



Q&A with Sara D. Hauber

By Sara D. Hauber, MA, edited by Kimberly Korwek, PhD

AMWA member Sara D. Hauber, MA, has been a professional editor and writer since 1996. Since 2009, her specialty has been health-related journal manuscripts, with a focus on developmental and substantive editing. For the past several years, she has been working on contract as a scientific writing instructor for nursing students, and it is this work that she describes for us here.

What is your title?

I've been a professional manuscript editor for many years. But regarding my teaching of scientific writing, my title has been in flux. It started as "Students' Editorial Advisor," but students frequently thought that because the word "editorial" was in my title it meant I would edit their papers for them. So I modified it to "Students' Editorial Advisor and Scientific Writing Instructor."

What do you do, exactly?

In my role as a scientific writing instructor, my main purpose is to instruct nursing students, on an individual basis, how to write in scientific style. The first step in the process is the student making the decision to schedule an appointment with me. For each confirmed appointment, the student sends me a paper—either a course paper or a manuscript for publication—and I return the paper to the student with comments and feedback related to all aspects of good scientific writing: grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, flow/organization, argumentation/persuasion, APA or AMA style, etc. If the student needs help with problems that I feel are too difficult to teach in written form, we schedule a phone call so we can talk through the issue together.

Working with me is optional, but some faculty members strongly urge their students (or certain students) to schedule an appointment with me so I can review and comment on the students' writing. I serve students at all levels of writing

ability and at all degree levels, from those seeking a bachelor degree in nursing to those on their way to earning a doctorate (either a PhD or a Doctor of Nursing Practice [DNP]). Most of these students have not taken formal writing classes since they entered university, and many of the DNP students have been working in a health care setting for years before enrolling in the program and could be decades removed from writing instruction. They express great appreciation for the services I offer.

My specific activities vary from day to day, giving me the opportunity to exercise my skills at multitasking in the editorial realm. I might be figuring out the best way to teach a first-year BSN student how to write an effective topic sentence for a class paper in the morning, then explaining to a DNP student how to properly report the results of an ANOVA in the afternoon.

In addition to instructing students in this way, I also provide comprehensive manuscript editing services to faculty and graduate students. But that work is not part of my role as a scientific writing instructor.

How did you get into this kind of work?

It was luck. Immediately after earning my MA in health communication, I was assisting with research at a major research-focused medical center. I had spoken with one of the faculty there about teaching the fellows how to become better writers. Sadly, that did not pan out because that same faculty member transferred to another university. A couple of months after she transferred, however, she told me the dean at her new institution was looking for someone to help improve the students' writing. I fit the exact need they had at exactly the right time.

Writing, and the English language, have been my passions since I was a kid. My dad and my grandmother instilled in me a love of words when I was very young. And for some

reason I've always been a teacher, able to explain complex situations and concepts in ways that my audience can understand. I graduated with an honors degree in English and entered the world of publishing (as an editor), but I gravitated toward teaching after a few years and left publishing to pursue other people-oriented goals. One reason I returned to graduate school, after 7 years working in a different field, was so that I could research a specific communication technique that fascinated me. But after some personal tragedies, I ended up not being able to complete my PhD studies. I feel that my current role as a writing instructor is the next most perfect fit. I get to apply all of the writing and editing skills that I have been learning and using since I was a teenager, and I get to teach very engaged, appreciative students. It's truly a wonderful mix of 2 of my favorite things—English writing and teaching—but without the immense pressure of a faculty position.

Do you work on campus, then?

No, all of my work is done virtually. In one sense, it makes the work more difficult to do well because talking through problems face to face is sometimes much easier than instructing via written comments. But in truth, my work would be impossible for me to do if I were only meeting with students in person because most of the DNP students are scattered across the United States. They are only on campus once or twice per year.

What is the most difficult part of your job?

