

EASE-Forum Digest: March to June 2011

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Inconsistencies between authors' instructions and printed articles

Preparing manuscripts is becoming ever more time consuming as journals make increasing demands in their instructions to authors in an attempt to decrease their in-house workload. Tom Lang and Rhana Pike intimated that journals are now essentially "outsourcing" copyediting to authors.

Too many reference list styles?

Karen Shashok asked if authors should follow the instructions to authors or the printed article where there are inconsistencies between a journal's instructions and its printed articles. Persuading authors to change, for example, a reference list to name the first six authors followed by et al as required by the instructions, could be difficult when articles that list only the first three authors appear in the journal. The task is pointless, too, because the number of authors named does not affect the retrievability of the referenced paper. However, some journals warn that they will reject a manuscript without review if it does not comply with their instructions. These journals in particular should ensure consistency between their instructions and printed articles.

Respondents favoured following the journal instructions. Angela Turner pointed out that instructions on the web can be updated quickly. Consequently even within a single issue of her journal *Animal Behaviour* some published articles would be in the old style and some in the new style. Another reason for discrepancy could be that external copy editors who were not used regularly overlooked minor details like the number of authors before et al. She did, however, think it unfair to be strict about following guidelines on submission and suggested that when requesting revision journals could send recently updated instructions to the authors. This idea appealed to Tom because final formatting need not be done until final acceptance, and acceptance could be made contingent on good formatting, which would save time and probably result in better formatting, as poorly formatted manuscripts could still be rejected.

Angela felt that, in any event, authors should be made aware that reference management software should be used only with reference to the journal's instructions. Karen, however, noted the plight of authors in developing countries, who may have poor access to the latest updates to reference management software, so delays between the change in a journal's rules, the availability of a new filter for the reference management software, and the time when authors could download the updates might be considerable.

Sylwia Ufnalska mentioned that in the EASE guidelines for authors and translators she had prepared (http://www.ease.org.uk/pdfguidelines/EASE_Guidelines-June2011c.pdf) the list of references was combined with suggestions for further reading. For this reason the list could not be formatted in Vancouver style (http://www.nlm.nih.gov/bsd/uniform_requirements.html), which is predominant in biomedical journals and favoured by the ICMJE guidelines. (Adjustments to the Vancouver style are common, exacerbating variations between journals.) Consequently, she used the name-year system and alphabetical order, which she felt was both reader-friendly and author-friendly (as no special software is needed to make any changes). She suggested that this sensible system could be adopted by non-medical journals.

The call for a one-style system for references made by Marge Berer prompted Maeve O'Connor to recollect discussion of this topic at a workshop held by ELSE (EASE's predecessor) in 1978. The heated discussions between representatives from the earth sciences, life sciences, chemistry, biochemistry, physics, and engineering made it clear that they could never agree on a single style – and the social sciences and humanities were not even amongst the crowd.

Jim Hartley (professor of psychology) also lamented the impossibility of reaching agreement on one style. He had identified four major groupings, with variations within each: the APA/Harvard style, the MLA style, the Vancouver style, and the IEEE style. He had also seen that the 2007 Endnote computer-based system for referencing included "more than 2,300 predefined bibliographic styles for leading journals". He formatted his articles in the two styles common in psychology – the APA and the MLA styles – to avoid having to look up authors' names again if he needed to resubmit to another journal.

Rather than endless attempts to agree a single style, Lorna O'Brien considered it made more sense to use technology to resolve the problems. Her account of production technology questions what all the fuss is about. She said that in modern journal production, input references (author's file) are converted to structured xml and the output (proof) can then be whatever is required for a particular journal. The structured xml is exactly the same regardless of the input or output style. This means that authors can prepare their references in a generic style that could be the same for every paper they produce, and journals will output in their own style from the xml. All authors' names should be given in the original submission and therefore in the xml, and the journal could then reduce the number they use as required.

Bold and italics in reference lists

Another part of the reference discussion focused on the bold and italic type used in some reference lists. Karen Shashok wondered why some journals embellish the Vancouver style with italics for journal titles and boldface for the volume number. The explanation offered by Andrew

Davis was that each journal or “stable” of journals wanted to create a distinct market image. This justification was greeted with scepticism by Norman Grossblatt as these styles had been around for a long time. More likely, individuals in editorial offices had simply thought it looked better, and once a format is chosen it is difficult to change.

