Editor-author conflict from the editor’s perspective

Even though editing is part of the writing process, editor–author conflict in scholarly communication is not uncommon. Such conflict exists throughout the world, in journal and book publishing, and also in academia. An author may be an experienced and skilled researcher as well as a talented writer, but s/he may not be a meticulous editor.

Few people have the drive for perfection, or have the third eye that is absolutely essential to examine all the details of any writing intended for publication. An editor looks for punctuation, correct spelling and use of grammar, redundancies, inconsistencies, sentence structure, subject–verb agreement, jargon, reading ease, logical flow of text, clarity, and formatting. It is very hard to modify someone else’s draft, and it is sometimes equally or more difficult to convince the author to accept the editorial changes made to his/her manuscript.

Editing is an unseen and “thankless job” (!) everywhere. Talukder rightly said that sometimes editors need to work like “butchers” but for a good purpose with a good intention. Authors appreciate the editor when they find their manuscripts are more readable, more organized, and easier to understand. But even then, misunderstandings may arise between author and editor on some points, and this can lead to conflict that can be difficult to overcome. Such experiences of editors from developed countries are reported elsewhere. To date little is known about editor–author conflicts in Bangladesh.

This viewpoint is based primarily on my experience in editing research reports and papers at the Research and Evaluation Division (RED) of BRAC during 1995–1999. The conflicts I experienced with authors, their reactions, reasons for such conflicts, handling of authors who reacted seriously on editorial changes, authors’ compliance in incorporating the editorial changes, and suggestions are described.

About BRAC
BRAC is the largest non-governmental, not-for-profit development organization in the world, working throughout Bangladesh to reduce poverty and empower the poor and women. BRAC works with people whose lives are dominated by extreme poverty, illiteracy, disease, and other handicaps. With multifaceted development interventions, BRAC strives to bring about positive change in the quality of life of the poor people of Bangladesh. The major development interventions of BRAC include socioeconomic development, primary education, and essential healthcare services. The development interventions include microfinance, micro-enterprise development, advocacy, awareness development, skill and capacity development, mobilization, institution building, and social development. BRAC Education Programme is especially targeted to poor children who never enrolled in any school or who dropped out of school before completing the primary course, and includes non-formal primary education, pre-primary education, adolescent development programmes, and post-primary basic and continuing education. Health interventions include essential healthcare through trained health volunteers, facility-based services through static health centres, community-based nutrition centres, antenatal care centres, and pilot initiatives such as maternal, neonatal, and child health, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria control, community-based arsenic mitigation, and micro-health insurance projects.

The Research and Evaluation Division, an independent unit within BRAC, provides research support to BRAC programmes by designing programmes and measuring their impacts on the community. It also undertakes collaborative studies with institutions at home and abroad. Currently, it has 53 researchers, 30 support staff, and 41 project staff of whom 47% are female. Its researchers generate research reports, papers, and reviews for publication in peer reviewed journals, as well as working papers and monographs, mostly in English, on socioeconomic development, education, public health, nutrition, environment, training, gender issues, and communication.

Participants in the study
All of the researchers at BRAC at some point become authors or co-authors, and so all of them became subjects in this observational study. The authors were a heterogeneous group, including senior, mid-level, and junior researchers, aged 22–60 years, and 43% were female (February 1999). Research experience varied between 1 and 30 years; all were highly educated (mostly masters and some PhDs and medical graduates) and had research and writing experience commensurate with their age and length of service. As of February 1999, eight staff had doctoral degrees from home and abroad, and 20 had master’s degree from abroad. All authors were Bangladeshi nationals.