I find that the most challenging aspect of my job is when my advice contradicts what the student has been told by a faculty member. This has happened with regards to APA style, which, thankfully, is easy to remedy because the style guide itself puts an end to the conflict. It has also happened with much more difficult, content-related issues, such as when a student includes qualitative data in the results section of a paper but did not employ or report rigorous qualitative data analysis methods in the paper. In many cases, my hands are tied and I have to tell the student to follow the guidance of the faculty member, even though my experience and training tell me that the faculty member is mistaken. That's definitely the biggest challenge I face in this role.

What is the best part of your job?

The best part for me is receiving the students' genuine appreciation of what I do. When one of the doctoral students gets published in a leading journal and tells me "I could not have done this without you," or "I learned so much from you about how to be a better writer," that makes me feel great.

The second-best part is being totally mobile, even though relying on the Internet to do my job is often a headache I wish I could live without.

Also, my brain works on a micro and macro level constantly, and in that way this work is perfectly suited to me. It makes me extremely happy that it can be put to use, helping these wonderful students learn to be better writers.

What advice would you give to someone interested in doing what you do?

First, you must have a deep understanding of the English language and the rules of good writing. I think most editors have this understanding. In addition, you must be able to "teach" a student who knows very little about English grammar or good writing how to understand and apply any one of the millions of bits of information that you implicitly apply when you edit a piece of writing yourself. It's not enough to be able to change a passive sentence to an active one. Rather, you must be able to explain to the student the difference between passive and active construction and then teach the student when, why, and how to change passive to active.

When it comes to teaching the doctoral students—many of whom must submit a publishable manuscript to graduate—you have to know the requirements and style of journal publications. What content belongs in the introduction? What is the proper style and flow of each section of text? How does one write about the methods? How does one report the results of various statistical tests? What belongs or doesn't belong in a table? These questions represent one tiny fraction of the knowledge base you need to really help students write quality manuscripts. Without that expert knowledge about manuscript style and content, you could still teach the bachelors and masters students how to improve their course papers, but you wouldn't be able to effectively teach the doctoral students. I also find that having had an extremely rigorous, research methods-focused graduate program (and advisor) helps me immensely.

What tools do you use to perform this work?

Style guides and the Internet are my best friends! I use the APA and AMA style manuals constantly. I also refer students to the APA Style Blog and the Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) websites for additional help. I rely on the Internet to do my job: Students schedule appointments, submit papers, and receive feedback from me via the Internet, so my work would be impossible without it.

What personal qualities do you think make a good scientific writing instructor?

Patience and understanding are crucial. It can be difficult—especially after one has been an editor for many years—to step back and realize that not many students (particularly in the hard sciences) know how to use language as well as we

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ments and structure to remain as they are; the risk is too great. As officers of AMWA, we have an obligation to ensure that AMWA complies with laws and best practices for nonprofits. To do otherwise is irresponsible and jeopardizes the future of AMWA for all of us.

Reference

1. BoardSource. Leading with Intent. A National Index of Nonprofit Board Practices. Available at www.leadingwithintent.org. Accessed April 18, 2017.

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editors do. But if I am to be a good teacher, I must approach the problem of writing from my student's perspective. I remind myself with each and every paper that this student has not had 15+ years of writing and editing instruction or 20+ years of writing and editing experience. Anyone else wishing to be an effective scientific writing instructor needs to be empathic to the student's reality and to adopt a teaching style that works with professional, busy adults who are experts in their own field. Being encouraging and expressing genuine belief in students' abilities to learn how to write well—these attributes are crucial.

Any final words for our readers?

Given the state of the publishing world today, I am hopeful that the kind of services I provide become more popular in all manner of health-related degree programs. Whether we're talking about nursing, medical, or public health students, they all need the help of great writing instructors. I hope that this brief look at my role helps convince other expert writers and editors to explore this as a possible career path.

Sara is eager to mentor writers or editors interested in becoming scientific writing instructors. She can be reached at sara@myresearcheditor.com.

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