CORRESPONDENCE

Improving the biomedical research literature: insights from authors’ editors can help journal editors define and refine their core competencies [version 1; referees: 1 approved]

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Abstract

A team of stakeholders in biomedical publishing recently proposed a set of core competencies for journal editors, as a resource that can inform training programs for editors and ultimately improve the quality of the biomedical research literature. This initiative, still in its early stages, would benefit from additional sources of expert information. Based on our experiences as authors’ editors, we offer two suggestions on how to strengthen these competencies so that they better respond to the needs of readers and authors – the main users of and contributors to research journals. First, journal editors should be able to ensure that authors are given useful feedback on the language and writing in submitted manuscripts, beyond a (possibly incorrect) blanket judgement of whether the English is “acceptable” or not. Second, journal editors should be able to deal effectively with inappropriate text re-use and plagiarism. These additional competencies would, we believe, be valued by other stakeholders in biomedical research publication as markers of editorial quality.

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Competing interests: VM and KS are both self-employed authors’ editors and realize that this article might attract clients. VM is the author of the book Editing Research and realizes that this article might affect sales. VM and KS are both long-time members of Mediterranean Editors and Translators, and have been unpaid speakers at CPD events run by this organization. KS was Vice Chair of Mediterranean Editors and Translators during 2006. KS is a long-time member of Asetrad and was an unpaid speaker at a CPD event run by this organization in 2017.

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Journal editing cannot be learned in higher education, and alternative training opportunities are not readily available. To guide such training and ultimately improve the quality of published research, Moher and colleagues defined core competencies (CC) for editors of biomedical journals. They did a literature review, surveyed 148 journal editors, and used a Delphi-like process to rank different competencies, resulting in a consensus statement signed by 30 stakeholders in research publishing. We commend this initiative to help journal editors work responsibly and accountably, and offer suggestions on areas that might benefit from additional input.

Moher et al. do not use the term “journal editor” but rather “scientific editor”, defined as someone “who make[s] decisions on the content and policies of a journal — including editors-in-chief and associate/academic editors”\(^2\). This definition excludes other editors who contribute to the quality of research publications, in contrast to the broader meaning of “science editor” used by two stakeholder groups in the consensus initiative (Council of Science Editors, European Association of Science Editors). To avoid confusion regarding who the CC are intended for, a term such as “decision-making editor” might be helpful. For simplicity’s sake, here we use “journal editor” to refer to the type of editor we assume the CC are intended for.

As Moher et al. concede, “time and resource constraints … limited inclusion of perspectives of other relevant groups (e.g. authors, readers, peer reviewers)” in developing the CC\(^1\). We believe input from authors is fundamental to efforts to define competencies of journal editors, and suggest that insights into authors’ (sometimes less than satisfactory) experiences with journals can be provided by another type of editor, namely authors’ editors\(^3\)–\(^8\). These editors help researcher-authors prepare manuscripts for publication by reading drafts and suggesting changes to structure and content (substantive editing), language and style (language editing), and appearance and format (e.g. compliance with journals’ instructions)\(^9\)–\(^11\). In addition, many authors’ editors train researchers in publication skills\(^12\)–\(^17\) and help authors navigate editorial processes\(^18\)–\(^21\). Authors’ editors’ knowledge of the publication process and their close interactions with the producers, distributors and consumers of research information make them qualified to help define CC for journal editors and identify deficiencies in current practices\(^1\).

Authors’ editors are often more familiar with researchers’ local circumstances and challenges than journal editors are. Although the writers of the consensus statement and their informants are themselves researchers and therefore authors, they were perhaps not representative of the wider population of “real-world” researchers who have limited contact with English-speaking opinion leaders in biomedical publishing. In contrast, many authors’ editors work with researchers whose first language is not English or who are based outside the global North and West. Familiarity with other languages and cultures gives authors’ editors insights into the types of competencies researchers from diverse geographical, cultural and linguistic backgrounds would value in journal editors.

