

Two Sides of Editorial Queries: Editors and Authors

Two Sides of Editorial Queries: Editors and Authors

Cynthia Saver and Julie Cullen

NURSE AUTHOR & EDITOR, 2021, 31(1), 2

Editorial queries refer to the questions asked of authors during the editing process. They're an essential tool to creating an effective final published piece. The editor is able to look at an author's manuscript with fresh eyes, catching mistakes that may have been missed. The editor also knows the publication's readers, so can anticipate what they might find unclear or want more information about.

By honing their skills, editors can create editorial queries that obtain the needed response while respecting authors' work and expertise. And writers can learn how

to respond to queries so that the final product shines, enhancing their reputations.

CRAFTING AN EFFECTIVE EDITORIAL QUERY: FOR EDITORS

Effective editorial queries save the author and editor time by avoiding the back-and-forth that frequently follows an unclear query.

Before writing a query, however, consider if you can quickly resolve the issue yourself. For example, perhaps a statistic from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention seems too high or low, and the author has provided the link to the relevant website. You can easily check for yourself, and then simply highlight the change so the author sees it.

If a query is needed, consider applying this three-step process:

1. Highlight the text in question.
2. Concisely state the issue, and, if appropriate, make a suggestion to resolve it.
3. Ask for a specific response.

Here's a closer look at each step. Keep in mind that you want to make it as easy as possible for an author to respond to a query

1. *Highlight the text in question.*

In many cases, you're asking about a word or phrase, not the entire sentence. Highlighting the relevant section allows the author to easily see what's at issue. Color highlighting is preferable to italics, which are harder to read and can't be used if something is already italicized in the existing text.

2. *Concisely state the issue.*

Editors commonly start queries with “AU” for author, but new authors may not understand this abbreviation. Therefore, it’s a good idea to define it on first use. For example: “AU (author): Please provide page numbers.” Starting each query with AU makes it easy for authors to search for queries, an important consideration for long documents.

Once you have the author’s attention, you’re ready for the next step. If you simply want the author to verify that your edit didn’t affect meaning, you can simply state something like, “Edit OK?” and skip the details.

In many cases, however, you need to explain the problem, such as “I’m not sure our readers, who are general practitioners rather than specialists, will understand your meaning.” Avoid unhelpful one-word comments, such as “unclear” or “revise,” that leave authors puzzled and unsure about how to respond. The key is to be specific. If the editor omits “who are general practitioners rather than specialist,” which explains why the text is being questioned, the author might be tempted to reply with, “Yes, they will understand.”

Be tactful when questioning authors about information they likely perceive themselves to be expert in. “Given that breast cancer also occurs in men, would you want to include any diagnostic considerations related to that patient population?” is an example of a gentle way to raise an issue.

Most authors will welcome your addition of a suggestion to resolve the query. For example, in an article about postdural puncture headache (PDPH), after “I’m not sure our readers, who are general practitioners rather than specialists, will understand epidural blood patch,” you might suggest: “Perhaps add description: ‘For debilitating PDPH that doesn’t respond to conservative treatment, the

anesthesia provider may place an epidural blood patch (injection of a small amount of autologous blood into a patient’s epidural or spinal space to stop a leak of cerebrospinal fluid).” Try to provide only one option, two at the most. Too many options can be confusing.

If appropriate, you also may consider adding a positive note. For example, “This table provides a great summary of the pharmacologic options. Could you strengthen it by adding the administration route for each drug?” Brenner¹ notes that praise should be sincere, but not overdone.

Perhaps the most important consideration when writing a query is to keep it as short as possible. Follow good writing principles: Use active voice and review each query to ensure it will be clear to the author. You edit the author, so be sure to edit yourself.

3. Ask for a specific response.

Whenever possible, use questions that authors can answer “yes” to if they agree. For example: “OK to change percentage to match what you use in the first paragraph under results?”

If the decision is up to the author, say so. For example, “You may want to define ...,” or “Consider defining” On the other hand, if something needs to change, say so, “Please define ...”

