



Chapter 8

## *Working with Editors—and Their Edits*

By Monya Baker and Jessica Marshall

● For science writers, there aren't many relationships more important—or more complex—than those they have with their editors. When you work on staff, whether at a newspaper or magazine, or at a university or other institution, your editor is a colleague, and quite often your manager or boss as well. As a freelancer, your editor is not only a collaborator, but also one of your only lines of communication with a publication, and the main advocate for your story as it moves toward print. Either way, career successes—clips and paychecks—ultimately depend on your relationship with editors.

How do you make these relationships lasting ones? Give editors what they want.

And what do they want? The essentials are surprisingly simple:

Editors want to know that they are going to get copy on time in something approaching house style and that is properly reported and accurate. Those things sound so basic that you'd think every reporter would do them. I wish they did.

—Peter Aldhous, *New Scientist*

### **Understanding Your Editor**

An editor's mission is to produce great content for his or her publication under tight time pressure. "Our job is to get things in a magazine," says Adam Rogers, senior editor at *Wired*. "We acquire stories and we make

them suitable for our bosses and what our magazine does. We tend to think as writers that all editors want to do is rewrite, to step on our art. Nothing could be further from the case.”

The lesson? Good writers, whether on staff or working freelance, strive to make an editor’s job easy. They turn in copy on time and at the agreed-upon length, clearly describe complicated science, alert editors to potential problems right away, answer e-mails promptly, and stay pleasant throughout edits, says SciLance member Kendall Powell, who freelances as both an editor and a writer. “I largely view my relationships with editors as ‘customer service,’” she says. “Whatever I can do to make their life and job easier will hopefully end in my being rewarded the next time an editor needs a writer.”

But there is another important element in an editor-writer relationship, especially for longer projects. “I start with the assumption that we’re teammates, on the same side, and both trying to serve the story,” says SciLancer Jill Adams. After all, the point is not to prove how much you can do in isolation. The point is to get a good story.

When the relationship is at its best, appreciation flows both ways and the story gets better with each iteration. But lofty ideals of customer service and teamwork can be hard to maintain when an editor sits on your story for weeks and then wants additional reporting plus a revised draft right away—and you’ve got other obligations on your calendar. It’s even harder when errors creep in and your favorite quotes disappear as multiple editors work over your copy. Unfortunately, these experiences are just part of the process. Making a sustainable, rewarding career out of science writing depends on how well you can anticipate, avoid, and respond to these scenarios.

One final point before we move on to the nitty-gritty: Being accurate, meeting deadlines, and writing well are universal editorial desires. But beyond that, editors and their publications have their own distinctive preferences. So when in doubt, don’t take our word for it. Ask your editor.

### **From Assignment to Deadline**

Editors differ as to how much interaction they like before a story is turned in. Editors of daily or weekly news venues, who typically assign stories on short deadlines, told us that their writers rarely check in before filing. Fea-

ture editors, meanwhile, generally assign much longer projects and prefer to be kept in the loop during the reporting and writing process. An editor's interactions with you during the pitching stage (see Chapter 3) may help you gauge how and how much he or she wants to hear from you—whether by regular phone calls or an occasional brief e-mail.

There is one overarching principle, however, unanimously espoused by the editors and writers we spoke with:

Editors hate surprises. If anything comes up, whether it's an unexpected twist in the story, difficulty in reaching a critical source, or a personal crisis that threatens your ability to make the deadline, your editor needs to know ASAP.

—Bryn Nelson

If you're having serious problems or the story is shaping up to be substantially different from the one you were assigned, get in touch. Of course, use the editor's time well: don't bug your editor with minor questions about whether to use a particular quote, or with style questions that you can answer by reading the publication.

One way to avoid surprising your editor is to pay careful attention to your correspondence about the assignment. Whether your marching orders come in a formal assignment letter or a chain of e-mails, reread them regularly as you report and write to keep the editor's expectations in mind. (A tip: When you're writing, that assignment letter can be a useful source for a nut graf or an outline.) If you realize something is missing, go back and report some more. If you can't deliver on each specification, your editor should know before the deadline.