David FitzSimons contended that the use of boldface and italics had value. Bold makes the volume number clear, and italics distinguish a series title. Given the ease of marking typefaces, why shouldn't references be enriched with typographical aids for the reader? Liz Wager had a different theory for the origin of such embellishments: putting references into house style had forced copyeditors in the old days to check that all the elements were in place; automatic electronic formatting has now made the task obsolete. Also, where journals use CrossRef/doi, errors in references will be picked up as the links do not work if details of the references are incorrect. Consequently Liz believed that journals' insistence on their own style was obsolete too.

A word of caution came from Mary Ellen Kerans. She warned that authors still needed to manually check references. Authors with multiple or compound surnames in particular are at the mercy of the software. Marge added that the use of different bibliographic software caused problems. She has found that her copyediting of references is often “uncorrected” by the author's automated software in the manuscripts that authors return to her. Either she has to ask the authors to remove the references from their software so as to keep them corrected or she has to copyedit them again.

Increasing abstract length

Abstracts were another example of a major second area of discrepancy given by Karen. Here the discussion veered to abstract length. Mary Ellen reported that PubMed no longer truncates abstracts at 250 words. Liz posted the URL which states that the limit on Medline abstracts is 10,000 characters: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/bsd/mms/medlineelements.html#ab>.

Jim Hartley gave journals published by the American Psychological Association (APA) as an example of journals increasing the lengths of their abstracts. The *APA Handbook's* 5th edition (2001) stated that abstracts should not exceed 120 words, whereas the 6th edition (2010) stated that word limits vary from journal to journal (in the APA stable) and typically range from 150 to 250 words.

Use of abstracts to assess research validity?

Tom Lang reflected that journals seem to forget that the purpose of an abstract is only to help readers decide whether to read the full article. Nowadays many journals and even the CONSORT group seemed to want the abstract to help readers assess the validity of the research, which is an entirely different purpose. Tom contended that, rather than subverting the established purpose of the abstract, a new form with a new name and requirements should be invented if indeed there was a need for a communication device that would allow readers to assess the validity of the

research without reading the full article. Liz Wager agreed in theory but pointed out that it is known that many people read only the abstract, and in some parts of the world only the abstract is available to doctors. Even in the developed world, doctors working outside academic centres did not have access to the full text for many papers and therefore relied on abstracts. In her view, until open access to full text is available to all, or doctors can be persuaded to read the full text, abstracts should be as informative as possible. While the example Tom had given of a journal requiring inclusion of institution review board approval and the like in the abstract was preposterous and such things were not essential for judging the validity of a study, requesting CONSORT items was, Liz thought, more reasonable.

Angela Turner mentioned that her journal's publishers, Elsevier, were introducing a very short summary of the paper (about 3-5 bullet points, each about 20 words long) called “Highlights” to be included in tables of contents, rather than with the paper itself. She saw the advantages but wondered whether it would result in people citing papers on the basis of these mini-abstracts, without reading the full abstract – let alone the full paper!

Conclusion

Karen Shashok set out her conclusion to this discussion. Instructions are becoming ridiculously long and detailed and often involve a lot of copyediting, technical editing, and layout work (especially for figures and tables) that many authors may be less than ideally equipped to comply with. Rhana Pike made a good additional point in asking journals to abandon requirements for publication-quality graphs on submission. This was unnecessary work and expense for the authors, when an unsized pdf should be enough.

The challenges faced by authors increase the frequency of discrepancies between instructions and what actually appears in the published articles. Requiring authors to spend scarce resources complying with detailed instructions, and then not checking or correcting compliance in house, sends the message that compliance is not important.

While consistency and neatness are nice to have so as to avoid distracting readers, the purpose of listing the references is for readers to be able to obtain the papers, for which all they needed was a doi. Therefore, provided that a reference list uses one style consistently, it may be more efficient for journals to allow the author's list to stand, rather than insisting that money, brains, and time are used to convert back and forth between different styles, such as three or six authors' names before et al.

Unsolicited authorship

Should editors worry about co-authors being added to papers without their knowledge, a practice that Will Hughes perceived as rare but increasing? He thought authors probably add highly cited scientists to boost their paper's citations and make them more authoritative. Publishers avoid liability by ensuring that corresponding authors sign a declaration that all authors are aware of the paper and are validly listed as co-authors. In Will's view this did not solve the problem, and he wondered if journals should obtain a

declaration from each author. Arjan Polderman's journal, *Pharmaceutisch Weekblad*, gets all authors to sign such a declaration after the paper is accepted for publication. Angharad Hills reported that the Geographical Society Publishing house uses an online submission system (AllenTrack) that has a facility for notifying all authors when a decision is made, but they did not follow up emails that bounced back. If unsolicited authorship was on the increase, she felt they should become more diligent.