Like journal editors, authors’ editors are taking steps to critically evaluate and improve their working methods. A growing body of literature facilitates knowledge transfer to colleagues in different settings. PhD degrees have been awarded to authors’ editors for applied linguistics research based on their work practices in the Netherlands\(^22\), Spain\(^23\) and China (Luo\(^24\) and unpublished; available upon request). Continuing professional development for authors’ editors is available through national and international associations (Table 1). Authors’ editors in these associations can provide valuable information about journal editor CC that researchers would value. As authors’ editors ourselves, we offer suggestions on how to improve the CC based on insights we and our colleagues gain about researchers’ experiences with peer review.

### Table 1. Professional associations that provide continuing professional development for authors’ editors (and other types of editors).

| Association                                                    | Membership\(^a\)          | Year founded | Website                     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|
| Editors’ Association of Canada (Editors Canada)                | Canada and North America  | 1979         | www.editors.ca              |
| Society for Editors and Translators (STEP)                     | UK and Europe             | 1988         | www.sfte.org.uk             |
| Society of English-language professionals in the Netherlands (SENSE) | The Netherlands and Europe | 1990         | www.sense-online.nl         |
| Institute of Professional Editors (IPEd)                       | Australia                 | 1998         | www.ipeed-editors.org       |
| Asociación Española de Traductores, Correctores e Intérpretes (Asetrad) | Spain and Europe          | 2003         | www.asetrad.org             |
| Mediterranean Editors and Translators (MET)                    | Spain and Europe          | 2006         | www.metmeetings.org         |
| Nordic Editors and Translators (NEaT)                          | Finland and Europe        | 2014         | nordicedit.fi               |

\(^a\) Country and continent in which most members live
In our experience, reviewers and journal editors increasingly cite "problems with the English" as a reason for rejection, even of manuscripts free from language errors. Meanwhile, biomedical journals publish an ever-increasing proportion of articles that were judged by reviewers to have "acceptable English" but which contain awkwardly worded statements that defy comprehension and undermine reproducibility(89–95). To avoid these problems, journal editors should be able to either provide authors with useful feedback on the language (e.g. by endorsing or overruling reviewers’ complaints) or delegate this responsibility to an appropriately skilled reviewer or editorial staffer. Relying solely on blanket “acceptable/unacceptable” assessments of the writing contributes, in our experience, to cynicism among authors regarding the fairness and quality of peer review, and to the proliferation of poorly written articles. Although we realize that skills in “dealing with language issues” and knowledge about the “fundamentals of editing” were considered but then excluded from the CC, we believe that inclusion of a competency in this area would be welcomed and perceived as a marker of editorial quality.

Another competency researchers would appreciate is the ability of journal editors to deal effectively with inappropriate text re-use. This omission from the CC is surprising, especially since plagiarism featured in two of the 23 highly ranked statements in the Delphi process(9). While working with authors on manuscripts, authors’ editors sometimes encounter re-used text and inadequate citation, and use these opportunities to explain why these practices may be inappropriate and how to avoid them(9). But these individual efforts are not enough to stop the global spread of plagiarism in published research, which journal editors may inadvertently facilitate if they do not check manuscripts carefully enough before publication. Journal editors should be able to interpret the results of “plagiarism-detection” software and deal sensitively with the manuscripts these tools single out (as proposed by the Committee on Publications Ethics, publicationethics.org/files/u2/02A_Plagiarism_Submitted.pdf). Setting a maximum allowable percentage of text overlap, without considering the context of the non-original text, may send inconsistent messages about appropriate and inappropriate text re-use. Manuscript rejection based solely on the percentage of non-original text can, in our experience, alienate well-meaning authors from journals that use this criterion.

These are just two of the areas where authors’ editors can provide valuable input for future efforts to define and refine CC for biomedical journal editors. Alongside earlier efforts to support professional and ethical practices(96–98) (see also: publicationethics.org/files/edible-bean/COPE_Core_Practices_0.pdf, and www.wame.org/about/syllabus-for-prospective-and-newly-appointed), the CC may indeed help gatekeepers meet researchers’ and readers’ expectations for editorial practices that ultimately improve the quality of published research.

