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Who should proof my paper?

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Abstract

This column is intended to address the kinds of knotty problems and dilemmas with which many scholars grapple in studying health professions education. In this article, the authors address the challenges in proofreading a manuscript. Emerging researchers might think that someone in the production team will catch any errors. This may not always be the case. We emphasize the importance of guiding mentees to take the process of preparing a manuscript for submission seriously.

A junior faculty member whom you are mentoring is poised to submit an article. You ask them if they have looked it over to make sure it was appropriately formatted according to the journal requirements. They say, “Oh, everything is fine. I used a reference manager to insert all my references and the grammar checker, so I am OK. If not, the editor will tell me.” You pause and think about an article you read recently where a typographical error existed, “discourse analysis.” It made you aware that, despite all the tools we have, authors need to take full ownership of preparing and carefully reviewing manuscripts for submission, and not depend on journals having a robust copy-editing process. This made you think about how to set expectations with your mentee. These expectations could be divided into formatting, grammar, and references. These are areas we often spot as being challenging in submissions to this journal.

Format: One piece of advice is to have your mentee develop a checklist that they are going to follow for their submission. Some journals provide general guidance and others give a specific checklist. AHSE’s guidelines, which can be found here: <https://link.springer.com/journal/10459/submission-guidelines>, include detailed descriptions from which a checklist could be developed. We recognize when authors have not reviewed the guidelines since references are not in the right format and articles have layouts and headers not used in the journal. This implies that AHSE is not a journal with which they are familiar and may even suggest to the editors that the paper was formatted for submission to another journal. This swings back to a comment we made in an earlier commentary in this series: “there is no doubt that submitting manuscripts which do not adhere to the journal format or are poorly written can irritate the EiC and tip the balance (unfavourably)” (Cleland, et al., 2023). Fortunately, due to open access, even individuals lacking access to the subscription version of this journal can now easily review AHSE articles to familiarize themselves with the format.

Grammar: Artificial Intelligence (AI) has provided authors with a variety of tools to help with their writing. These can help to level the writing playing field for many authors, particular those for whom English is not their first language. However, one cannot use AI tools without taking responsibility for proofreading. A personal example comes from proofreading a paper for a family member. There was no indication, such as a squiggling red line, of any misspelling. However, I paused when

I found “defecating” in the middle of a business document. The writer had intended to use the word “deficient”. AI does not always revise to a correct choice.

References: Every journal will urge its authors to check their references since their accuracy is their responsibility. Interestingly, a colleague went to find this reference cited in a 2024 health professions education article: Cuyvers K, Donche V, Van den Bossche P. Unravelling the process of self-regulated learning of medical specialists in the clinical environment. *JAMA*. 2021;33(5):375-400. doi:10.1108/JWL-09-2020-0151. Our colleague paused thinking this was an interesting topic for the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA). However, it was not from JAMA. Fortunately, this reference had the DOI (Digital Object Identifier) allowing the article to be retrieved. Cuyvers and colleagues had published their article in the Journal of Workplace Learning, the name of which did not remotely resemble JAMA. How does this happen? We are not sure, but it certainly argues a cautionary tale of how to use reference managers. In terms of references, closely proofing them, make sure they are in the format of the journal (APA for AHSE), and we also advise checking all DOIs. This takes time, yes, but it must be done. Even when you are very familiar with a body of work it is easy to make mistakes, whether referencing manually or using a reference manager.

Returning to our original question of ‘who should proof the paper?’, all authors must review a final draft of an article to meet the criteria for authorship. However, experience has taught us that many of our colleagues typically review a near-final draft paper for the “science” (or the “social science”), not the precision of the grammar, format, and references. Typically, the responsibility of a close proofreading belongs to the first author ... except the first author has almost always also led on the writing, and it is extremely difficult for anyone to see their own errors when they are very close to a manuscript. For example, one of us (JC) remembers proofreading her doctoral thesis again and again (and again!), only to be asked by her external examiner if she had really meant to talk about the “morality” of her animals rather than their mortality.

Reading the manuscript over provides time to contemplate Lingard’s advice of “killing your darlings” (Lingard and Driessen, 2023) in terms of deleting unnecessary language. Authors are very invested in communicating all that they

have learned and, consequently, fail the most critical goal of keeping the writing simple. We would add that as authors it often is hard to recognize what has actually been written, rather than what you thought you wrote.

We would advise several strategies prior to submission to pass the proofreading test. Resist the temptation to submit your manuscript immediately. Let it rest and breathe (like a good wine). Go back to it after a couple of weeks when you have a little cognitive distance - long enough to allow your brain to forget what you think you wrote - and no distractions. Then print out and go through your manuscript line by line or read it aloud. These are great ways to focus your attention on punctuation, grammar, and spelling as well as recognizing sentences that are too complex and wordy. Another handy hint is to make the manuscript look different before you proofread it, to trick your brain into thinking it is reading something unfamiliar. This can be as simple as changing the text to a font you rarely use so that your brain sees this as a new text.

If you are not confident with your grasp of the basic rules of grammar and punctuation, there are two other techniques you might use. One is to ask a 'critical friend' or colleague, someone whose precision of writing you admire. We have all proofread and provided feedback on colleagues' manuscripts, learning much in the process. The second is to hire a copy editor whose expertise is attention to detail. Bringing in a professional can be particularly helpful if you are writing in a language other than your first language or lack experience in manuscript writing. You can learn a lot from a copy editor.

In conclusion, even the most accomplished writers struggle to proof their own work. However, it is a skill that improves with practice. Embrace it as an opportunity to make your writing the best it can be. Editing is the bridge between your research and the final, polished work that will resonate with readers.

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