Problematic sentences
Problematic sentences were of several types: wordy sentences full of jargon, long sentences (range 35–116 words), and inappropriately constructed sentences, some of which were illogical and amusing (which I am sure the authors did not intend). Examples are shown in Boxes 1 and 2 (next page). A few authors tried to justify their lengthy sentences by showing examples from other international journals; however, they were finally convinced of the value of short and jargon-free sentences in direct speech.
Box 1: Lengthy sentences (unedited verbatim)

The study argues that in the post-transitional (high performing) stage, the effects of current level of microcredit programmes on contraceptive use is expected to be minimal but if the programme addresses to tackle the sources of subordination, provides education that leads to self-worth and access to information, and help women gain self-esteem and ability to control over their own bodies, the process of women’s empowerment in rural Bangladesh, if matured, would also began to transform the context for family planning programme. [81 words]

The advantages available at the BHCs were cheaper services (cheaper consultation fee, cheaper medicine), located near their homes so travel time was short, good medicine, having skilled MBBS degree holding physicians, effective treatment of TB, short waiting time, most medicine were available, doctor always available, immunization of children and pregnant mothers were available, people get better from BHC treatment, BHC medicine, having skilled MBBS degree holding physicians, doctors were good and openly discussed the illness with the patients, pathology tests were available, BRAC staff visited village to village, TV available, there was a place to sit down, and good behaviour of BHC staff. [116 words]

The paper concludes that by creating a system of organising poor rural women into strongly bonded social groups and the process of learning from experience, ensuring participation in group meetings and savings, providing a set up capable of generating self-reliant economic activities to begin the process of alleviating poverty – the credit-based self employment and income generating programmes have created high hope and enthusiasm among the policy planners and development managers in Bangladesh. [72 words]

Nature of editor–author conflict

Strong disagreement between authors and editors leads to conflict. If left unresolved these conflicts can form a barrier against improving a manuscript, and they can also reduce working harmony and relationships. Such conflicts may be caused by suggested editorial changes, ego problems and overconfidence on both sides, understimation of the other’s ability, lack of patience, and inflexibility in accepting suggested changes.

Reactions from authors vary widely. One senior researcher with a higher education from abroad reacted seriously on two occasions. He became emotional, arrogant, impatient, and argued to justify his own writing style. He did not want to accept any of the suggestions made or to improve his writing. Even though the readability score of this author’s unedited manuscript was very low according to the Flesch Readability Test\(^\text{2}\) (this test can be used as a scientific evidence to help convince authors that their writing needs revision) he was extremely confident in his style of writing and he accepted corrections only of typographical and minor grammatical errors. He said “Please indicate only the grammatical mistakes and typos in my paper. You do not need to think of the text and the construction of the sentences. I will take care of that.” However, I did not accept this and I stated clearly that an editor was not simply a proofreader. I made him understand the role, duties, and responsibilities of an institutional editor of scholarly publications and I also made it clear that if I was given a report or paper to edit I had to do just that – but without compromising with my professional ethics, duties, and responsibilities, otherwise he could take it back and should proofread himself. Finally he said, “Well, you may do whatever you like, but I think you are wasting your time. I am not going to incorporate any changes other than grammatical and spelling mistakes, possibly not more than 10% of your changes.”

A few authors criticised the editor, and said the editor had made unnecessary changes. This group was reluctant to accept suggested changes, even if those changes were necessary to improve the readability of their reports (by reducing the length of the sentences, using short words, and reorganizing the text).

Finally, a few authors passed negative remarks, and still others were passive and indifferent, failing to interact with the editor, although interaction could have minimized the gap in misunderstanding.

The conflicts or reactions varied widely with the author’s level and place of education, and with length of service. Authors who had completed a masters or doctorate overseas tended to react with the response that they knew quite good English and wrote well. Some of the senior staff thought that no editing of their writing was necessary, but afterwards serious mistakes were found in their published documents. One commented, “It seems that you [the editor] are too busy. So, I think I should not increase your burden of editing by giving you my report. My report is in a good shape and it does not need any editing. I will submit it to the management as a final report.” A few months later I found a copy of the final version of that report; it had been submitted to the management without editing and contained serious mistakes, inconsistencies, and editorial flaws. A report such as this should not be allowed to leave the office, because it may affect the prestige and goodwill of the organization. Ultimately this paper was edited, thoroughly revised, and resubmitted to the management for acceptance.

