

THE SCIENCE OF COPYEDITING: AN ANALYSIS OF REVISION RATES IN ISEC SUBMISSIONS

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Copyeditors are under-recognized for their contributions to the publishing world. Through complex editorial processes outlined in this paper, copyeditors quietly shepherd researchers' work into the academic world by making their research more readable. This paper analyzes ASEA-SEC-2 submission successes and failures, pointing out trends behind acceptances and Requests For Revisions (RFRs) before publication. The findings reveal that the ISEC Copyeditor's work generally went beyond cosmetic edits: Nearly half of the papers that reached the Copyeditor had to be returned to authors. A significant number of those RFRs were due to general violations of ISEC Guidelines (e.g., excessive page length, illegible illustrations, and lack of citations) that should have been returned to authors before they reached the Copyeditor. If contributors (and ISEC editors) had paid more attention to guidelines, many man-hours of labor would have been saved, and their research disseminated into the scientific community more efficiently and cost-effectively. This paper aims to increase awareness in the enormity of the task behind copyediting for conference articles, in hopes that contributors will cooperate more closely with (and editors more strictly enforce) journal guidelines in future.

Keywords: Academic journal submissions, Quality control, Publication guidelines.

1 INTRODUCTION

Copyeditors have a tough but important job. They are entrusted with the arduous task of making authors' research into something they can conscionably show to their colleagues. According to Butcher et al. (2006), copyeditors "remove any obstacles between the reader and what the author wants to convey, and find and solve any problems before the book goes to the typesetter, so that production can go ahead without interruption *or unnecessary expense*" [emphasis added]. However, copyeditors' work is largely invisible: Like any translation service, when copyeditors do a good job, nobody notices; but when copyeditors do a mediocre job, everybody notices—and the quality of the publication suffers. Moreover, copyediting is not merely a clerical job: issues of content and form inevitably arise during the editing process. Thus the copyeditor gets little credit for making the science more scientific.

These proceedings have been no exception. The prime author of this paper, the ISEC Copyeditor, has edited many journals in the past, as well as submitted (and published) many of his own papers in (social science) journals on his way to achieving his doctorate (in Sociology). Thus he has experience in how to advertise his knowledge and help others show off theirs. The need for this article arose when it was observed

that a large number of ISEC submissions were not adhering to simple guidelines. While some authors had no trouble, about half did not adequately concern themselves with this important task. Through this article, written at ISEC's invitation, the Copyeditor wishes to impart two things to the ISEC readership: 1) his thanks to the researchers attempting to construct a better world for both humankind and the environment; and 2) his frustration at how some contributors are allergic to simple stylistic guidelines. He hopes that by increasing contributor awareness of what a copyeditor goes through, they will make the process easier for him next time around.

2 RESEARCH METHOD

Data was collected over six months (between March and August 2014), as paper submissions were slowly received and approved by ISEC editors (i.e., the people at the top of this page). Approved, they were sent to the Copyeditor. Every paper was read and annotated by one Copyeditor, then either uploaded to the ISEC site or returned to contributors with requests for revisions (RFRs). The Copyeditor followed rigorous and standardized ISEC Guidelines for quality control, and kept detailed notes at every stage of the editing process on the progress and changes of each paper. The trends and themes of those revisions are tallied and analyzed in the following sections.

3 THE EDITING PROCESS

3.1 Stage One: Initial Editing

In the initial edit stage, each paper took on average approximately two hours for the head Copyeditor to edit. This did not include additional time if papers needed further revisions from ISEC contributors (see below). Table 1 gives the number of submissions received, and the rate at which they were successfully published:

Table 1. Successful submissions for publication.

	Papers painstakingly edited by head Copyeditor*	Papers eventually accepted for publication*	Success rate§
Number of papers	149	123	86.1%

* Not all papers edited were eventually accepted for publication, since many authors did not respond to RFRs, and many did not pay conference fees. Only the authors who were paid-up conference attendees received the full copyediting procedure for publication.

§ Defined as the number of papers accepted for publication divided by the number of papers edited.

Thus the initial edit stage weeded out nearly 15% of papers that had made it past the ISEC editors. If two hours were spent on each paper, and 26 were not published, then that means 52 man-hours, or more than one week of full-time labor, was lost. This reflects the burden ISEC has to carry when authors submit papers, have them reviewed, but then do not register to have their article published.

