Lean and Mean

I’ve just returned from a week-long writing workshop in Vermont, and the instructor’s words are still fresh in my ear. “Make it lean and mean”, he said of our writing, “Make every word justify its existence.”

I thought of how often in my role as editor, lulled by the familiarity of certain phrases or dulled by the drone of Med-speak, I have failed to delete unnecessary words from manuscripts. How many sentences have I let stand that began, “It has been shown that” or “Evidence from a number of studies clearly demonstrates” when perfectly good reference citations made such phrases mere throat-clearing? These do-nothing words can occur in mid-sentence as well:

These are the only agents that have been shown to heal erosive esophagitis (15, 16).

Bethanechol and metoclopramide are reported to be minimally effective when used as solitary agents (27).

The word observed can often be eliminated to good effect. It may appear unnecessarily dozens of times in a manuscript, taking up valuable space and interfering with the natural flow of sentences:

One explanation for the persistent gap in infant mortality observed between blacks and whites in our study . . .

Some extra words are not only redundant but silly: “fatal adverse outcomes”, for example. My favorite target in this category is the virtually universal “small [or large] sample size”, as in “The difference in conclusions can be explained by the use of small sample sizes.” Why not simply “small samples”?

A similar example: “Laparoscopic resection . . . may result in . . . a shorter duration of hospitalization.”

A sentence beginning, “The largest magnitude of risk reduction occurred between the lowest and the second lowest quintile” obviously needs pruning to read, “The largest reduction in risk . . . .”

Abstracts particularly cry out for spareness. I recall one that, before editing, referred to “patients with a pathologic lesion of the small intestine consistent with celiac sprue”. An exasperated editor slashed that to a nonsense “patients with celiac sprue”, adding the marginal comment “Puh-leeze!”

The purpose of clearing out the verbal underbrush is not so much to save space — though that can be important, too — as to clarify the writing by simplifying it. With clarity and economy comes speed of reading, important to any publication aimed at busy professionals.

Before: In situations where a sudden increase in reported cases was noted . . .

After: When there was a sudden increase in reported cases . . .

Before: Acetaminophen was relatively ineffective in reducing temperature in this population as compared with ibuprofen.

After: Acetaminophen was less effective than ibuprofen in reducing temperature in this population.

An already long and tortuous sentence in one manuscript ended with this phrase: “to increase the amount of time spent in healthier and higher quality of life health states”. After struggling for some moments to crack this cipher, the manuscript editor translated it as “to increase the time during which the patient feels better”. My workshop teacher would have approved.

The WordWatcher welcomes your comments and suggestions. Recently retired from the New England Journal of Medicine, she can be reached by mail: Lorraine Loviglio, The WordWatcher, 1347 Sudbury Road, Concord MA 01742; or e-mail: lovigli0@ma.ultranet.com.
right review with reference check?
- Will you also charge for consultation time (for example, about how to draft a response to a journal’s reviewer’s comments or convert documents using different platforms)?
- Do you need a business plan for the transition with some supporting documentation (for example, estimate forms stating charges for editorial services with a client signature line)?
- How can you best communicate the new policy to existing client-authors so that they will plan to include requests for editorial services in their grant proposals?

**Solutions**

(Note: The following solutions come from experienced editors representing a range of settings. The first is from the director of a long-standing editorial service at a private clinical institution, the second from an experienced editor-physician who recently established an editorial service at an academic research institute, and the third from a well-established freelance editorial consultant. Additional responses to the question are invited; please submit them as noted at the end of this column.)

Setting a fee. Once a decision is made to charge for your editorial service, the first step is to establish a fee. We decided on an hourly rate because it seemed less likely to penalize better writers, whose manuscripts take less time. An hourly rate also encourages authors to supply us with electronic copy, which can be easier to correct and thus faster to process. When an institution finds it desirable to continue supporting the editorial service to any extent, an hourly fee based on a unit of time can cover salary and benefits or overhead.

Defining gratis services. Continuing to provide authors with some free editorial hours or services can ease the transition to a fee-for-service program. When we instituted our “chargeback” program at The Menninger Clinic in 1991, clinicians were given 5 free hours of editorial support over each of the next 3 years. Today, we still provide at no charge some small services, such as phone or e-mail responses to grammar questions. In addition, we continue to assist residents, fellows, and trainees in the Karl Menninger School of Psychiatry and Mental Health Sciences at no charge and to conduct low-cost writing workshops and seminars.

