



## Eliciting revision: An approach for non-authors participating at the boundaries of scientific writing, editing and advising

by Mary Ellen Kerans

We expect young scientists to learn to write and publish from fellow scientists: our expectations are based on either first-hand experience or published accounts by observers of the process (e.g., [1,2]). With luck a junior scientist will be guided by a wise senior and surrounded by fellows with varying degrees of experience to give feedback at all stages of research from conception to reporting and defending. A scientist's readers are all candidate role models and a novice author's first contact with distant readers comes through journal peer review. When researchers study this social system they apply various terms. Anthropologists say that activities (like scientific enquiry and communication) are learned contextually through *situated learning* and *legitimate peripheral participation* [3]. Applied linguists say the end result is initiation into a *discourse community* [4]. Most of us simply call incidental teaching in context *mentoring*.

Outsiders often enter the picture, however. They might be translators, medical writers or author's editors—whether professionals or someone's cousin or friend. Conventional wisdom has it that an ideal writing facilitator would be as similar as possible to an author. Doctors, we think, should be assisted by other medical or biomedical scientists. This is why many online editing services promise authors whose native language is not English (E2 authors) that their papers will be handled by English speakers who studied or are graduate students in an appropriate field.

Although I share these notions, I work in a non-Anglophone setting where writing facilitators are needed but ideal discipline-specific matches will only occasionally be possible. I therefore take an alternative approach. Before I fully edit a manuscript, I elicit revision from an author—who remains the source of scientific expertise and the defender of the manuscript. In this system, the paper emerges incrementally through cycles of substantive revision. I edit some sections as we go along but focus with the author on content in early drafts. Final editing to prepare the paper for external peer review comes only when the text seems complete and the overall structure well conceived—a sequence much like the natural writing process of proficient writers in their native language. I will describe the sources and main features of this approach.

*"The editor says I have to do 'substantive revision' before he'll send the paper for peer review. I don't know what that means."*

The unusual statement of this section's subtitle was spoken by my first author-client, who arrived about 25 years ago.

I'm not a scientist, but I did happen to know what substantive revision would mean, even in the absence of a peer reviewer's report. I trained to teach English as a second language in the 1970s, at a time when new lines of research into writing, the socio-cognitive nature of academic communication, and the 'functional grammar' of texts were emerging. One line—which produced the 'writing process literature' of the mid-1970s through the early 1990s—turned out to be very relevant to my task of eliciting revision of the medical research paper this author wished to resubmit. This literature clarified how writers develop ideas into all manner of texts. The researchers looked at how proficient writers see what needs to be revised. They also contrasted the practices and attitudes of more and less proficient writers, leading to a sense that there were 'promising practices' novices needed to learn in addition to the attributes of admirable finished papers.

The findings encouraged recursive writing (multiple drafts as ideas emerge and are refined) and implied ways to resolve the tension between a writer's purpose and the needs or expectations of real readers (in other words, with a view to publication). In educational settings, developing authors being guided according to 'process-oriented' principles are helped to focus on their ideas and insights first, look critically, interpret the implications of criticism, and gradually produce a manuscript that will be effective with readers. Short conversations (called 'conferences') about a manuscript help an author see how to move the text closer to publishable quality.

### Brief, focused conferences with an alert, responsive reader

Brevity of talk—relative to writing—is a principle that underlies conversations leading to revision. A story that illustrates the power of brevity comes from an early writing process researcher who worked with well-known workshop leader, Donald Murray. In her foreword to a small book on adopting the emerging approach in a children's classroom [5], the teacher-researcher mentioned driving six hours for only a half-hour meeting with Murray. "Whatever happened during those conferences, it not only made the trip worthwhile, it also transformed my writing and teaching of writing, she reflected" [p. vi].

