

# Publishing a journal in English: tips for journal editors who are non-native English speakers

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## Introduction

Scientific researchers around the world are increasingly publishing in English. In parallel, local or regional scientific journals are also perhaps increasingly becoming English periodicals. I congratulate the editors of *Science Editing* for their efforts to bring this journal to the international stage by publishing articles in English. Nowadays, researchers who are non-native English speakers often recognize that they need some kind of assistance with the English language to become successful communicators of their work. Similarly, non-native English speaking (NNES) journal editors who wish to start publishing their journals in English may also benefit from more awareness of the language aspect of publishing. This article is aimed at NNES journal editors who wish to improve the standard of English in their journals.

## Diversity of English speakers

In only a few countries of the world does the majority of the population speak English as the first language. These countries include the USA, the UK, Canada, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and some in the Caribbean. The nationals of these countries, as a result, are considered to be native English speakers. The idea of a single first language is, however, a bit problematic. Some people may speak more than one language at home and at work, and thus they may have two first languages. Some people may change their dominant language over time because they live outside their home country or for other reasons, and they may acquire native-level proficiency in a language that was not originally their first language. In countries where English is increasingly used both at home and at work, people may have English as one of their first languages or even their only language. Their English may be of a regional variety, but in many cases it may be quite close to American or British English, which are the two main forms of English in scientific publishing.

Given this diversity, it is not always possible to tell from an author's name or location whether he or she is a native English speaker or non-native English speaker. In scientific

publishing, just as every article should be evaluated on its scientific merit regardless of the affiliations of the authors, it is best to evaluate every article on its linguistic merit regardless of whether the primary author is (or appears to be) a native English speaker or non-native English speaker.

## Avoiding “author name bias”

When an NNES journal editor encounters an article submitted by an NNES author (or someone who appears to be one), they might suspect that the quality of English in the article is not good enough. On the other hand, when they see an article submitted by a native English speaking (NES) author (or someone who appears to be one), they might immediately assume that the quality of English in the article must be good. Although it might be difficult to avoid such first impressions, journal editors should be careful to avoid bias from setting in. It's good to question whether the English in any manuscript is good enough, not just those submitted by NNES authors. Further, many NNES authors write excellent English (or they may at least have strong scientific writing skills), and they would be offended if they encounter bias just because they do not happen to be native English speakers. Telling an NNES author who has written well to get his or her manuscript checked by a native English speaker can make the author think the editor is biased and turn him or her away from that journal.

When a journal editor is certain that the language in a manuscript needs improvement before it can be reviewed or published, it is of course necessary to advise authors to take action. Some journal editors tell authors to ask a native English speaker to check their manuscript, but this is neither appropriate nor helpful. Where are these native English speakers who are not only qualified to check articles but also have the time to do such checks when they are simply asked to? When the English in an article needs to be checked, the task can take several hours (or span days, depending on the length of the article), it must be done by a language professional, and it can cost a good deal of money. Therefore, recommendations for language improvement should be worded as “please hire an authors’

editor to check your manuscript” or something similar.

## English language professionals

In scientific publishing, several types of language professionals can be involved in preparing a manuscript for publication. In the previous paragraph, one such professional was mentioned: “authors’ editor.” An authors’ editor is a person who works for an author and helps him or her improve the language and presentation of a manuscript before it is submitted to a journal. This may involve fixing mistakes in grammar and spelling, using appropriate punctuation, implementing style guidelines, improving sentence construction, checking terminology for usage and consistency, pointing out unclear parts to the author, and—in some cases—adjusting the structure and flow of the content (this kind of high-level editing may be called substantive editing). The ultimate goal of an authors’ editor is often to help authors get published. Authors’ editors may also help authors select the right journals, share their knowledge about writing and publishing, and so on [1].

A copy-editor also helps improve the language and presentation of a manuscript, similar to an authors’ editor, but copy-editors work for a range of clients: publishers (or journals), companies, universities, individual authors, and so on. The difference between copy-editors in general and authors’ editors is that the latter understand the authors’ publishing goals. All authors’ editors are copy-editors, but not all copy-editors are authors’ editors. Some journals employ copy-editors (in-house or freelance) to check and correct manuscripts before publication. Such editors are sometimes designated “manuscript editors,” and they work for the journal, not authors. However, the practice of journals employing manuscript editors has been on the decline [2].

A proofreader is, strictly speaking, someone who is involved in the final stages of the publishing process. A proofreader examines a manuscript for grammar, typographical, and stylistic errors, but does not check whether sentences and paragraphs convey the intended meaning. A proofreader has a keen eye for detail but is generally not concerned with the “big picture” of the article. Sometimes, anyone who improves the language of an article is mistakenly called a proofreader. NNES authors of scientific manuscripts commonly issue requests such as “please proofread this article” when they are actually looking for substantive editing!

Incorrect terminology can lead to unfulfilled expectations (for example, the author receiving a proofread article when in fact he or she needs a heavily edited article) and it also indicates a lack of knowledge of the variety of language professionals, each of whom plays a distinct role in the scholarly publishing process. The second pitfall is especial-

ly important for journal editors to avoid.

## Improving the quality of English in journals

At the very beginning, an NNES journal editor should make sure that the journal’s website is designed well and the English used is clear and correct. If, for example, there are grammatical errors in the journal’s instructions to authors, one can’t demand perfect English from authors submitting to that journal! Then, depending on the journal’s operating budget, NNES editors can consider employing language professionals (or contracting companies that provide English language services) to do one or more of the following: (1) introducing guidelines on language usage in the journal’s instructions to authors (this can be as simple as recommending established style guides); (2) vetting authors’ editors or editing services and recommending them to authors through the journal’s website; (3) checking submitted articles to determine whether they need to be edited by an authors’ editor (but not actually doing the editing); and (4) editing or proofreading articles.

The points above are in increasing magnitude of effort and, correspondingly, investment. A language professional will be able to do (1) and (2) on a short-term contract, whereas (3) and (4) call for a long-term relationship between the journal and language professional.

Even with a small operating budget, journal editors may be able to implement at least (1) or (2). I recommend that NNES editors consider implementing (3) if they receive articles of varying English quality written by authors from diverse linguistic backgrounds. In this case, the language professional should have a close working relationship with the journal editor, and as a result the journal editor can improve his or her own abilities in evaluating the quality of English in articles. While hiring language professionals, journal editors should look for the below attributes in applicants: experience working with NNES authors; experience working for journals or publishers; membership in scientific editing societies, such as the Council of Science Editors and European Association of Science Editors; membership in general editing societies, such as the Society for Editors and Proofreaders (UK) and Society of Writers, Editors, and Translators (Japan); any special qualifications, such as a certification from the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences; and evidence of commitment to the profession, for example, blogging about writing or publishing.

Journal editors may also consider hiring people to improve page design and online publishing processes so that their journals look similar to established journals in the field. The visual appearance of a journal sends subtle messages to readers and authors regarding the journal’s quality.

## Conclusion

Transitioning from a regional language to English can make a journal accessible to readers around the world. To make the most of this opportunity and impress readers, it would be wise for journal editors to make sure that the quality of English in their journal is consistently high.

## Conflict of interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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