Selling externally. Although selling our editorial service externally was tempting, we decided that the problems (such as promotion, conflicting demands, and billing) outweighed potential benefits.

Delineating basic services. To respond to authors’ needs better, we have developed a fairly definitive list of all the potential projects our editorial service is willing and able to handle. Some umbrella tasks have been subdivided into smaller tasks; for example, providing assistance on a book proposal might require input on formulating the proposal and selecting a publisher as well as on editorial review of the sample chapter, outline, curriculum vitae, and cover letter. For the tasks that we exclude (such as editing of dissertations and book indexing), we refer authors to freelance editors and writers.

Implementation plan. Processing a recharge plan through management can facilitate its implementation. Users of our service were polled on whether they found it helpful and on whether they or their program would pay for it. Other institutions were also surveyed. As the change was instituted, there was grumbling but little opposition, partly because of the precedent set by other departments (for example, our professional library and audiovisual services).

Off-line requirements. At first, we relied on a preprinted paper request form that required the responsible author to detail the work (such as deadline and purpose). A time estimate was then forwarded with the manuscript to that author’s administrator for a decision about whether to pay for the assistance. Dated signatures were required at all 3 stages. This procedure often slowed work on time-sensitive projects.

The current process. With the advent of an institutionwide e-mail system and management’s emphasis on reducing paperwork, we rely increasingly on fairly informal written requests, estimates, and approvals. Authors who are denied institutional support must pay personally. Some administrators give blanket approval for a set number of hours for specific clinicians or programs, and the administrators are notified when the maximum is reached. They also are notified when work on a project requires more time than estimated or when an author adds to the job or otherwise greatly changes its focus. Any increase in the rate is announced only to administrators, who process it with program directors; individual clinicians are simply informed of the rate when given an estimate. If the rate goes up in the middle of a project (lengthy multipart projects, such as books, excluded), the finished work is billed at the old rate. The recharge system requires us to instruct the business office to transfer funds for approved and completed work. Supporting documentation is sent with each transfer request, and all involved personnel are copied.

Ways to improve a recharge system.
1. Survey other editorial services to direct your own program’s development and gain support for how you structure it.
2. Process the recharge system through channels; don’t bear the bad news alone.
3. Compile an exhaustive detailed list of work that you can and will do.
4. Specify exactly what work you will not or cannot do (for example, indirectly related projects, such as dissertation proposals or book indexing).
5. Itemize any assistance that is offered at no cost (for example, telephone or e-mail grammar questions or inquiries about your editorial services).
6. Negotiate blanket approvals for heavy individual or departmental users.
7. Keep paperwork to a minimum.)
8. Have a plan in place for dealing with problem situations: a) work is approved but for less time or money than it turns out to cost; b) author adds to job after it is begun (for example, changes publishing outlet after manuscript has been reformatted); c) author insists that verbal approval has been given him or her.
9. Beware of the cost of your own learning period when drafted into helping with projects that are outside your expertise.
10. Keep up with your recharges; do them weekly, monthly, or quarterly.
11. Be prepared to deal with external requests for your service, especially from former staff members.
12. Adjust your fees periodically.
13. Develop referral lists of professional associations (such as Council of Biology Editors, Board of Editors in the Life Sciences, American Medical Writers Association, and Society for Technical Communication), external editorial consultants, and independent freelancers.

Benefits. Despite some fear that recharging would suppress writing, that has not been the case. One unexpected benefit is that it has served as a gatekeeper to screen out less rigorous research. Staff members now weigh whether their writing is worth the cost of editorial support, so they submit fewer “old” papers that have been rejected multiple times. Another benefit is continued existence of a centrally managed thus consistent editorial policy, quality standard, and style for published articles emanating from our institution.

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Conduct a needs assessment. The choices of what to offer in an editorial-service department are extensive, and conducting a needs assessment by interviewing the users can be indispensable. We discovered that what investigators really wanted was access to medical writers to help with drafting a manuscript and, more often, to incorporate revisions on manuscripts after peer review. The needs assessment is a communication strategy that allows promoting development of the editorial-service department and building expectations for future services. We found that the clinical researchers whom we interviewed became our biggest allies when we went to seek funding.

