

Editing at the *BMJ*: then and now

By Margaret Cooter

The *BMJ* has been appearing, week after week, for 165 years. I've been helping make this happen for just 18. During those two decades, what technical editors have been required to do has changed tremendously. Authors' expectations surely have changed as well.

When I joined the *BMJ* as a raw trainee in 1987, wondering what to expect, I was told: "You'll be editing for 5 hours a day, and proofreading for 2." We novices - three, then four, then five in a large room with a shared telephone and a rarely used computer - worked on paper, using pencil to make our careful, plentiful changes. These were overseen by a senior editor, painstakingly revised (in pen) during the 6 or more months of our training. House style was taken extremely seriously, especially the famous "no hyphens" dictum (see box). Trips to the BMA library to check references were frequent, and the lunch hour was a very important part of the day.

No hyphens in the *BMJ*?

Contrary to popular belief (and easily verified by a glance at any page), the *BMJ* does allow hyphens. But not just any hyphen!

The paucity of hyphens, no doubt the diktat of a long-ago editor, is nicely complemented by another linchpin of *BMJ* style, the desire to eliminate "noun strings". These are often sloppily strung together with hyphens and crop up commonly as jargon in scientific writing, making understanding difficult. The temptation in editing is simply to readjust the hyphens where necessary, so the "no hyphens rule" improves matters by requiring these noun clusters to be clarified during editing. If you think about these phrases, what do they actually mean? "Movie tobacco-use exposure category" is difficult and lengthy to unscramble. On a seemingly simpler level, are "doctor visits" visits from the doctor or visits to the doctor?

BMJ style has never banned hyphens when they need to be used to avoid ambiguity (re-creation, for example, or two-day cases). Recently, as we've been thinking about readability, more and more uses of hyphens have been approved - for example, in two-word noun or adjectival phrases that include a preposition (run-in, trade-off, in-house). From the memorable "jelly-like mucus", the use of hyphens with such suffixes has spread to -wide, -style, -type, -free - but it has yet to apply to prefixes, apart from non-, mini- and sometimes mid- and anti-.

The Write Stuff

Editing at the *BMJ*

Once edited, papers went to our typesetters to be turned into galley proofs, which were read against copy (sometimes heroically, given the many changes in both pencil and pen on the original), corrected, and then returned to the *BMJ* office for mailing to authors [1]. On their return, which could take 2 to 4 weeks, the author's changes were "dealt with" and the proofs read for sense and conformity by a colleague and then carefully checked by The Editor - who was always alert to deviations from house style. Our style book was long and detailed, and I volunteered to put it on the computer. All changes to style were agreed in meetings that involved everyone in the office. Change was slow.

In the late '80s, the aim was to have a homogeneous product, arrived at by all technical editors being trained by the same person to very rigid standards, and maintained through proofreading each others' work (and the threat of The Editor's reprimand). Authors received proofs that had been drastically revised. Whether to take in authors' changes was up to the technical editor, who contacted the author only in cases of extreme difficulty. "Man proposes, God disposes" was the modus operandi.

The 21st century

In 2005, the computer is ubiquitous at the *BMJ*, along with email - and just about everyone involved in putting the journal together mixes and mingles in an open-plan office. Technical editors no longer proofread; freelance proofreaders come into the office (and they read on paper, not on screen). Half the technical editors are freelance; all have had intensive training in *BMJ* style. Paste-up of pages is a thing of the past, and typesetting - once a matter of retyping by anonymous operators in Bedford, with a one-armed messenger taking "the bag" of copy and proofs back and forth - is now given to Colin, Malcolm, Gordon, and Clinton. Authors no longer submit three copies, double-spaced, when they send their articles for consideration - submission and notification of acceptance is done on line, but "the hanging committee" still sits around a table every week, selecting papers for publication. Communication with authors is usually by email - and there is much, much more of it - but because of the steps in the reviewing and editing processes, notification of acceptance and arrival of proofs are not necessarily quicker.