RETURNING QUERIES: FOR EDITORS

When the editor returns the edited manuscript, the email should set a positive tone, help the author understand what they’re receiving, and instruct them in how to respond. Here’s an example:

Attached is your edited manuscript for review. Please check carefully to ensure your intended meaning hasn't been altered. You'll find queries that require your response. The text in question is highlighted in blue followed by blue queries addressed to AU (author). Please insert your responses directly in the text in a red font so they can be easily seen.

Please return the manuscript with your responses by October 15.

Thank you again for your submission. We know our readers will find the information on managing pain in older adults helpful to their practice. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to ask.

TYPES OF EDITORIAL QUERIES: FOR EDITORS AND AUTHORS

Here are 6 types of queries, followed by examples from *American Nurse Journal* articles.²

References

These queries may relate to incomplete, incorrect, or missing information. Here are two examples:

1. The Joint Commission. Root causes of maternal deaths & injuries. Available from: www.jointcommission.org/NR/rdonlyres/960276C4-1957-4C78-983D-681124E70D1E/0/se_rc_maternal_deaths_inj.jpg //AU: **Highlighted URL goes to “page not found.” We're not able to find an alternative URL; can you provide another?//**
2. National Kidney Foundation. Immunosuppressant. 2017. org/atoz/content/immunosuppression //AU: **This URL goes to a page titled**

“Care after kidney transplant.” The copyright date on it is 2015. Is this the page intended?//

Terminology

Authors may be familiar with terminology or phrasing that the journal’s readers are not. For example:

With nearly half of healthcare staff reportedly experiencing violence in the workplace, organized mechanisms to address behavioral health emergencies in a trauma-informed manner //AU: I’m not sure readers will know what “trauma-informed manner” means. Please briefly define.// have never been more relevant.

Or, the context of a term may be unclear. For example:

Sharing HTN care responsibilities can be implemented as part of a multifaceted approach, with system support //AU: Please clarify what system support means in this context?// for clinical decision-making, collaborating, and monitoring.

Verification of editing changes

The editor may want to verify that the changes made don’t affect the meaning of the text. For example:

Original

Many patients fear side effects from ICSs and will not take them daily. Focus education on how ICSs reduce swelling in the lungs, leading to better symptom

control and better quality of life. Many people mistake corticosteroid side effects for those of anabolic steroids. These medications differ, and side effects are not the same.

Edited

Many patients don't take ICSs as prescribed because they mistakenly believe these medications have the same side effects as anabolic steroids (hair loss, liver and kidney disease, increased aggression). To encourage adherence, explain the difference between the medications, focusing on how ICSs reduce swelling in the lungs, which leads to better symptom control and better quality of life. **//AU: Edit OK?//**

Additional text

Editors may suggest additional text to clarify points. For example:

Multiple chronic conditions may compete for the patients' attention, and depression, social isolation, and financial challenges are common in older adults, making them less likely to engage in self-care. **//AU: Addition OK?//**

Or, an editor may request that the author provide additional text. Here are three examples:

1. Focus your teaching on taking the medication as prescribed and preventing side effects. **//AU: Please provide some specifics. What are some of the side effects? How are they prevented?//**
2. Help patients recognize situations that place them at risk for diverging from their dietary or physical activity goals (for example, having guests over for dinner,

celebrating holidays, travelling) and how to use behavioral strategies //AU: **Please share a few examples**// to handle these circumstances.

3. Current evidence-based guidelines //AU: **Which guidelines are referred to here?**// recommend including cardiac rehabilitation (rehab), but many patients with end-stage HF can't tolerate these activities.

Clarification

The editor may ask the author to clarify text. Here are two examples:

1. The first recognizable symptomatic stage of dementia is called mild cognitive impairment (MCI), which is characterized by subjective complaints of cognitive changes and objective deficits that are detectable during cognitive testing; everyday functioning remains mostly normal. MCI was operationalized //AU: **What is meant by operationalized?**// in sentinel articles by Petersen and is now widely regarded as a risk state for AD, in recently published practice guidelines.

