Copyediting and proofreading scientific publications after acceptance

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Your revised manuscript has been formally accepted for publication in a peer-reviewed scientific journal. A thrilling moment to be sure, but don’t forget that your job as an author is not done. You may now start working with a copyeditor with little scientific background, rather than with a scientist acting as a journal editor. The final phase of scientific publication has two stages. Copyediting is meant to improve the clarity, presentation, and consistency of the text and images (Day 1998). Proofreading is the fine examination of galley proofs that show the exact appearance of the paper in print (Hyatt et al. 2017). I must see a completely clean copy of proofs of any published work of mine before publication. I will accept no eyes but my own for publications that I author.

There are wide variations in the extent of copyediting performed by different scientific journals. In many cases, the important copyedits are included as author queries at the page proof stage. More substantial copyediting is common for magazines and trade journals. Staff writers have liberty to re-phrase and re-write your work to the point of adding entire sentences or paragraphs. My works have benefitted from excellent writers adding examples or sidebars to articles for the popular literature. There are scientific journals where copyediting for clarity is typical, although not usually to this extent. Authors writing in a non-native language may seek concerted copyediting for grammar and clarity. Copyedits are meant to be constructive, but there are cases where the meaning of a sentence is changed inappropriately, when edits for clarity are introduced by well-meaning copyeditors who may not be knowledgeable of the science. Disagreements can arise between authors and copyeditors over a turn of phrase, what is considered conventional, and terms in standard usage (University of Chicago Press Editorial Staff, 2017). These will need to be resolved, usually without editorial involvement, with the author prevailing in my experience.

Copyediting should scrub the document for errors, both factual and typographical. It is a time when the publisher may ask for higher resolution or modified versions of drawings, graphs, or images. Assets from other sources included in the paper should be checked for copyrights and fair usage. The reference list is examined closely to put each of the bibliographic entries into the proper format for the journal. Citations should be checked for the accuracy of author names, title formatting, volume, and page numbers. In some cases, there may be questions as to how to properly cite a published article. For example, if the original article has a title or author list that is all capital letters, then there could be disagreements as to how to capitalize certain words when formatting sentence capitalization. In my experience, these types of formatting queries tend to be resolved in favor of the copyeditors’ suggestions.

The final stage before publication is proofreading. Perhaps months after your manuscript has been accepted, and without warning, page proofs arrive as a pleasant surprise. However, even though months have passed, the proofs must be edited and returned within 48 hours! Fortunately, examining every character of the page proofs of my next publication is a great joy for me. The process may take a couple of rounds of editing, because in the end, I must