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The Editor's Role

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When a manuscript requires major revision to make it acceptable for publication should the editor return it to the author to be rewritten or revise it himself? Or phrased another way: To what extent is it appropriate for an editor of a professional journal to rewrite a manuscript before publication?

This question was posed in a recent article written by Lois DeBakey, a professor of Scientific Communications at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas (DeBakey, 1974). Her question has brought into the open one of the most controversial issues among editors in professional journalism. It is almost a certainty that if two editors from different journals get together at the same table, one will ask another as to his stand on the issue. Just how much rewriting should

an editor do without being subjected to the charge of “ghost writing”? When does the writer become a “phantom author”?

Although Professor DeBakey confines her comments to scientific journals, her question has set many of us nursing journal editors to searching our collective conscience as to what we may have wrought in believing that an essential part of our editorial responsibility is to help authors to sharpen and refine their manuscripts, and, by so doing, save the eyes, dispositions, and digestions of the readers of our journals. Are we wrong?

Dr. DeBakey's position is that we are wrong. She contends “that the published version of a . . . manuscript, as a scholarly product, should represent primarily the [thought] and literary efforts of the person(s) listed in the by-line and only incidentally those of an editor or others.” Her concern is not with the slight editorial changes made in manuscripts to make them uniform in mechanical matters, such as that which would come under the rubric of style: abbreviations, reference preference, or the fixing up of faulty grammatical and sentence construction. She is concerned, to quote her, with “major reorganization, excision or recasting—perhaps even reconstruction of tables and graphs—changes which indeed present the report in more lucid, logical, and readable form.” However she does allow that extensive editorial revisions might be acceptable in worthy manuscripts by foreign authors with serious language problems. (A loophole through which this editor will quickly crawl to gain immunity since a good number of our authors, although not foreign born, write the English language as if they were.)

I have to confess I am one of those editors who Dr. DeBakey condemns as considering “it more important to save readers' time and effort than to gratify the ego of the author.” If I don't revise some papers whose literary form is unacceptable but whose content is theoretically and clinically sound, what are my options? How am I to maintain the literary standards of the two journals I edit?

My first option is to return to authors all manuscripts not meeting the journals' literary standards, regardless of the contribution their content might make to the profession. My second option is to accept the manuscripts and talk myself into ignoring disorderly sentence and paragraph sequences, illogical phraseology, confused sentence structure, repetition, and verbosity; that is, ignore the form and accept the substance. My third option is to return manuscripts unacceptable because of their literary quality with detailed critiques of the flaws therein. With such conditional letters of acceptance would go the hope that the authors would be motivated to learn how to organize an article, use the English language correctly, and do it in time before their material is outdated.

Lois DeBakey debunks editors who maintain that by example they can educate authors in how to express themselves so they can be understood. She states, "that course is self-defeating, for writing well is a skill that is acquired through practice." It has been her experience that it is "a rare author who profits from major reorganization, revision, or rewriting of his article by an editor." Her reason for that statement, to quote her, is "even when an author conscientiously reviews editorial revisions, he may not grasp the expository principles underlying the changes, although he may instinctively recognize that the revised version is an improvement over his original copy." To which I ask, if a well-edited revision doesn't help the author to see the flaws in the original manuscript, how can a letter requesting the author to undertake the rewrite do the job?

The sum and substance of Dr. DeBakey's argument is that the editor who accepts poorly prepared papers, trying himself to rehabilitate them before publication, is sanctioning substandard writing and discouraging self-improvement on the part of the authors. It is only when editors establish high literary standards for all professional journals will authors recognize the need to acquire greater literary proficiency than current professional journals reflect.

Since I have already pled guilty to being a confirmed rehabilitating editor, I feel I must justify my position. Dr. DeBakey maintains that the editor will not risk the loss of valuable manuscripts by insisting on high literary as well as scientific [professional] standards; not if his journal is highly esteemed. This may be true among some scientific journals—and about that I have my doubts—but the writing skills of nurses, degrees notwithstanding, need much more developing before nursing journal editors could rely on meeting issue deadlines by accepting only articles of impeccable literary quality.

Whether I'm wrong or right, our purpose in creating *Nursing Forum* and *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care* was to help and encourage nurses to write for publication at the professional level they were aspiring to, and to create the audience for that writing. I am convinced that the authors we have worked with in helping them revise their manuscripts over these many years have learned as much from us about organizing an article and acceptable English usage as we have learned from them about the content and specialized language of their area of interest and practice.

Frankly, if I saw my editorial responsibility as confined to selecting manuscripts, putting in and taking out punctuation marks, and making sure that each manuscript conformed to the journals' style manual, I'd opt for early retirement. Maybe, I suffer from what *Perspectives'* clinical editor, Sheila Rouslin, would call “chronic helpfulness.” Whatever the condition, it has kept me a “working” editor some 30 years . . . and a happy one.