My conferences with scientists are longer, at an hour to an hour and a half, but they share the goal of transforming writing, nudging the author back to authoring as soon as possible. Each conference is unique because it is a >

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> conversation about one manuscript, but the literature on the attitudes and behaviours of writers and what they say to themselves and each other hints at what an author's editor can helpfully say. The structure and content of my conferences are synthesised in the table. The research that underpins the table comes from videotapes I made of two conferences toward the late 1990s, when I was curious to know if my practice had drifted from its original conceptions as I'd gained experience with medical texts. The data from the tapes served to supplement a case report of a third author's revision of a paper after similar conversations [6].

The tapes revealed how very similar, and hence replicable, such meetings are. For this article, I've constructed a new table organised according to the underlying principles for anyone who might like to try the approach.

The principles, actions and techniques grounded in theory together share the purpose of reinforcing the author's engagement with ideas and the manuscript. Putting into practice principles 3, 4 and 5 (the main part of a conference) is the least formulaic: this is the most challenging part for the author's editor who is not a writer. The messages I bring to the table are similar to those of any medical

**Table 1 Principles that guide a process-oriented writing conference and how they unfold with scientists\***

Principles	Actions	Reasons and notes on technique
<b>1. Set a realistic goal for the conference.</b>	Brief conversation to agree on what should be accomplished at the meeting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It's not necessary to go over an entire manuscript. Few authors have the time to have long meetings or the budget to pay for them. Attention span may also be an issue.</li> <li>An author needs time alone with the manuscript. Use conference time to give guidance (principles 3 through 5) and provide an E2 author with a sense of being supported. Leave the responsibility for developing and explaining the content to co-authors.</li> </ul>
<b>2. Focus on the writer's experience.</b>	Ask the author to comment on <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>how the writing went, and</li> <li>what concerns he or she has about the manuscript.</li> </ul>	Since authors seem to enjoy this and sometimes say too much for a brief conference, it's best to just listen for insights that will be useful during the rest of the conference.
<b>3. Focus on the manuscript as it is and the reader's response to it.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ask questions about main messages, why certain concepts are mentioned, about information that seems missing or incongruous, about citing.</li> <li>Read particularly problematic or key sections aloud.</li> <li>Mention what works well and why.</li> <li>Authors also ask questions and express concerns.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>An author often benefits most from simply knowing how a reader responds to specific portions—in detail and overall.</li> <li>Reading a section aloud is especially useful when working with E2 authors, though native-language writers also benefit. Readability problems stand out. Also, both editor and author will need to re-experience a problematic section before it can be worked on effectively. Additionally, novice authors may not realise that constant re-reading is a natural part of writing, especially after substantive changes are made. A conference allows this behaviour to be modelled naturally.</li> <li>Mentioning positive points isn't a mere face-saving move. The aim is to reinforce an author's feel for what works.</li> </ul>
<b>4. Model re-reading to detect dissonance† in a manuscript.</b>		
<b>5. Model the writing process.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Real-time editing or more substantive rewriting</li> <li>Drafting of new material by the author</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Writing and note-taking emerge naturally from reading aloud. If authors think the 'expert' should lead, they may need to be encouraged to take the most active role. Authors may introduce new material that wasn't present in the submitted manuscript (a reason why even highly interventionist editing is not authoring, as the editor does not know the author's full research and reading experience).</li> <li>Sometimes the editor might write (revising) with the author watching. Novice authors may need to see that it's not always easy for 'the expert' to find the right wording and E2 authors are more likely to confidently retain their active role if they see that nothing is written in stone (yet).</li> <li>On other occasions it might be best to leave the author alone to concentrate and write for a few minutes. (Make an excuse to withdraw—such as going to print forgotten tables.)</li> <li>Remember the conference should be brief. Working this way on one paragraph, or even part of one, is usually plenty for an intelligent author to get the point. The overall goal is to facilitate the author's autonomous revision back home.</li> </ul>
<b>6. Focus on what the writer will do after the conference.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Based on what's been worked on during the conference and the stages reached, outline revision steps, 'negotiating' with the author. Ask the author when he or she will take up the manuscript again and how much time will be available. Ask what will be done first, second, etc.</li> <li>Make tentative process recommendations based on what you think will best suit the author's style, personality, and ability to organise time.</li> <li>Set a timetable.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Having a plan of action and visualising the process will make the complex task seem less overwhelming.</li> <li>Don't hesitate to ask for a partial draft to be returned. Help the author establish achievable goals.</li> <li>If the timetable isn't met (as it often isn't), you may need to call to find out why. It may be that the author needs a 10-minute phone conference to re-set goals. Or there may be interesting new developments you need to know about.</li> </ul>

\*The principles in the table are derived from my reading of the writing process literature of the 1970s-1990s, partly under the guidance of my own mentor, Gay Brookes. The actions are a synthesis of those observed in videotaped conferences, included in Kerans [5].

