean for authors of manuscripts?

To improve chances of acceptance, try to make the manuscript you submit in the first instance as ready-to-publish as possible to make the best initial impression.

Challenge 3

Overcoming discrimination

1. Factors not related to science influence the decision to accept or reject a manuscript [4,5].

- National origin
- Use of English
- Balance in topics
- Citability
- Potential media attention

2. Overdependence on writing strategies or patterns that characterize English writing might contribute to intolerance toward alternative patterns in language that come from other languages [6].

English written by authors with a different first language can reflect their ability to combine different writing strategies in ways writers who know only English are unable to achieve.

Texts written with this combined process can be just as effective as texts that follow the sequence of information that is characteristic of English [7].

But...

some gatekeepers are not tolerant of alternatives that are different from their own experience or expectations.

3. The quality or availability of local editorial help can vary.

Many authors do not have access to professional editorial help – a problem with the potential to worsen the North-South and West-East information imbalance [8-10].

Some translators have "insufficient knowledge of medicine and the rules of scientific writing" [11].

If they are not subject experts, language professionals or copyeditors may miss deficiencies in the logic and argumentation because they do not understand the scientific content.

Can the challenges be overcome?

Author's editors and "translators as editors" who work with researchers can help overcome the challenges of discrimination [12-16].

Workshops to train non-subject-specialist language and writing professionals to handle specialist material competently are available from **Mediterranean Editors and Translators** [17].

www.metmeetings.org

Also, some national, regional and specialized journals still provide help for authors in improving their manuscript [11,18].

Programs such as **AuthorAID** will attempt to reduce geographical imbalances in access to high-quality author editing and language help [10]**.**

Conclusions

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Although more researchers are learning English, there are increasing challenges to publication in English that can limit the dissemination of research from non-English-speaking countries.

Improved training in English writing skills and a clear understanding of what gatekeepers and readers expect from a well-written article can help increase publication success.

Thank-you very much