Some editors, like Rogers, write detailed assignment letters, ending with a list of what the writer will need to do for the story to succeed in their eyes. "I expect the writer to have that as a guidestone," Rogers says. "When the story comes in, if it doesn't have those things, it gives me the power to say, 'You didn't do this and I said you had to.'"

Sometimes editors give broad assignments: they might ask you to refresh a topic the magazine hasn't covered in a while, or to highlight a specific researcher. "They are expecting you to find the angle," explains Bryn. "They'll say, 'Here's an interesting scientist. Go find a story.'" He recalls being burned by just such a scenario. After researching the scientist and discussing interview questions with his editor, he wrote up an

article and turned it in. "It wasn't what the editor had in mind. They killed it," he says. "If I did it again, I'd send the first three or four paragraphs a week in advance to make sure we were still on the same page." The point: Just because you have a vague assignment doesn't mean the editor will be happy with whatever you turn in.

Even when expectations are crystal clear at the outset, editors recognize that the story will change during reporting, and they usually want to be kept abreast of those changes.

"Sometimes writers express that they are worried about bothering me, so they don't get in touch, but I think I speak for most editors when I say that that's what we're here for," says Laura Helmuth, science and health editor at *Slate*. "I would encourage people to think of an editor as a sounding board." Conversations with editors can offer solutions you may not have considered. Rogers notes that he can sometimes help with stumbling blocks by, say, making a phone call to a reluctant source or offering research support from an intern, but only if he knows what the writer needs.

"I tend to dread those phone calls or e-mails to my editor beforehand," says SciLance member Amanda Mascarelli, "but I'm always really grateful for them afterwards, and find myself wondering why I don't pick up the phone and call my editors more often." That said, it's important to tailor your interactions to editors' individual work styles, she says.

Plan on touching base with an editor after a reporting trip, or before settling in to write thousands of words. "It is nice to have a discussion with a writer once the reporting is under the belt," says Helen Pearson, features editor at *Nature*. "It's much better to be asked questions along the way than to have a disastrous story in my inbox." In fact, unexpected twists can be a fresh source of assignments. "Contact your editor with an update when you hit a snag or roadblock in reporting and you wonder if your story should take a slightly different turn from what you'd originally proposed," says SciLancer Susan Moran. "I did this recently, and it led to a separate news story and a postponement of the original feature story until more evidence came in."

Occasionally a story falls apart when the reporter digs deeper. "A writer will sometimes send me a note and say, 'I'm starting to get a bad feeling about a story,'" says David Grimm, *Science's* online news editor. This shows your news judgment and is better than filing a story that doesn't hold water. For a freelancer it is "doubly impressive," Grimm

notes, since the writer is giving up full payment. “It really speaks to the integrity of the writer.”

Still, you don’t want to make your first impression with this kind of bailout. “If you’re trying to make a new contact with an editor, I would say you want to make absolutely sure you’ve got a cracking original story for them and that it isn’t going to crumble to dust in their hands,” Aldhous says.

More often than not, the story does print and bears a strong resemblance to the story assigned. By giving you a byline, editors are acknowledging your responsibility for the story, and how much interaction you have with your editor will usually be your decision. “I think writers are grown-ups and I try not to be a micromanager,” says Pearson. “Once they’ve got the commission, they can go find the story and then come back when they want to.” If you really think it’s important to talk something through with your editor, trust your instinct and be persistent, even if he or she is tough to reach.

## Filing the Story

As you approach filing, remember some cardinal rules:

Meet your deadline and word count. That’s point number one for a reason, and it’s especially true for a daily site or a weekly magazine with an inflexible press schedule. Missing a deadline in this situation can be an unforgivable offense.

When reporters do fall behind, they make things worse for themselves if they disappear, says Rosie Mestel, former health and science editor of the *Los Angeles Times* and now the chief news editor of *Nature*. “I don’t like it when someone goes dark just because they are running late. The editor needs to know the person is still out there and the copy is coming.”

Especially for monthlies and features, editors can often give you more time if you ask for it early enough. Editors would far rather have notice and plan accordingly than to clear their desk for a story that doesn’t arrive.