Consider a credit system. One of the innovative funding systems we heard about was based on the concept of a credit system. Each department (or clinical investigator) is given a particular amount of editorial-services “credit” at the start of each year according to the baseline budgeted for editorial services within the overall clinical-research budget. Once this credit is used, each service is charged back to the requesting researcher or department. This system offsets the disadvantages of a free service (which can encourage trivial use or be taken for granted) while encouraging equal access to the service for all researchers and preventing individual researchers from using a disproportionate share. If researchers find themselves consistently charged for editorial services at the end of the year, this might be a sign to increase the overall budget. The disadvantage of the system is that every service must be tracked financially so that departments know when their credit is used up; this adds a layer of administrative duties to manage.

Explore alternative funding sources. Alternative sources of funding, such as pharmaceutical support or fund-raising activities, should be considered. People like contributing to specific projects, such as establishment of a new service. Because we are just starting up, for example, we will be highlighted as an innovation in a telethon fund-raising event. We hope this event will cover all our startup costs (purchase of office furniture, computers, reference sources, and so on).

Prepare a business plan. A business plan, especially if prepared with assistance of an objective, outside person who has business expertise, can clarify what needs to be done, how, and by when and might engender new ideas that could improve efficiency, services, or promotional activities. A business plan offers a comprehensive document that can become a focus for administrative “buy-in”. It lends structure to changes and promotes an organized project-management approach. The alternative, a series of meetings and internal memos, might make it difficult to ascertain later what was agreed on. A business plan sets up clear expectations and timelines, so that evaluating changes becomes more feasible.

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As an independent consultant, I prefer to bill for services hourly. I determine the hourly rate according to my needs and the usual market rates for someone of my experience. I use the same hourly rate for all tasks rather than different rates for different tasks. Less demanding tasks take less time and cost less, and the converse is true, so clients need not be concerned about being overcharged for simpler tasks.

I charge for everything: initial interview, consultation, editing, and so on. I do not do graphics or production (other than rough drawings), but one might want to charge other than hourly for that aspect only—perhaps by the piece or production-work component. If someone asked me for graphics or production, I would subcontract these and bill the subcontractor’s fee as overhead. I do not charge overhead for US telephone calls, copying, or mileage (I generally work at home, so my only mileage is for attending interviews), because these charges are small (and are business tax deductions anyway).

This method of charging a single hourly rate avoids consideration of the many variables involved in editing a manuscript. If one were to charge a flat rate for the whole job, one would need to determine a rate for each component and put together a rate sheet from which the client could select compo-
Trawling Cyberspace

Jobs for Biology Editors

Interested in a new job? Or in learning your worth on the marketplace? Or perhaps in hiring an editor? If so, take a look at some of the job sites on the Web, starting with Safenet’s Job Opportunities (1), a composite site of links to federal registers, state and local government job sites, and private-sector job opportunities. Sponsored by the US Department of Labor, this site is part of the larger Safenet site that seeks to provide opportunities for federal employees in a time of downsizing. Some of the links are surprisingly interesting and offer search capabilities for location, profession, and salary and an opportunity to place your resume information and then forward that information to potential employers.

Under “Newspaper Want-Ads” at the Safenet site, the job listings from the previous 3 Sundays are linked for the following newspapers: Houston Chronicle, Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, Washington Post, Boston Globe, San Francisco Chronicle and San Francisco Examiner (The Gate), Philadelphia Inquirer (TriClassifieds), The News & Observer (Raleigh-Durham), San Jose Mercury News, and The Seattle Times. The timeliness of the pieces varies. On 14 June, I could not get the 14 June Boston Globe ads. I was able to obtain the 14 June ads for the Anchorage Daily News, however, by going to the search box at the Alta Vista search engine and typing the name of the newspaper within quotation marks.

The Safenet newspaper ads can be searched by job categories, including administrative, arts/humanities, computer education, engineering/science, financial, health /medical, marketing/sales, professional, management, trade/services, and other with subcategories under each. I found the papers to be far more readable on screen than in their printed versions. The print is larger and the subcategories smaller.

Universities offer job sites as well. At the Duke University site for international job resources (2), I found O-Hayo Sensei, The