2. *Thiazolidinediones*. Pioglitazone, a thiazolidinedione, //AU: **Only pioglitazone or all thiazolidinediones?**// is metabolized entirely by the liver; no dose adjustments are recommended in patients with CKD.

Inconsistencies

The editor may pick up on contradictory information. For example:

This article explains the differences between primary and specialty //AU: **Both specialty and secondary palliative care were used in the article. We changed everything to specialty for consistency.**// palliative care and when a consult is appropriate.

RESPONDING TO EDITORIAL QUERIES: FOR AUTHORS

Depending on the journal or publication, you will receive your edited document, with queries, in Word or as a PDF file. Authors should follow the editor's instructions for responding to queries.

Word

A Word document will look similar to the manuscript submitted, but with queries inserted within the text or via the "insert comment" function in Word. (In some cases, the editor will have used Word's track changes feature so you can see the editing that has been done.)

When track changes are used, if you simply need to answer yes or no, enter your response in the comment "bubble." If you need to alter text, the editor will usually want you to use the Track Changes feature (with "Show Markup" turned on) so they can see your changes.

Other editors prefer to avoid Track Changes, which can be difficult to follow if there are multiple changes. These editors will ask you to respond in the text, using a different font color, and leaving the query in place. For example:

Editor's query

Proper training creates a positive environment for volunteers and improves retention. Develop an onboarding program and designate an organization member with the appropriate skills to facilitate it. Do you have reference materials for your volunteer to use to help them execute their role? **//AU: Please clarify. Are these reference materials for the person facilitating the onboarding program or reference materials for volunteers?//**

Author's response

Proper training creates a positive environment for volunteers and improves retention. Develop an onboarding program and designate an organization member with the appropriate skills to facilitate it. **Create reference materials and how-to guides for your volunteers to refer to as they execute their roles.** //AU: **Please clarify. Are these reference materials for the person facilitating the onboarding program or reference materials for volunteers?//**

Editor's query

In addition, racial differences found in epidemiological studies are more likely to reflect the *effects* of racism rather than race itself. The allostatic load//AU: **Please clarify meaning for readers unfamiliar with this term//** associated with lifelong toxic stress, rather than genetic predisposition, may lead to health disparities.

Author's response

In addition, racial differences found in epidemiological studies are more likely to reflect the *effects* of racism rather than race itself. The allostatic load (**the cumulative effects of chronic exposure to stress**) //AU: **Please clarify meaning for readers unfamiliar with this term//** associated with lifelong toxic stress, rather than genetic predisposition, may lead to health disparities.

No matter how you respond, answer promptly to keep your article on its publication path.

PDF Files

A PDF file may be partially (or completely) formatted to journal style—even so, there will be queries and edits that you need to respond to by using an application

such as Acrobat Reader or Adobe Acrobat. Acrobat Reader is free and allows you to view, print, and annotate documents, which should be adequate for responding to queries. There are also several paid versions of Adobe Acrobat, which start at \$14.99/month for a subscription. You may have access through a subscription from your employer, especially if you work at a school of nursing at a college or university. In lieu of that, the free version will probably be fine for simple queries in an edited manuscript. The examples provided earlier are still relevant—you just need to use the annotation features of Acrobat Reader rather than commenting and using track changes in Word.

TIMING: FOR AUTHORS

Most queries come at the initial editing stage, so authors see them in a Word document or PDF. Supplemental material—such as tables, figures, and sidebars—may be inserted at the end of the document or sent as separate files. If your publication is to be posted on a website, you may receive a URL to the article for review. No matter how you receive the document, it is important to carefully review and respond to all queries. You can also correct any typos or other errors that you see. However, this is not the time for re-writing your manuscript. If you see sections that need major changes—major enough to delay publication—you should contact the editor immediately to discuss.

