



EDITING GUIDELINES

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The following editing guidelines were originally written by Ian Fyfe, BlueSci President 2010. Ian's notes have been supplemented with advice from workshops given by Michael Marshall, BlueSci alumnus and a reporter for New Scientist, in Michaelmas 2007 and Rachel Thomas, co-editor of Plus Magazine, in Michaelmas 2009. On top of this I have added a few thoughts of my own.

This is by no means a definitive method for editing, but it is intended as a practical guide of one way to approach the task. Hopefully it will be useful for those who have not done any editing before (and possibly for those that have too!). Remember: don't be afraid to make changes!

Tim Middleton, BlueSci President, October 2011

GENERAL COMMENTS

Editing is primarily about a second pair of eyes. All writers know that they are liable to get stuck in a rut: after a while they read over the same mistakes again and again. Your job as an editor is to shed some new light on the matter. What's good? What's bad? What works? What doesn't?

If you're the first editor, your job is to make sure the article is good. It's very tempting to correct typos as and when you see them. But if the whole piece is uninteresting then you're wasting your time. Start with the big picture: the ideas, the structure and the layout. Gradually you can then narrow your focus. But note: the final nit-picking is the job of copy editors, not first (or second) editors.

When editing an article, you should also bear in mind BlueSci's target audience. We aim to appeal to school pupils, undergraduates, postgraduates and academics; scientist and non-scientist alike. This is, admittedly, a very broad range of people to be aiming at, but it is your job to make sure that an article is interesting for, and accessible to, as many of these people as possible. The author may, or may not, be a specialist in the field they've chosen to write about. But you certainly can't expect the reader to be. If you don't understand what the writer is on about, then you need to flag this up. Don't be tempted to think that "biologists will get it"—you should get it too.

It is very rare for a submitted article to be publishable without edits and many of the best articles require an open dialogue between writer and editor. So don't be afraid to make changes and don't be afraid to send an article backwards and forwards a few times. When you do send an article back try to be very precise about what you think needs changing so as to avoid unnecessary confusion. It is important to be tactful, but don't refrain from passing comment for fear of offending the writer; they will want the article to be as good as it can be too.

On a practical level, 'tracking changes' and adding 'comments' on Microsoft Word is the standard way to conduct the editing process and should be used in all but the most exceptional circumstances. This enables you to initiate a conversation with the writer and allows other editors to see the changes you've made. It is also much easier to make understandable changes using this method than it is to try and explain, for each correction, which part of the document you are referring to in your comments.

Finally, use a spellchecker! Admittedly, it's not always right (and you'll need to find one that deals in British English rather than American English) so it shouldn't be thoughtlessly relied upon. But it still provides a vital first order check.

EDITING TECHNIQUE

PRELIMINARY READ-THROUGH

First, read the whole article without changing anything (no matter how tempting!). Use this to identify the ‘thrust’ of the article—this can usually be summarised in three or four points. What are the main things that the author is trying to say? What should you know at the end of the article that you didn’t at the beginning? Keep this in mind throughout subsequent editing—almost everything in the article should contribute to getting these ideas across.

You should also use your preliminary read-through to check that the basic elements of a good article are present. Is there a coherent story or is this just a load of facts? Are the explanations clear, easy and lively? Are there sufficient quotations to grab people’s attention? Is there an interesting narrative: an element of mystery, some red herrings and a final resolution? Is there conflict, controversy, atmosphere, description or personality?

CHECK FACTS

It is imperative that all the information in an article is correct. This article might be the only information the reader ever receives about this subject—so make sure the facts they take away with them are right! This includes: explanations of research, spelling of names, the dates and locations of events, and all figures and measurements. Check the facts first, because the last thing you want is to spend ages refining a paragraph only to discover later that it’s wrong anyway.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE ARTICLE

As a general rule, there should be one fact per sentence and one idea per paragraph. Does each paragraph contain just one idea? If not, consider splitting or merging paragraphs so that they do. Any new idea merits a new paragraph—and if in doubt, keep paragraphs short.

Also consider whether the ideas are presented in the most logical order. If not, try rearranging the paragraphs to give a more logical development of ideas. A good technique is to read the first sentence from each paragraph in sequence. Doing so should make sense, pull the reader along and convey the main points of the article.

BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

A handy rule of thumb is to put the important stuff either at the beginning or at the end. Start with something old, end with something new. And this principle can be applied to the structure of a sentence, a paragraph, or even a whole article. Also, thinking about the beginnings and ends of sentences and paragraphs improves the flow of reading.

Check the start of the article. Does the first sentence catch the reader’s attention? Does the first paragraph make the reader want to continue? Does it tell you what the rest of the article is about? If the opening sentence or paragraph is weak, or doesn’t give the reader an idea of what they’ll learn from the article, they may need changing. Look through the second and third paragraphs—often there is a passage or sentence in these that make a stronger opening.

Examine the end of the article. Does the final paragraph round the article off well? Does it leave you with a sense of satisfaction and a clear ‘take home message’?

PARAGRAPHS

The first sentence of the paragraph should tell the reader what the paragraph is about, the rest of the paragraph should expand on this. If the main point of a paragraph is buried in the middle, it should ideally be moved to the start. And the last sentence of a paragraph should make you want to continue on to the next.

SENTENCES

Is a sentence clumsy, or difficult to read? If so, this will disrupt the flow of the article and may be better if it is re-worded, retaining as much of the original as possible. Is the wording of the sentence clear? If not, find a way to clarify.

Ideally, sentences should be kept short. This doesn't mean that all sentences have to be the same length. Short sentences should be mixed up with long ones, but experts say that on average there should be 15 to 20 words per sentence. The best way to keep sentences short is to follow the rule of one important fact per sentence, perhaps with an additional sub-clause giving context. Does each sentence contain one fact? If there is more than one, consider splitting the sentence.

Make sure an active voice rather than a passive one is used wherever possible. An active sentence is one that starts with the subject. “The dog ate my homework” is active, while “my homework was eaten by the dog” is passive. Active sentences are usually clearer and more engaging. Sometimes, a passive voice is unavoidable, but an entire article written this way will be boring.

WORDS AND GRAMMAR

Eliminate jargon wherever possible. Make sure the audience is going to understand. Don't assume that others will know the technical terms used in a given field; if you, the editor, don't understand a certain word, then neither will many of the readers. Avoiding jargon is particularly difficult when editing an article which is about your own research or interests. Ask yourself: does the reader really need to know that term? Or is there a colloquial term that will do? If you do need to include specialist terms, ensure that they are clearly defined when they are first used.

Check grammar, punctuation and spelling. In particular, here are a few common bits and pieces to look out for:

- Do verbs agree with subjects? Do pronouns refer to the correct subject?
- Do ‘it’, ‘this’, ‘them’ and ‘that’ refer to what you think they do?
- Look for ‘empty’ words and phrases, such as: actually, really, very, own, with regard to, in the case that etc.—see if you can leave them out if possible. Check too for unnecessary words and implicit repetition e.g. “a tall giant”. It is also best to avoid openers such as ‘Scientists recently found that...’ or “New research has suggested that...” which are generally redundant when reporting scientific information.

- Check that brackets, commas and dashes around sub-clauses are in pairs.
- Check all apostrophes.
- Take care that persons and tenses agree and that singular and plurals match.
- Note: 'like' makes comparisons, 'such as' introduces examples.
- 'Whether' and 'if': 'whether' should be followed by 'or not', otherwise use 'if'.
- 'That' defines the subject and is not preceded by a comma; 'which' describes the subject, and is preceded by a comma. If you're unsure, use 'which' if the following text is not essential to the sentence and 'that' if it is. Examples: "The American universities that have high levels of funding do better research." ... "The American universities, which have high levels of funding, do better research."

A FINAL WORD OF WARNING

Don't, however tempting it is, re-write the article, or long stretches of it, in your own style. If anything needs to be re-worded or added, ensure that the voice of the author is not lost. Sentences or paragraphs written in a different style stick out from the rest of the article and disrupt the flow for the reader.

Similarly, avoid making changes simply because the writing style is different to your own. All changes should be made to ensure accuracy, clarity, concision and good flow—every change should be made for a reason other than just that you “prefer it like that”.

Finally, any substantial changes should be made in consultation with the author. Often a writer will agree with your changes if there are good reasons for them. Again, the Microsoft Word 'track changes' function is very useful here. It may also be necessary to consult the author if you're unsure what they are trying to say. Your aim is to enhance what the writer has done and give a new perspective, not write the article again. If it's really bad, get the author to write sections again based on your comments and inform the Issue Editor if more time is needed.