The lesson? Don’t be late, and as soon as you seriously fear you might be, give fair warning.

As for word count, missing the mark is to some editors a sin as foul as a missed deadline. “If I assign you 4,000 words and you give me 8,000, the first thing I want to do is kill it. The second thing I want to do is send

it back to you and say, 'Your assignment was to write 4,000 words. Go do your assignment,'" says Rogers.

A good rule of thumb is to file within 10 percent of the assigned word count.

**Be accurate.** "If I find something wrong, how can I trust that reporter again?" asks Betsy Mason, science editor for Wired.com. "I don't have time to fact-check." *Science's* Grimm agrees. "Accuracy is the biggest thing," he says. "Bad writing can be fixed."

A related point is to be sure that you have reported deeply enough to give your editors confidence. They expect that you have hunted out critical voices from appropriate sources, asked the tough questions, and rigorously checked any claims of being first, fastest, or best. "It always worries me when I just have a sense from talking to the writer that they don't understand the material," says Pearson. Long quotes from sources explaining the science tend to be warning signs, Aldhous notes. They suggest that the writer didn't understand the subject well enough to write his or her own description. For Mestel, one symptom of under-reported stories is the use of vague terms such as "positive health outcomes" rather than specific measures such as blood pressure, glucose levels, or longer life span.

And being accurate includes crediting sources fairly. Mestel recalls encountering a jargony sentence and discovering it was lifted verbatim from a scientific abstract. "We just can't work with people who will do something like that," she says. "The people we trust are the people we turn to again and again."

**Provide useful supplementary info.** Editors may ask you to supply web links and other material to fact-checkers as well as ideas for photographs, illustrations, or multimedia. "Any sizeable piece in the *Times* is going to have some sort of illustration, and the more value that adds, the better," says David Corcoran, editor of the *New York Times* science section. "I always say to the writer, 'How would we illustrate this piece?' I expect the writer to work closely with the picture editor and the graphics editor to make sure that we get the best possible illustration for the space we have."

**Write well, and in the publication's style.** Editors told us again and again that many writers don't pay enough attention to what their publication "is."

To get the right voice, read stories from the publication you are writing for. “I notice right away if writers don’t read *Wired*—they turn in something unlike anything we’ve ever run,” says Mason. “If you haven’t taken the time to read the site, that will be an obvious, huge strike against you.”

**Stand out.** Here’s what editors told us separates the best writers from adequate ones:

*Structure:* “Features are tough to write because you’re drowning in material. The outstanding writers can pull back and craft a story out of that. They can see what needs to stay and what needs to go,” Pearson says. Writers should analyze story structures from the relevant section of the magazine before, during, and after reporting. They should also discuss ideas for structure when checking in with their editors.

*Style:* Writers should follow the particular style of the publication they’re writing for. For instance, British publications punctuate quotes and spell words differently than their American counterparts. “The people who straightaway blow me away are the ones who adapt to it,” says Aldhous. “If I get an American freelancer who sends me an article that’s been spellchecked in British English, it shows attention to detail.”

*The whole package:* While reporting, chase down images, audio, or video. If you’re writing a story about bird songs, for example, ask for recordings.

## Getting the Draft Back: How to Take Editing Well

From the moment a writer sends in a story, he or she is dying to know what the editor thinks. It’s like the anticipation before getting back a graded test or a report card. Waiting can be excruciating. But don’t interpret silence as an indication that your editors hate your story. They’re probably preoccupied with the fine details of another story that’s ahead of yours in the queue—or stuck in an interminable meeting and afraid to check e-mail.

*Being edited is hard. Emotionally it’s kind of battering. No matter how gentle the edit is, the draft is something you’ve kind of poured your soul into. There’s a range of how personally or deeply people feel that, but what’s independent is how professional and gracious they are.*

—LAURA HELMUTH,  
SLATE



Even if you get your story back with praise, seeing the edits can hurt. Why has your favorite section been shrunk to a single sentence? What if the editor wants some more reporting to flesh out an angle? Or if the science is mangled because the editor didn't understand what you wrote? And are you really expected to send it back by the day after tomorrow?

