Nurse Author & Editor

Volume 21 - December 2011, Issue 4

Editing Checklists Can Help Authors and Editors

Charon A. Pierson

I have used editing checklists as an editor in the past and I returned to using one in pre-production editing during the past year. Because I edit manuscripts on a daily basis, I thought I should not need a checklist. All the steps in the process should be easy to remember, or so I thought.

Perhaps it's aging or, as I prefer to think, it's the variety of manuscripts I edit, but I do miss some details if I'm rushed by deadlines and overloaded with work. Recently I received an email from a professional writer who was surveying members of the American Medical Writer's Association (AMWA) about the use of editing checklists. That survey got me thinking – maybe I need to go back to using an editing checklist. I also started thinking about ways in which writers could use editing checklists. My intent is to describe some of those ideas in this article and provide some insight into the potential uses for editing checklists.

Why develop an editing checklist?

My experience as an editor and an author demonstrates many possible uses for editing checklists. As an editor I primarily use the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 6th Edition (APA).* I keep that well-marked and tabbed book close by my computer as a reference and, although I am quite familiar with most of its contents, I occasionally have to check some detail. When I took my first job as an editor I was more familiar with the *American Medical Association Manual of Style*, so I developed a checklist based on the APA manual used by the journal I was hired to edit. Soon I thought I had mastered APA style and abandoned my checklist – one less piece of paper to maintain. As the APA manuals went through various updates, I occasionally thought about creating new checklists to remind me of the style changes, but by that time, I was doing more editing on the computer and it seemed cumbersome to add a piece of paper to the mix. Now that I use two computer screens to do my editing, I have resumed the use of a checklist and I believe my editing is more consistent. Editors today often do both substantive editing (content based) and copy editing (technical) and it can be difficult to do both jobs well. My editing checklist keeps me on track with the technical aspects of editing so that I don't lose my focus with substantive editing.

Why should authors use an editing checklist?

As an editor I've noticed that many authors submit manuscripts that appear to be first drafts, full of careless errors in grammar, syntax, and punctuation, as well as a disregard of formatting rules for headings, references, citations, and other required elements of the submission. My advice to authors has always been to put the manuscript aside for a few days then go back and read it aloud to see if it makes sense. I don't think many authors follow that advice. My second suggestion for authors is to ask a reliable editor to review the manuscript prior to submission – this could be a colleague or a professional writer or editor. In situations where multiple authors have collaborated on a manuscript,

careful editing is essential to smooth out the multiple styles of writing, which enhances readability. In all of these situations, authors could benefit from using an editing checklist. Based on my perceptions of the most common errors, here are some suggestions for items to include in an author's editing checklist:

• Use abbreviations consistently – spell them out the first time they are used in the manuscript and use them consistently throughout

• Check subject/verb agreement – singular subjects (a nurse) require singular verbs (has), plural subjects (nurses) require plural verb forms (have)

• Check noun/pronoun agreement – much like subject/verb agreement, singular nouns (the student) require a corresponding singular pronoun (he or his), plural nouns (students) require them or their and avoid the problem of the awkward use of he/she

• Check correct use of apostrophes – its is a pronoun (the dog had its own bed); it's is a contraction of it is; subject's blood sugar is a possessive singular form; subjects' blood sugars is a possessive plural form; the dog had its blood sugar checked (no apostrophe)

• Check placement of modifiers – the large black woman's bag does not mean the same thing as the woman's large black bag

• Limit use of passive constructions – subjects were given a demographic questionnaire to complete is not as accurate as saying subjects completed a demographic questionnaire

• Use parallel structure for clarity and conciseness – "the intervention consisted daily of counting calories, a one hour walk, and the PI made a phone call once a week to the patients"; re-written with parallel grammatical construction - "the intervention consisted of <u>counting</u> calories for all meals, <u>walking</u> for one hour per day, and <u>reporting</u> to the PI by telephone once a week"

• Check tables and figures – they should be labeled and numbered correctly, cited in the text, and formatted according to the author guidelines

• Check references and in-text citations – they should comply with the correct style guidelines

• Check headings and subheadings – they should be formatted according to the correct style guidelines

• Verify the spelling of all drugs and any other scientific nomenclature – particular problems include Latin Genus/species, genes, proteins

If you know you have a particular tendency to misuse commas, semicolons, or certain words, add those items to your checklist. For example, I tend to write long sentences, sprinkle my text with semicolons, and, add at a whim, dependent and independent clauses; therefore, my final edits on my own work focus on streamlining and simplifying sentences wherever possible.

How can editors use a checklist efficiently?

Depending on the type of workflow in the editorial office, editors may elect to have one or multiple checklists. Checklists are easy to create – I use a table format with three columns labeled *Item, Correct Parameters,* and *Notes, Comments, Problems*. For the final pre-production editing checklist, I created a single form that includes all the items I sometimes miss in my haste to get manuscripts processed. By this time, accepted manuscripts have been through peer review, revised, and checked multiple times for content and clarity; substantive editing should not be required at this point. I developed my final checklist based on the recurrent issues I found I had to correct on page proofs. For example, a common correction I had to make was spell out an abbreviation or acronym the first time it was used in the text. Other common problems included incorrect level headings, missing key words, and symbols that did not convert accurately when the manuscript was typeset. Now when I do my final editing, I have a one-page checklist that includes all those items plus a few more reminders to check the article type and disclosures, verify the contact author's most current e-mail address, and check the citations and reference list for compliance with APA 6th edition format. If I find any additional problems, I return the manuscript, along with my checklist and additional instructions, to the contact author for further work.

A final word to authors

Authors are always anxious to see their work in print and every delay means publication is moved ahead by weeks or even months. Authors who carefully check and recheck their manuscripts prior to submission, whether by using an editing checklist or not, can avoid unnecessary delays due to careless errors. It is not the job of the editor-in-chief of a journal, many of whom receive hundreds of submissions annually, to re-write manuscripts. In fact, we tend to reject outright those submissions that do not meet the criteria we establish in our author guidelines because we have many excellent and carefully prepared manuscripts from which to select. Authors can make their manuscripts stand out among all the others in the queue by paying careful attention to the details I've mentioned above. Details do matter; careful attention to detail can make a difference in editorial decisions and speed of publication.

Charon A. Pierson, PhD, GNP, FAANP, is a Clinical Associate Professor and Director of the Center for Aging at the University of Texas El Paso School of Nursing and the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners*. She is also the Editor of *Nurse Author & Editor*.

Print this article   Email it to a friend

Back to Table of contents | **View all articles in this issue**