Liz pointed out that COPE has a flowchart (http://www.publicationethics.org/files/u2/04A_Author_Add_Submitted.pdf) that covers the situation where a new author is added *after* the manuscript has been submitted to a journal. In this case the editor should seek an explanation for the addition.

Does anyone understand the ICMJE authorship criteria?

The discussion on unsolicited authorship took a turn to become an analysis of the ICMJE authorship guidelines (http://www.icmje.org/ethical_1author.html). Elisabeth Heseltine's interpretation was that to meet these requirements a new author would have had to have been involved not only in revising that paper but also in the conception and design of the study or analysis and interpretation of it, both of which are unlikely to take place after the manuscript had been submitted to the journal. The guidelines state: "Authorship credit should be based on 1) substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; 2) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and 3) final approval of the version to be published. Authors should meet conditions 1, 2, and 3."

Elisabeth thought the guidelines were designed to guard against people qualifying for authorship through merely making suggestions for changes to the draft paper. Liz viewed "interpretation" as giving considerable latitude. For example, an author's involvement in design and conception might not have initially been substantial enough to qualify them for authorship but the author's contribution to revision might be regarded as "interpretation" and be such as to qualify for authorship. She thought it would be helpful if journals' instructions explained authorship criteria.

Mary Ellen read the guidelines as meaning the conception and design criteria were one possible contribution and revising the manuscript was another. How then, wondered Elisabeth, should the statement that "Authors should meet conditions 1, 2, and 3" be interpreted? Mary Ellen admitted to doubts about the "and" in the three-point list but the overall statement included "An author must take responsibility for at least one component of the work, should be able to identify who is responsible for each other component, and should ideally be confident in their co-authors' ability and integrity." She understood this as meaning that all three of those criteria could make a person eligible. Elisabeth thought the sentence indicated that to be an author a person must take responsibility for at least one component of the work, which she considered to be the

study, and must also have fulfilled the other two criteria. Mary Ellen understood "work" to include all of the work from conception to proofreading, and no single author would do all of the work but could keep an eye on who was responsible for what.

Marcin Kozak and Andrew Davis firmly believed it was not practical that authors should have to meet all three criteria, which would leave some papers without any authors; one of the three criteria should be sufficient.

Time for refereeing

What is a reasonable time to allow for reviewers to respond to invitations to review? Will Hughes' journal *Construction Management and Economics* sends manuscripts to four reviewers with reminders three and five days after sending the invitation and cancels the request on the seventh day if reviewers do not respond. It allows 14 days for the review. Some reviewers had complained that this was too tight. Marcin thought four weeks was more reasonable as time could be needed to reflect on a paper and reviewers might have a number of papers to review at any given time. He also thought four reviewers were too many for authors to contend with, as reviewers' views can vary, leaving the authors in a predicament as to which opposing suggestion to comply with. Will accepted these points but thought it better for a reviewer to decline an invitation than to keep editors waiting. The journals that Diana Epstein manages in the ophthalmology field allow 21 days for reviewers to return their comments. They send to two reviewers, and to a third if their opinions conflict. Liz Wager thought two or three reviewers were more usual in medicine, and most medical journals expect reviewers to return their reviews in 10-14 days. *Animal Behaviour* allows referees 14 days. They rely on two reviewers and seek a quick third review from the editorial board in cases of conflict. Their main problem was to get reviewers to accept the invitation.

A survey conducted by Elsevier between 2005 and 2008 found that the average time to review was 16 days. Those who agreed to review were agreeing faster, within 3.9 days in 2008 compared with 5.2 in 2005, but the number agreeing was declining by 1% a year.

Jim Hartley advocated an auction system called Peer Choice, which was being tested by the journal *Chemical Physics Letters*. Abstracts of manuscripts are sent to a panel of reviewers with the authors' names withheld. The panellists email the editor to say which manuscripts they would like to review, and the editor allocates to the first bidders. In Jim's experience the system works well.

Elise Langdon-Neuner (compiler)

langdoe@baxter.com

Discussion initiators

Karen Shashok: kshashok@kshashok.com

Will Hughes: w.p.hughes@reading.ac.uk

Angela Turner: Angela.Turner@nottingham.ac.uk