† Sommers [7] defines dissonance as incongruities between intention and execution. She found that proficient writers attended to dissonance and were revising at all stages of composing. Less proficient (student) writers revised superficially, at the word or sentence level of text.

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writer, instructor or editor, but the manner of delivering them can be different. Instead of saying, “Further discussion of [a certain point] is needed,” or “This is unclear,” or “There is little discussion of [...],” I’ve trained myself to be more specific, saying, “You raise the point of [...] and note your findings are similar to those of [...], but *I’m not sure how you see the relation between their findings and yours or what you want me to remember most at the end of the paragraph. Could you explain now?*” I listen and take notes of phrases. Once the E2 author’s explanation is in full swing, I may interrupt and say the message is now clearer, showing some of the noted phrases that were helpful to me. I may suggest the author redirect the energy that has gone into explaining conversationally and instead take a few minutes to start editing the paragraph, putting the new ideas I’ve jotted down (or others) at the head. I promise to re-edit to correct the English (or translate and incorporate) before e-mailing a new file later that day. This small change in manner of speaking and working keeps the focus on the author’s work. My contribution as a reader is reactive. My contribution as an editor follows the author’s.

A few more examples might help to bring principles 3 through 5 into sharper focus. I don’t ask rhetorically, “Is this the most appropriate reference?” but rather I reveal my response when reading by saying something along these lines: “*These references surprise me because you say they demonstrate efficacy, yet I see one is a general review and the other a case report. Do we need to change the references or the wording?*” Then I listen and act in response, modelling revision of phrasing or noting the author’s intention to obtain new references. Likewise, it’s not threatening to my position or the author’s if I say something like, “*I’m confused when I read [...] because you’ve just written about [...] and I was expecting you to discuss [...] next. Can you explain why you’ve introduced this point now?*” I phrase my response that way rather than saying “This statement contradicts [...]” or “This point seems irrelevant (or ‘doesn’t flow’).”

Finally, the traditional ways of starting and closing a conference are also shown in the table beside principles 1, 2 and 6. Authors usually have much to say and I gain insight from hearing how the draft was produced (processes) as well as noting how they express attitudes and uncertainties. Understanding the author well helps me reinforce effective practices, fill in gaps by suggesting heuristics and correct questionable practices such as copy-paste ‘patch writing’ in a firm but unthreatening, natural way at opportune moments. Similarly, ending the conference by discussing a realistic plan that feels right and corresponds to a timetable helps the author visualise solitary revising. This is especially important for novices or anyone who might have had frustrating publishing experiences. Writer’s block occurs during revision as well as during early composing. (Even proficient writers become blocked, but they have a repertoire of ways to get past it.)

## Practical issues

Though conferences are always too short to address all the problems a manuscript might have, they’re long enough for an author to decide on useful directions to take to bring the paper closer to completion. Novices might require several meetings, whereas a proficient author might need only one or two or might be able to work with me at a distance. Briefer virtual conferences with experienced revisers are an option I use often: the author and I might have a half-hour phone conversation once I’ve sent a partially edited manuscript we can both view on screen. Fluent writers might even work with me on a portion of text by e-mail or chat. Videoconferences have also sometimes been possible. I still insist on face-to-face meetings with new clients who live nearby, however, and occasionally meet with experienced ones—if they’re taking on a new text type, for example. A reason face-to-face conferences can accelerate revision is that I can monitor how an author is responding to feedback more easily and change approach quickly if necessary. Authors are also more likely to express their uncertainties spontaneously in person.

