Evaluating the NIH Library Editing Service
An Analysis of the Effect of Editors’ Suggestions on the Published Work of NIH

Background
Providing quality, responsive service to National Institutes of Health (NIH) researchers is paramount to the mission of the NIH Library (NIHL). Recognizing the complex needs of researchers when communicating their findings, the Library created a Writing Center and Editing Service in 2008. Expanding on traditional library service, its purpose is to support NIH staff with their manuscripts from concept to publication, especially those for whom English is not their primary language.

Purpose
In order to learn whether the editing service had a positive effect on NIH authors' work, librarians conducted a pilot study comparing editing suggestions given for manuscript improvement with the published journal article. Librarians framed the research question as:
• Are editing suggestions made by NIHL Editing Service editors incorporated in NIH published journal articles?
• Put another way: Is the NIHL having an impact on the published science?

Methods
• Conducted a literature search: PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, LISTA, and Google Scholar
• Collated citations of all edited manuscripts as a Word document n=147
• Generated random numbers for selection of 5 edited/published research papers using Random.org / integers 1-147 (# of NIH manuscripts that received editing assistance between January 2008 and February 2012)

Results
• Two of the five analyzed papers were ultimately published in a different journal than was planned or underwent significant revision after the authors submitted the manuscripts to the editing service
• Analysis of the three other journal articles showed that 243 of 289 editors’ suggestions (84%) were accepted by NIH authors
• In addition, librarian editors were acknowledged for their editing assistance in 2 of the 5 published articles

Conclusions
• Editing can be a messy process
  ✓ Authors change chosen journal for submission; edited style not appropriate
• Authors have some common challenges
  ✓ Definite (the) and indefinite (a) articles
  ✓ Formatting numbers/units (spacing, capitalization)
  ✓ Plural and singular verbs (noun/verb agreement)
  ✓ Clarity and conciseness
  ✓ Conforming/formatting to journal style
• Authors have the option to accept or reject editing suggestions
• Does the NIH Library impact science?
  ✓ Yes! 84% of editors’ suggestions accepted for 3 NIH published papers submitted to journal edited for, without major revision
• NIHL editors’ contributions acknowledged in published papers
• This study provides a process for future/ongoing evaluation

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Quantification
For the purposes of this research project, we counted each instance of an editing suggestion separately. While it may appear, from the number of suggestions made, that the manuscripts required a lot of work to become publication ready, that was not the case. Most manuscripts that NIH librarian editors review benefit from added punctuation to improve readability, a correction of noun/verb agreement, or formatting to meet journal guidelines. An author may have a few writing challenges that are evident throughout their manuscript. Once these are identified, and the editor provides references to punctuation or grammar rules, the author becomes aware of how to improve current and future manuscripts.

Criteria for Analysis
We created a evaluation rubric for this research, based on the work of L. M. Daggett (2008) and others. We will be happy to share our version, upon request. In general, we looked for the following aspects within the manuscripts used for this research project:

- Spelling errors (American or British English used consistently, word treatment consistent, etc.)
- Term treatment (consistency in hyphenation, capitalization, sub- or super-script, etc.)
- Grammar errors (a paper should not be published with these errors)
- Format and sequencing issues (alignment, lists, etc.)
- Revision of unclear sentences/phrases/paragraphs (for suggested editing)
- Adherence to the journal’s Instructions for Authors guidelines (title, abstract, section headings, article length, etc.)

References

For more information about the NIH Library Writing Center and Editing Service, go to: http://nihlibrary.campusguides.com/WritingCenter.