We've all been there. This is what you need to do: Give your dog an earful, call a friend, take a walk, or down a pint (ice cream or otherwise). Then write the following back to your editor: "Thanks for the edits. I'll get on it."

This is where responsiveness and professionalism make all the difference. Your interactions with your editor as you get a story ready for publication can be the deciding factor in getting repeat assignments. "The impression you don't want to give is that revisions are a pain. They're part of the process," says Aldhous. "The speed, the willingness to make another call, to find another source, to go and do a bit more research when necessary—when that is dealt with promptly, enthusiastically, that's great."

Cursory, superficial responses to requests annoy editors and create more work. "Take edits seriously," says Mason. "I don't edit for the sake of editing, ever." Above all, be polite and cooperative.

For short news stories, or stories on tight deadline, the edit you get back may be close to the final form, and you may be asked to check only for factual errors and misleading changes. Longer stories may involve more extensive rewriting and several versions back and forth.

At some point, your assigning editor may send your story up a chain of editorial command. This may include a top editor who will edit the story with fresh eyes, a copy editor or subeditor who will finesse sentences and check for house style, and sometimes a magazine editor who makes sure content across the publication isn't repetitive or contradictory. Your assigning editor is typically the interface between you and the rest of the editorial staff. Although it can be hard to revisit the story time and again, treat these new requests seriously. If you strongly disagree with a request, concisely and politely articulate your argument to your editor to help him or her make a case on your behalf. The best writers see every stage as an opportunity to make the story better, Helmuth says.

So stay the course, remembering the ideals of customer service and teamwork, even when your story goes back and forth several times or encounters editors who contradict previous editors' comments.

A few guidelines for navigating the edit:



**Pick your battles.** Editors don't want to work with writers who fight over commas. In general, if the edited piece is factually accurate and you feel readers will understand it, don't object to the edits.

Remember that editorial decisions are, by definition, for the editor to make. The goal is not to show off your facility with words or include every interview you conducted; the goal is to produce a story that will carry readers of that particular publication from beginning to end.

**Challenge an editor respectfully.** "Good editors don't want writers simply to take their edits," Aldhous says. "It's easy for people starting out to be so glad that they're getting a commission that they aren't as assertive as they should be." Alert your editor to errors and changes in meaning that get introduced during the editing process. If you think edits have removed an important aspect of the story, explain why.

Also, if you don't understand what the editor is after, ask, don't guess. "If you're confused, and if you send back a draft that doesn't resolve the confusion, you're just wasting your time and your editor's time," says Bryn.

**Be clear about what you can accomplish.** Editors may have no idea how much work their requests will require. They may assume, for example, that you have answers to all their queries in your notes. If a question or proposed change requires chasing down a source, you may need more time. If so, clarify with your editor whether that time is available.

SciLance members emphasize that a cheerful, cooperative attitude makes a big difference. "I'm willing to go the extra mile when it's possible, and particularly when editors have been especially good to me at other points," says Sarah Webb. If a request seems unreasonable or will require significant time, explain why without getting huffy. Kendall Powell says, "Helen Pearson once told me, 'Kendall, I know sometimes I ask for the moon. And it's not that I always expect you to be able to deliver it, but I still have to ask just in case you actually can!'"

Finally, if the editor is really asking for considerably more reporting or side pieces outside the original scope of the assignment, you may want to renegotiate so that you get paid for the extra work. (This is where having assignment letters and expectations in writing can be really helpful.)

**Suggest an alternative.** Never just change an edit back to the original. If you don't like something an editor wrote, suggest an alternative. "If it

was changed there was probably a reason for it," Aldhous says. "Let's forget about going back to the original wording and move on to a form of words that both are happy with and is correct."

If anything is incorrect, fix it. If your editor introduces errors, suggest accurate options. If something is wrong, be firm in the need for a change that makes it correct. You may need to explain briefly and politely that a technique has several inventors, that a study was performed with biopsies, not in patients, or that being HIV-positive is not the same as having AIDS. Be careful at this point not to add too many words to the total story length.