3.2 Stage Two: RFRs: Requests for Revisions from Contributors

Stage Two is where the editing process became a treadmill for the Copyeditor. If the accepted draft of the paper had followed all ISEC Guidelines, then it was a relatively quick job (i.e., the fastest case was 45 minutes, but on average around two hours). The most basic edits involved checking spelling, grammar, and content, with some small formatting issues. However, the majority of papers were not a quick job (Table 2):

Table 2. Successful submissions and number of requests for revisions (RFRs) by Copyeditor.

	Single edit (i.e., no RFR)	One RFR	Two RFRs	Three RFRs	Four RFRs	More than four RFRs
Number of papers eventually published*§	65	24	16	6	8	4
As percentage of total papers published	52.8%	19.5%	13.0%	4.9%	6.5%	3.2%

* These tallies do not include papers that were edited but not published because authors did not respond to RFRs or did not pay conference fees. If those papers are also included, the total rises to no RFRs: 15; one RFR: 8; two RFRs: 3; three or more RFRs: 1, respectively.

§ This tally includes published papers that were also RFR-ed after the initial editing process, due to issues such as page length after camera-ready formatting (see section 4 below).

Thus, about half of the papers (47.2%) submitted to and published by ISEC had to be returned to contributors by the head Copyeditor.

However, Table 2 still understates the amount of work involved. A paper became an RFR only if the Copyeditor lacked complete information to make definitive edits by himself (for example, if References were not cited within the text, a copyeditor could not possibly know where to put them). Thus a paper with no RFR did not mean an easy edit. Many non-RFRs required several more hours of work (due again to issues of grammar, spelling, and punctuation—but instead of weeding a garden, some felt like bushwhacking through a jungle), to the point of becoming too big a job for one person. So like the expert engineers they are, ISEC editors brought out their slide rules and calculated the amount of time being spent on small edits, then extrapolated it to how many papers remained before publication deadline. That's when they realized this task was Augean. ISEC then hired four more proofreaders to do Stage Three formatting, significantly increasing production costs.

3.3 Stage Three: Camera-ready Formatting

After the paper had passed the initial edit and RFR stages, it was passed on to the four proofreaders to typeset and make the paper ready for publication. Under the eagle eyes of the supervising editor (who can spot an improper line spacing at ten paces), papers were carefully vetted for uniformity and professional appearance. Papers that did not pass scrutiny for reasons that were unresolvable (see Table 3) were sent back to contributors for tidying up. Papers that did pass scrutiny were finalized and made photo-ready for publication by the four proofreaders. Then work was complete.

4 REASONS FOR RFR

Reasons for returning the paper to the contributor were numerous, but they fell within three standard categories: Reference and citation issues, paper length issues, and miscellaneous issues (see Table 3):

Table 3. Grounds for RFR.

Category of edit problem	Problems in specific	No. of Papers*
Reference and citation issues	Incomplete References (lack of author, publisher, publication year, etc.)	10
	Incomplete citations of References in body of text	20
	References not following formatting in Guidelines	11
	Incomplete author biographies	2
Paper length issues	More than 6 pages	25
	Playing with font sizes and margins to make a long paper appear to be only 6 pages	9
	More than 6 pages after camera-ready formatting	9
	Figures and tables taking too much space	6
	Paper sent in A4 size, not US Letter	5
Miscellaneous issues	General incomprehensibility (e.g., sentences unclear)	13
	Illegible illustrations, tables, or figures	13
	Formulas of irregular sizes	5
	Portions not rendered in English	1
	Too much copying of other publications with insufficient attribution	6
	Incomplete definitions (of terms, acronyms, etc.)	2
	Locked uneditable formatting	7
	Two-column format	2
	Abstract/Conclusion incomprehensible	4
	General formatting issues	6
Papers with no RFR issues		65

*This includes unpublished papers. Papers do not total to 149 because single papers had multiple issues.

Thus the biggest reasons for RFRs were page length and lack of citations, totaling to around a third (30.2%) of all papers received by the Copyeditor. Also, lack of clarity both in terms of writing and visuals were significant in number (an additional 17.4%). Therefore, if around half of the contributors had followed even the most basic items of the Guidelines, ISEC could have saved a significant amount of time and manpower, and authors would have been less bothered by RFRs. Finally, consider how many times the Copyeditor and proofreaders reread papers (Table 4).

The minimum number of versions (i.e., edits) possible in the process is two (i.e., once over by the Copyeditor, and once over by a proofreader). However, as Table 4 demonstrates, the average number for all papers was nearly double that, with some papers requiring nine rereads. This essentially doubles the time that optimally should have been spent copyediting the proceedings, and likewise doubles copyediting costs.

Table 4. Number of versions of published ISEC papers.