New sections have been added to the print journal, starting with News, which now occupies six and sometimes eight pages an issue. It has its own set of editing requirements and conventions, and of course must be prepared as near to press day as possible. Commentaries on papers are common now, commissioned from experts and (to avoid unpleasant surprises) sent to the paper's authors along with their proofs. New sections have been added; entire new publications have arisen. The careers supplement (*bmj-careers.com*), with articles of interest to doctors scanning the job advertisements, is constantly enlarging its editorial content, and the student *BMJ* was launched 10 years ago; it appears monthly and contains a mixture of articles from the *BMJ* and its own material relevant to medical students.

The freedom of the web

With computers and the internet came *bmj.com* - a quantum leap not just in accessibility but, for us, in the different processes needed for preparing material and the new kinds of material it made possible. Access to *bmj.com* was free from its inception in 1995 [2] (full text arrived in 1998) until January 2005. Now the personal subscription is

The Write Stuff

Editing at the *BMJ*

£ 20 (\$37, €30) a year, which gives access to the previous 52 weeks of the journal. Everyone currently has free access to all content prior to that, all research papers, and the current week's journal, and Rapid Responses, the electronic letters page [3].

For reports of research, the web's possibilities led first to ELPS (electronic long, paper short), whereby two versions of an article are prepared, a detailed one for the web and an abridgement for print. Later we jumped on the "pre-publication" bandwagon and now post articles on *bmj.com* as soon as they've been edited, checked by authors, and proof-read. The difficulty of making changes to Online First articles once they've been posted on *bmj.com* makes it even more important for authors to check their proofs carefully.

The workload in other sections of the journal, not just the research papers, has increased - "web extras" sometimes are posted as supplied by author (long obituaries, statistical appendices, extra references, for example) and sometimes are carefully edited (news items). Deadlines and timing have always been important, but with electronic publication, timeliness becomes more of an issue.

"Five hours of editing ..."

On a good day, technical editors may actually spend 5 hours doing "real editing" - the problem solving involved in making the paper clear, concise, and correct. The main task of the technical editor, along with correcting spelling and grammar, may seem to be "imposing house style", but in editing we are really aiming at something deeper - namely, making articles understandable by non-specialists and foreign readers [4]. Editing requires not just a knowledge of grammar and punctuation, but a level of critical analysis. The technical editor is the person who will read the paper most carefully.

"... and 2 hours of ..."

Then what do we do in the remainder of the work day? Processing and administration, mainly, which includes more and more emails. Nowadays technical editors have a lot of communication with authors - during editing if a major question arises, such as numbers not being supplied along with percentages; while sending proofs (which go as Word files; authors use Track Changes for amendments); on queries still remaining after proof stage; about the date of Online First publication; and sometimes about corrections. All this communication is definitely a good thing for both editors and authors - they can work together, exercising the fine art of compromise. Much more guidance is available for authors (*bmj.com/advice*) and the feedback during the review process has also been augmented [5]. The drive towards transparency [6] has resulted in the addition of contributors [7], detailing who did what in the research and writing the paper, the declaration of competing interests [8], and statements regarding ethical approval.

Production changes

The *BMJ* certainly looks different than it did 160, or even 20, years ago. Late last century it was properly redesigned, rather than left to evolve [9]. The sedate blue cover with its list of contents has been replaced by attention-grabbing photos and teasing tag lines. Fitting new features into the design, along with a typesetting system that uses tagging

The Write Stuff

Editing at the BMJ

to put elements within articles into the design of the page, makes new challenges for editors and brings them into close contact with IT specialists. Any new section has either to be modelled on an existing one or to be designed from scratch and new tags and conversions developed. The elements needed include article identification lines, DOIs, titles, authors, addresses, acceptance dates, levels of headings, types of boxes, pull quotes, captions, references. As the numbers of sections proliferate, each with its own tagging quirks, confusion and error lurk just around the corner, so we've developed something that didn't exist 20 years ago - a set of written procedures that threatens to take over the style book in length and complexity.