The time you have to review the edited manuscript and respond to queries varies depending on the type of planned publication. For a blog, you might have only a few hours. For a journal, you might have 5 to 10 days at the initial editing stage and 2 to 3 days for a final review. For a book or a chapter in a book, you might have 2 to 4 weeks. Be sure to note the deadline and return on time to keep the publication process moving forward.

KINDNESS: FOR AUTHORS AND EDITORS

A successful editor-author partnership requires mutual respect—and a little kindness.^{3–5}

Some editors are tempted to explain the rationale behind each change, providing grammar lessons that illustrate how much the editor knows, but slow the author's response time. The editorial query isn't the time to educate—or pontificate. It's a time to resolve issues as quickly as possible.

Some authors respond to queries curtly, conveying their annoyance at being questioned. Keep in mind that the editor is the reader's advocate and that you both have a mutual goal: a high-quality article. As with the editor, this isn't the time to educate about your specialty. For example, if you're asked to clarify the difference between two types of receptors in "one or two sentences," don't provide an entire paragraph.

As with most relationships, respect and courtesy will foster a successful partnership.

CONCLUSION

Receiving and responding to queries is an essential part of the publication process. However, until you have an actual article "in press" you may never have seen an AU: query. And if you are a new editor, you might be unfamiliar with some of these "best practices" to make sure your queries are clear and concise. Consider your role and carefully craft your queries and responses to make sure the article shines as a professional publication.

REFERENCES

1. Brenner E. 4 tips to using praise in author queries. ACES: The Society for Editing. Published October 1, 2019. Accessed January 18, 2021.

<https://aceseditors.org/news/2019/4-tips-to-using-praise-in-author-queries>

2. Saver C. 6 types of editorial queries and how to respond – American Nurse. *American Nurse Journal*. Published online December 1, 2020. Accessed January 18, 2021. <https://www.myamericannurse.com/6-types-of-editorial-queries-and-how-to-respond>

3. Montgomerie A. 10 ways to word a sensitive query. ACES: The Society for Editing. Published October 1, 2019. Accessed January 18, 2021.

<https://aceseditors.org/news/2019/10-ways-to-word-a-sensitive-query>

4. Ozunal B. Quills and Queries. ACES: The Society for Editing. Published October 6, 2020. Accessed January 18, 2021. <https://aceseditors.org/news/2020/quills-and-queries>

5. Pfefferle BE. How to soften the red pen’s blow: Tips for editing a colleague’s work. *Medical Writing*. 2018;27(3). https://journal.emwa.org/editing/how-to-soften-the-red-pen-s-blow-tips-for-editing-a-colleague-s-work/article/3979/how-to-soften-the-red-pen-s-blow_-tips-for-editing-a-colleague-s-work.pdf

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Cynthia Saver, MS, RN, is president of CLS Development, Inc., which provides writing and editorial management services to leading publishers of nursing content. She is editor of *Anatomy of Writing for Publication for Nurses, 4th ed.*, editorial director for *American Nurse Journal*, and a member of the *Nurse Author & Editor Authors-in-Residence*. She also presents writing workshops for nurses. You can contact her at csaver@clsdevelopment.com

Julie Cullen, BA, is a healthcare writer and editor and managing editor for *American Nurse Journal*.

2021 31 1 2 Saver Cullen

Copyright 2021: The Authors. May not be reproduced without permission.
Journal Complication Copyright 2021: John Wiley and Sons Ltd.

Related

[Trial Registration: Lessons Learned from Nursing Research](#)

January 20, 2017

In "Reporting Research"

[Addressing Racism in Editorial Practices](#)

December 5, 2020

In "Editor Role"

[Featured: Editorial Advisory Board Virtual Meetings](#)

January 5, 2021

In "Editor Role"

📁 PUBLISHING

◀ Previous

Editor-in-Chief

Leslie H. Nicoll

PhD, MBA, RN, FAAN

Subscribe to Nurse Author & Editor

Receive a notification every time a new article is published.