In preparing, I take into account other knowledge fields and writing approaches that will be more familiar to EMWA members. Like most of my colleagues I check whether an author has chosen a journal and heeded its instructions before sending me the manuscript. (E2 authors are mostly on a tight budget and my clients pay for editing by the hour, so I try to have them do everything they can on their own.) I also look at the abstract and provide pertinent reporting guidelines (CONSORT, STROBE, etc.) to those unfamiliar with them. I look into the social context of their writing. This means I find out who, besides the contact author, is most involved with drafting and revising, because some of my work might include helping a novice drafter plan strategic interaction with co-authors. All of these early steps are compatible with the approach because they are normal components of the scientific writing process.

If authors express difficulties, I may suggest we work with a partial manuscript. This helps with early correction of problems such as a tendency of some E2 authors to fail to make their contribution to the field explicit [8] or to give insufficient or unconvincing reasons for performing a study in the introduction [9]. A methods section might also be drafted in an incomplete or confusing way by even experienced authors whose co-authors have given insufficient support. Some may benefit from a phone conference at this point.

When a complete manuscript is available, I prepare for a conference by reading and, if portions seem fairly clear, I edit them lightly (incomplete editing being possible because I know I’ll see the manuscript again). Portions of text, especially in the discussion, may remain unedited because they are in need of much substantive revision. >

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- > We'll talk about the author's intentions in chosen portions and possibly analyse pertinent examples of writing from papers in the author's reference list (genre analysis, [4]). Any portions that are unclear or even simply uninteresting might be candidates for such treatment in the main part of the conference (principles 3 to 5 in the table).

Successive authoring and editing cycles follow. The main goal is straightforward enough to be clear at all times: to provide whatever support a non-author can give an E2 author so that a manuscript receives a respectful review and is finally published in an appropriate journal. The E2 author is supported in terms of language, reporting practices, writing processes, and international journal procedures in an individualised way. I take care not to over teach concepts an author already understands.

## Physical demands of medical writing

What does it take to be a medical writer? Physically, I mean. I found this description as part of a job ad<sup>1</sup> for a senior medical writer in the US, right between Work Environment and Competency

*“Physical Demands: The physical demands described here are representative of those that must be met by an employee to successfully perform the essential functions of this job. Reasonable accommodations may be made to enable individuals with disabilities to perform the essential functions.”*

So far so good. However, the description went on to describe the specifics of these physical demands, as follows:

*“While performing the duties of this Job, the employee is regularly required to sit and talk or hear. The employee is frequently required to stand; walk; use hands to finger, handle, or feel and reach with hands and arms. The employee is occasionally required to climb or balance and stoop, kneel, crouch, or crawl. The employee must frequently lift and/or move up to 10 pounds.”*

Now, isn't the writer ever required to write or type at all?

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<sup>1</sup> HittList 20 Nov 2009. Job list at Emma Hitt Medical Writing, LLC.

## Constraints, advantages and generalisability

Eliciting revision is a strategy I use as an author's editor with no desire to be a writer. I cannot be certain that the principles are readily generalisable to medical writing situations, though I suspect some may be of use to those who wish authors to engage fully with the manuscript.

An objection that is often raised is that recursive writing takes time, especially for novices, who are always surprised that authoring is more complicated than they thought. (Proficient authors also need time, but they take it in stride instead of complaining!) Social pressures to publish fast and in abundance do work against encouraging authors to do the revising themselves and those with higher budgets may well expect not to have to work on writing. They may prefer to get on with planning the next study. However, as author's editors share with medical writers the purpose of alleviating the frustrations writing can bring, authors should save time overall, certainly not waste it, by working in this way rather than alone.

An advantage of this admittedly advisory, even 'educational', approach is that more E2 authors with tight budgets may be able to obtain help in their own communities, where language service providers may be available even though English-speaking field-specific experts may be lacking. The approach can be implemented by a literate, attentive, empathetic reader familiar with the features of the author's literature (through personal experience or genre analysis) and equipped with an understanding of the social and cognitive processes of writing.

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