Although technology has made much possible in terms of production, we're still using pencil-and-paper methods to track editing and proofing - but we're developing a content management system to manage workflow of accepted articles (in much the same way that our electronic submission system BenchPress manages articles). This will of course mean yet another adaptation to new processes. But still we glide on, serene as a swan ... all the action is hidden below the surface.

When the content management system kicks in, we'll have gone full circle to something resembling galley proofs. The aim of the system is to produce "stable copy" which can then be formatted for web, print, or republication elsewhere. This edited, checked, read neo-galley can be published on the web (as soon as ready) or gathered into an issue for publication in print, with proofreaders checking at this stage for layout (word breaks, spacing in tables, placement of figures, etc).

And the future?

The economics of journal production seem to be coming to the fore – not just the move to charge for access to some sections of *bmj.com*, but other developments that are common throughout publishing. One initiative at the *BMJ* is out-of-office "flexible workers" who work from home 3 or 4 days a week. This benefits workers by cutting out their commuting time, but a greater benefit is that it reduces the need for expensive inner-London working space. We've experienced our fair share of exercises to save money, run by expensive consultants, and new salary scales (adjusted downwards). Journals are becoming more and more market driven and their marketing departments often have the draconian final say, over-riding experienced editors. Outsourcing of aspects of production is becoming a reality, such as "preprocessing" of articles (electronic clean-up and tagging) in China. At the time of writing, we're awaiting the appointment of a new editor. Meanwhile, emails and urgency have eaten up what used to be the lunch hour.

The five most common editing changes at *BMJ*

- Making the antecedent of pronouns clear: what does "it" or "they" or "this" actually refer to?
- Changing passive verbs to active verbs
- Providing the missing comma in a pair (e.g. in: Dr Smith former editor of the *BMJ*, said...)
- Removing unnecessary words ("it is possible that" is better expressed as "may")
- Making data consistent in the paper (e.g. percentage was given in abstract and number in text - and they didn't correspond)

Margaret Cooter

Managing technical editor,
BMJ, London
mcooter@bmj.com

References

1. Cooter M. Countdown to the *BMJ*. *BMJ* 1991;303:1615-9.
2. Delamothe T. *BMJ* on the internet. *BMJ* 1995;310:1343-4. (<http://bmj.com/cgi/content/full/310/6991/1343>)
3. Editor's choice. Rapid responses and the death of the editor's arts. *BMJ* 1999;318(9 January). (<http://bmj.com/cgi/content/full/318/7176/0>)
4. Cooter M. Putting on the style. *BMJ* 1999;319:1592. (<http://bmj.com/cgi/content/full/319/7225/1592>)
5. Smith R. Opening up *BMJ* peer review. *BMJ* 1999;318:4-5. (<http://bmj.com/cgi/content/full/318/7175/4>)
6. Smith R. Beyond conflict of interest. *BMJ* 1998;317:291-2. (<http://bmj.com/cgi/content/full/317/7154/291>)
7. Smith R. Authorship is dying: long live contributorship. *BMJ* 1997;315:696. (<http://bmj.com/cgi/content/full/315/7110/696>)
8. Smith R. Making progress with competing interests. *BMJ* 2002;325:1375-6. (<http://bmj.com/cgi/content/full/325/7377/1375>)
9. Delamothe T, Smith R. Redesigning the journal: having your say. *BMJ* 1996;312:232. (<http://bmj.com/cgi/content/full/312/7025/232>)

Help for medical writers. How to tell the difference between male and female medical writers

This is not one of those jokes. Sometimes it is hard to tell whether a medical writer is male or female. A lot of our correspondence is by email with people we have never met. Maybe hundreds of emails are exchanged before one day you need to know whether your correspondent is male or female, perhaps merely to report what he or she has told you to someone else. In such a report it might be monotonous to continually state Sandy (or Terry) said this, Sandy said that. The occasional pronoun might lighten the text.

As usual help is at hand in the Internet. Next time you're perplexed just enter a block of your correspondent's text onto Gender Genie at www.bookblog.net/gender/genie.html. This site analyses whether the author of text is male or female. The analysis is based on research suggesting that generally women tend to write in a more personal, "involved" style and men in a more "informational" style".