**When in doubt, use the phone.** A phone call can defuse an escalating back-and-forth e-mail exchange, and get both of you back on the same page. Writers and editors agree that sometimes that's the best way to get the process back on track. "If I think it's a situation that will turn into hours of e-mail versus five minutes on the phone, I'll try the phone first," says Sarah.

**Assume your editor has good intentions.** Accept that your editor understands the readers of the publication you are writing for. Remember that he or she is representing them. Also, know that the e-mails and changes from your editor may reflect things going on behind the scenes at the publication that you'll never have to know. "What's happening that the freelancer doesn't see within the magazine is that the editor is fighting for more pages, for a better art budget, for better placement, trying to keep the writer's language protected from top editors, and speaking on the writer's behalf to the fact-checker," says Helmuth. "The editor is your biggest advocate."

### **After the Story, the Relationship Continues**

Completing an assignment is not just an end in itself. It's a bridge to the next assignment, and the next. But remember, if you're a freelancer, you don't have to keep working for any particular editor or publication. If writing for them is not worth the money—or the byline—stop pitching and politely decline additional assignments.

Conversely, when you find a good editor, latch on tight. Stay in touch and show that you're proud of your work. Scott Dodd, the editor of OnEarth.org, says that writers who use blogs and social media tools to

expand a story's audience are "an editor's dream." If, as you promote your story, it gets picked up by a popular aggregator, send a brief e-mail to your editor (but not a series of them!). And remember to give thanks where due—if someone at the magazine helped with a great image or lede, acknowledge that in an e-mail or even in your online posts about the story.

Particularly after you've written for an editor a couple of times, you might ask for feedback in a way that doesn't put the editor on the spot. Saying something like, "Have you seen anything in my stories that you'd like me to work on?" or "Is there anything I could be doing differently that would make your life easier?" leaves the door open for the editor to respond or not. It shows a positive attitude and, if the editor responds, makes you better able to target the editor's needs.

Another way to stay in touch is to establish yourself as a resource, and as someone who follows a particular topic closely.

When you're working with a good editor, every story becomes a lesson in better reporting and writing. Producing a great story is hard work, and few people can do it alone, says SciLancer Michelle Nijhuis. "Good editors, and there are quite a few of them, can both make your stories better and make you feel proud of the process. The longer I'm in this profession, the more I appreciate them."

One final tip: When your fantastic story wins an award, make sure you thank your editor, says Helmuth. "This is a little secret among editors: we really listen for that. It's really gracious and it helps your reputation and it makes people want to work with you."

*When I'm working regularly for an editor, I anticipate his or her weekly/monthly needs and send ideas and forward relevant e-mails about events/findings—even if I don't have time to do the resulting story. I think that taking this approach both keeps you in the editor's good graces and makes you a go-to person.*

—VIRGINIA GEWIN



## SCILANCE SAYS . . .

- Deliver **accurate, thoroughly reported, clearly written copy** to your editor **on time** and within 10 percent of the assigned length.
- Work to **keep your editor's job easy**. Editors are busy and have to produce work to satisfy their bosses and the style of their publications. Think of your job **as customer service**.

(Continues)



## SCILANCE SAYS (Continued)

- **Editors hate surprises.** Pay close attention to correspondence that spells out your editor's expectations for the story and **make sure you deliver** on them. Let your editors know as soon as possible if the story is turning out differently, if you hit serious stumbling blocks, or if you are going to be late.
- Remember that **your editor is your ally**. You are working together to produce a great story. Don't be afraid to connect with your editor to discuss the project.
- **Find video, images, and other extras** that can be packaged together with your story.
- **Take your edits graciously, but not uncritically.** Don't quibble over commas, but if any edits make your story wrong or misleading, speak up and suggest alternatives.
- **Never just change an edit back to the original.** Assume your editor had a valid reason for tweaking your text, and look for another option that you are both comfortable with.
- When your story gets picked up by other outlets or wins an award—or even when it just comes out a lot better than your original draft—**thank your editor**.