
Improving the Journal Review Process: The Question of Ghostwriting

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Recognizing a widespread discontent among reviewees, Epstein (October 1995) offered a dozen suggestions for improving the journal review process. Furthermore, he described various constructive changes he had made in his own behavior (both as a reviewer and reviewee) and urged others to follow his lead. Finally, he expressed the hope that his remarks stimulate additional suggestions for improving the review process. It is for this reason that I offer the following comments.

My concern centers on the question of where in the journal review process detailed editing and reviewing end and ghostwriting begins. This question touches not only on the areas of writing, editing, and reviewing but on the ethics of authorship (Garfield, 1985). No one denies that reviewers provide a reservoir of knowledge that no single editor could hope to equal. Conscientious reviewers can also protect authors from making careless errors. And we all agree that skilled copy editing can enhance a manuscript's clarity. What seems to be a relatively new puzzle, however, is whether editors and reviewers ever "cross the line" of authorship and function as ghostwriters.

In my own experience and in that of many colleagues, this quandary has arisen repeatedly, as editor and reviewer comments have become increasingly more detailed and demanding. It is not uncommon, for example, for an author to receive a set of editor and reviewer comments that equals the length of the submitted manuscript. Editors and reviewers (not to mention copy editors if a manuscript is finally accepted for publication) seem to think nothing of rewriting and even retitling an author's work.

Although this commingling of the legitimate roles of author, editor, and reviewer is troublesome, what is even more disturbing is the final product: a manuscript that its author may not have intended to write, which expresses in someone else's language thoughts the author may not have intended to convey, under a title the author may not have selected. Such situations turn editors and reviewers into ghostwriters, thus blurring the responsibility for a manuscript's content and raising the question of legitimate authorship. This unfortunate scenario pushes the role of

editing far beyond maximizing the clarity of an author's ideas.

A spectrum exists from reviewer or editor to ghostwriter to coauthor. My suggestion is that journal editors develop and enact practices that protect the integrity of the scientific enterprise while respecting the prerogatives and ethics of authorship. In particular, they should bear in mind that authorship is a scholarly endeavor in which the true origins of thoughts, and the words used to express them, should be known. This suggestion is, of course, consistent with the "Open Letter to Authors for APA Journals" that is provided to everyone who submits a manuscript to an APA journal. I quote: "Authors should cite the sources of their ideas." What neither this "Open Letter" nor the APA "Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct" (1992) addresses, however, is how manuscript changes resulting from editor and reviewer comments should be acknowledged. As Garfield (1985) asked, "Should explicit acknowledgment be done on a line-by-line or word-by-word basis?" (p. 8). Acknowledgements could easily reach absurd lengths, recognizing not only significant contributions but also points at which material was omitted on an editor's or a reviewer's demand.

As forms of human expression, words are explanatory constructs that reflect ideologies. To tamper with these constructs or to color an author's logic and rhetoric with the overly invasive demands of editors and reviewers denies the author full intellectual responsibility for his or her work and permits subrosa influences to be exerted on both a discipline's current character and its future development.

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