Number of Papers Published	Number of edited versions	Average number of edits per published author	Range of number of edits per author
123	450	3.66	Minimum 2 edits, maximum 9 edits.

4.1 Caveats

No paper ever passes the proofing process without some edits, and this conference was no exception. That's why a copyeditor exists. There will always be corrections due to, for example, typographical errors, numeration problems, stylistic concerns, and contributor unfamiliarity with Word software formatting. Moreover, in an international organization, not all submissions were from native speakers of English (which did not affect the science). Of course, not all edits were errors: some authors from Commonwealth countries appeared to dislike American spellings and Oxford commas. And, the author admits there are inevitable differences between writing styles in the physical and the social sciences; this Copyeditor respectfully curtsies to engineering conventions while bowing to basic writing foundations (*cf.* Strunk and White 1999).

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 The Insignificant Effect of the Polyglot Environment on Paper Quality

This is an international proceedings, and not all authors have English as their first language. That said, there was no correlation found between non-native writers of English and the difficulty of copyediting their papers. Some of the most difficult papers to edit were in fact from native writers of English, while some of the easiest were from (I assume; apologies if incorrect) non-natives. That said, most papers, as indicated above, could have done with a proper proofreading before submission, and almost all of them could have followed ISEC Guidelines and house styles more carefully—not just for this journal, but for any journal. As demonstrated in the following formula:

$$G_f(\text{BS}) + \text{PPP} = H_{\text{CE}} \quad (1)$$

where G_f = Guidelines followed (Before Submission), PPP = Properly-Proofread Paper, and H_{CE} = Happier Copy Editor(s).

5.2 Other Observations

There are other Guidelines that authors could have followed. For example, **Keywords** should not repeat title words because both are used in search profiles, meaning there is no point in repetition. Reducing the size of **Figures** to fit into the text (often with imbedded script smaller than 9pt) made them illegible. Moreover, inserting Figures in color rather than grayscale is meaningless in a monochrome publication, and often causes problems later when the halftone contrast turns out to be insufficient (there is little point in including a chart or picture that cannot be seen or read). Having **Titles** longer than 14 words takes up precious space and does not usually add to the content;

moreover, including country-specific references within the title calls into question of the universality of science. Not formatting **References** to house style, including not putting them in alphabetical order, was present in the vast majority of papers, and in some cases alone took about an hour to fix. Inserting educational qualifications (e.g., Ph.D.) and contact details (e.g., email addresses) into author **Bylines** when not requested in the Guidelines just adds work for the Copyeditor to remove.

However, some papers were outliers under any basic guidelines, and should have been caught by the editors beforehand. More than one paper was received in a two-column format. Two had no References at all. Others put one space after each full-stop period and two spaces after commas. Others, after the Copyeditor had adjusted font sizes, margins, and page sizes to US Letter, came out much longer than the maximum six pages (the longest submission the Copyeditor received was *twelve* pages; there were at least two ten-pagers as well). Of course, editors returned many papers in the first draft stages, but these were the egregious issues in those that did reach the Copyeditor.

5.3 Cost-saving Suggestions for ISEC

Some time-consuming labor is inevitable in the editing process. Both contributors and editors are busy people, and submitting rough papers expecting the in-house copyeditor to give them a professional gloss is an understandable impulse. However, less work done by ISEC editors before submission means more labor costs for ISEC at the copyediting stage, and, consequently, higher conference fees for ISEC participants. Therefore, if ISEC editors had been more careful during the first stages—immediately sending back, for example, the papers that were clearly more than six pages, had no References or citations, or had illegible tables and figures—ISEC would have saved many paid hours of copywriting labor. This paper therefore recommends that ISEC editors tighten up their enforcement of ISEC Guidelines to save copyeditors work.

6 CONCLUSION

This research aimed to quantify how difficult a copyediting job is for the benefit of both the consumer and contributor. It demonstrated that many of the time-consuming tasks, including returning papers to contributors multiple times, were largely due to basic Guideline problems such as page length, lack of References and citations, and illegible illustrations. All of these issues are easily verifiable by editors without carefully reading the paper. Among the difficulties in copyediting conference articles, in contrast to journal articles, is the time constraint, which adds to urgency and stress—and becomes a major production scheduling problem. Therefore, the head Copyeditor not only humbly implores ISEC contributors to consider the difficulty and complexity of the copyediting process (thereby proofreading their own papers more carefully before submission), but also asks ISEC editors to save their organization copyediting costs by more strictly vetting papers in future publications of this proceedings. This will save man-hours all around, and keep operating costs and conference fees to a minimum.

References

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