Granted, there are editors who aren't qualified to make extensive revisions on manuscripts, and their changes may be “capricious, inane, or even mutilating,” as Dr. DeBakey charges, but even when authors are so abused they always have the right of withholding publication. No author need accept editorial changes made in a manuscript and, by the same token, no editor need publish an article if the

suggested changes are not accepted. A published article is, in the ideal sense, a shared product between author and editor. For the author who replies, “I want my paper published exactly as I wrote it,” he had better have produced an exemplary product, otherwise, he will get it returned exactly as he wrote it with a rejection slip—not because the editor is vindictive, but because editors, too, are human. Who wants to spend hours, and frequently days, straightening out an author’s muddled sentences when already forewarned that there will be no appreciation of the effort. The author’s thanks and the readers’ interest in a well-written, well-edited article are what editors thrive on.

Dr. DeBakey, notwithstanding, I would wager that behind many “classics” published in professional journals sits a gaggle of editors who worked to liberate the authors’ tortured prose. I ask sincerely, if we remove the creative editor from between the author and the reader who will intercede for the future generation of readers? Having lost their advocate for clear communication, and while waiting for literary education to catch up with professional education, readers will continue to be bombarded with the bromidic style of most professional authors.

An editor’s first responsibility is to the journal’s reader-audience. The editorial help offered authors is to enhance the readability of their articles. If authors haven’t as yet acquired the skills to produce a readable article, yet have something valuable to communicate, then I, for one, am convinced I am not weakening their moral fiber or the veracity of their authorship by giving aid to their crippled sentences and misplaced paragraphs.

On one point Dr. DeBakey and I would be in solid agreement if I accepted her premise that all rewriting is “ghost writing.” As there are shades in colors, there are degrees of revising a manuscript. Dr. DeBakey charges that an editor who rewrites another’s paper is party to a deception. She says, “Although we have come to expect ghost writing in the fields of politics, entertainment, and even religion,

phantom authors have no place in education or medical science, where intellectual integrity is requisite. The fact that academic promotion, election to elite organizations, and other professional accolades are based to a considerable extent on professional writing makes authenticity of authorship important.”

I agree—some authors are “passing.” But I doubt whether they can continue the masquerade too long without detection unless they employ an editor-in-residence. But even if a few are “phantom authors”—created either by their own ambition, the “publish and perish philosophy of academia,” unethical editors, or unscrupulous publishers—should all authors in need be denied editorial help? Should the literary quality of all professional journals be downgraded or cease publication until more “literate” professionals are produced?

Of course professionals should learn to express themselves in writing. It is part of their professional responsibility to contribute to the literature of their field. But unless the nursing profession has discovered some magic formula to rectify the deficiencies of general education, there will be editors who consider it their responsibility to aid and abet would-be authors to be published—short of ghost writing their articles for them.

REFERENCE

1. DeBakey L. (1974). Rewriting and the by-line: is the author the writer? *Surgery*. 75(1), 38-48.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

At the time this editorial was written (1975), Alice R. Clarke was the founding editor and publisher of *Nursing Forum* and *Perspectives on Psychiatric Care*. She was born in Dayton, OH and studied nursing in Boston, MA. Upon graduation, she enlisted in the US Army Nurse Corps was stationed in the Philippines and

Australia during World War II. She was honorably discharged in 1946 with the rank of Major. Ms. Clarke pursued advanced education in nursing and received an MA from Columbia University. In the early 1960s she raised \$18,600 from 38 people (mostly nurses) and used the funds to establish the Nurses Publishing Corporation. She ran the business and served as editor of the two aforementioned journals for almost 30 years, until her retirement in 1989. She died in 2012 at the age of 94 in New Jersey.

EDITOR'S NOTE

In August, 2019, *Nursing Forum* and *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care* were both inducted into the Nursing Journal Hall of Fame established by the International Academy of Nursing Editors. As I was doing research on these journals, I discovered Alice Clarke was the founding editor of both. Her name was not familiar to me, although reading through her editorials (and editorials written by others) it was apparent that she was very highly regarded and well-respected by her peers and colleagues. When I came across this editorial, it was clear that Dr. Bakey's comments struck a nerve, and Ms. Clarke responded eloquently! Reading this essay, written almost 45 years ago, I am surprised at how much of what Ms. Clarke says is still true today. I am honored to be able to share this with *Nurse Author & Editor* readers.

NB: I have re-published this exactly as written. Some language, such as the use of "he" and "him" to refer to all people, is not inclusive and not in line with current writing standards. However, I preferred to leave Ms. Clarke's words as she wrote them, as that was the style in 1975, and respect her memory.

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