Competing interests
VM and KS are both self-employed authors’ editors and realize that this article might attract clients. VM is the author of the book Editing Research and realizes that this article might affect sales. VM and KS are both long-time members of Mediterranean Editors and Translators, and have been unpaid speakers at CPD events run by this organization. KS was Vice Chair of Mediterranean Editors and Translators during 2006. KS is a long-time member of Asetrad and was an unpaid speaker at a CPD event run by this organization in 2017.

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Written by two long-standing, respected professional biomedical authors’ editors, this article responds to the proposal to create core competencies (CC) “for scientific editors of biomedical journals”. Although commending the proposal, Matarese and Shashok point out that Moher et al.’s use of the term “scientific editor”, instead of “journal editor” or “decision-making editor“, might raise confusion about the type of editor to which the CC apply. They also argue that when refining the CC, authors’ experiences with journals provide useful insights into the CC needed by journal editors. Matarese and Shashok point out that some scientific editors do not work for a publisher or journal but instead work closely with researcher-authors, helping them to produce publishable papers – a service particularly helpful to authors writing in their second (or third) language or living in the Global South. These “authors’ editors” can also help their author clients to deal with reviewer comments and journal-related correspondence, thereby accumulating valuable information on authors’ experiences with journal editors. Authors’ editors are thus well-placed to contribute to formulating certain CC, especially in relation to assessing the quality of the English and providing clear, constructive feedback to authors. Drawing on their extensive knowledge of journal–author intercommunication, Matarese and Shashok plead for reversal of the decision not to include competence to deal with language issues and knowledge of the “fundamentals of editing” from the CC. They also express surprise at another omission: competency in plagiarism detection. Again, they point out relevant insights that authors’ editors can supply.

Matarese and Shashok’s case for expanding and refining the CC with the help of authors’ editors is convincingly argued. They have underpinned it with references to relevant publications by authors’ editors that are probably unfamiliar to editors of science journals. The table of editors’ associations indicates that there are professional associations providing CPD that committed, principled authors’ editors may join. All this helps broadcast the actual and potential usefulness of authors’ editors to researcher-authors, journals, journal reviewers and journal editors. However, to avoid creating the impression that all authors’ editors are suitably trained, optimally competent in all the editing they undertake, involved members of appropriate associations and proactive in undertaking CPD, Matarese and Shashok should acknowledge that there are no CC for authors’ editors, nor are authors’ editors required to have certain academic or professional qualifications. Matarese and Shashok are currently among the most respected and high-profile biomedical authors’ editors; their plea to involve authors’ editors in developing CC for journal editors should be placed in that context.

Is the rationale for commenting on the previous publication clearly described?
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Are arguments sufficiently supported by evidence from the published literature or by new data and results?
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Is the conclusion balanced and justified on the basis of the presented arguments?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Referee Expertise: I am an experienced authors’ editor myself, though not in the field of biomedicine. I have published on editing, particularly on the editing of non-native English.

I have read this submission. I believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

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Version 1

Reader Comment 26 Jan 2018
Ravi Murugesan, Freelance, India

I think this piece is an important addition to the literature about author editing. I would like to ask the authors to consider including more citations to sources from beyond the global North or West. For example, the open access journal Science Editing, published by the Korean Council of Science Editors, occasionally carries articles on language editing and manuscript editing. I've linked to a couple of these below:

Education for local Asian journal editors

Publishing a journal in English: tips for journal editors who are non-native English speakers

Competing Interests: I'm the author of the second article mentioned in my comment

Author Response 26 Jan 2018
Karen Shashok, Translator - Editorial consultant, Spain

Our colleagues at the Society for Editors and Proofreaders https://www.sfep.org.uk/ have alerted us to an error in the name of this organization in Table 1, for which we sincerely apologize. This will be corrected in the next version of the article.
Valerie and Karen (off to sign up for a refresher course in proofreading!)

**Competing Interests:** Authors of the article.

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