Box 2: Complicated sentences (unedited verbatim)

When the resourceful parents found marrying their daughter difficult they would not hesitate to marry their daughter with dowry in such a situation.

A father unable to support his daughter can marry her to an able husband.

The programme through postering intended to empower whole of Bangladesh with legal knowledge.

A very high percentages of women (94%) were delivered at home as indicated by the programme records.
Mitigation of conflicts
Editors of scholarly publications try to avoid confrontation with authors. We, the editors, should accord a patient hearing to the grievances of authors on our suggested changes; we should be tolerant and should be able to justify proposed changes. Editors should not forget that the manuscripts belong to the authors and not to the editors, and as such all credit or discredit goes to the author. On the other hand, authors should also have due respect for the editor: authors need to look logically at the changes the editor has made to their manuscripts; they need not accept all of the suggested changes or modifications but they should have a strong argument for rejecting the editor’s suggestions. Such tolerance on both sides will help mitigate conflicts in most cases.

Although an editor cannot be an expert in all subjects, in an office such as the Research and Evaluation Division, an editor needs to edit material from various disciplines produced by a multidisciplinary team of researchers often of mixed background and ability. To cope with this situation, an editor must read as much as possible on the subjects s/he frequently edits; this will give the editor more confidence and will earn respect from authors.

Another important task of the editor is to safeguard the prestige and goodwill of his or her employer, the organization for which s/he is working. Nothing should be disseminated unedited, with mistakes and with low readability. If an author does not comply with these requirements, as a last resort, s/he should be referred to the higher authority.

Conclusion
Conflict with others is an unavoidable part of human character. Many authors do not understand the exact role of editors, and understandably many do not like ruthless editing on their nicely typed manuscripts, however necessary such editing may be. Conflict between editors and authors will never be totally eliminated, but by tolerance and understanding on both sides, it can be reduced.

Recommendations:
- Editors should handle authors carefully. Nothing should jeopardize the self-esteem and ego of the authors.
- Editors should not insist that authors incorporate all of the editorial changes suggested.
- Editors should be patient, friendly, and polite when dealing with conflicts with authors.
- Authors should respect the editor—the editor is there to help them reach their target audience more effectively.
- Editors need to be flexible in accepting authors’ valid points.
- Editors should read as much as possible in order to gain a broad understanding of each subject area.

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The writer who helped writers: Donald Murray (1924–2006)

Writer and well-known writing teacher Donald Murray died last December. When I heard, I searched for two things on my bookshelves. One was a small book by Lucy McCormick Calkins (1983), one of the earliest systematic researchers on the writing process in the 1970s. She described learning to write under Murray. The other was a 1983 research article by Carol Berkenkotter in which she reported what I believe was the first truly naturalistic ethnography of an adult writer at work — that writer was Donald Murray.

Murray was a fine journalist (a Pulitzer winner) and academic writer, but I’m convinced his greatest contribution was his ability to enable others. He was demanding and optimistic. Under Murray, writers felt that difficulties were intrinsic to the task, not signs of their inability. His message was that successful writers took textual difficulties seriously but in stride, and acquired ways to solve problems by noticing how others managed and by revisiting their own work, drafting, rethinking, editing. Because he helped ordinary people build confidence as writers, he also enabled them to teach others — creating a wave that reached me in Barcelona in the mid-1980s.

Berkenkotter’s article on Murray helped me to recover lost confidence in my own writing. How can one feel incapable when one sees Murray go back and forth in notebooks searching for half-remembered ideas, dealing with false starts and changing his mind as he went along? Berkenkotter’s study showed how a writer deals with apparent failures in a text as opportunities to write a better one. Her portrait revealed that what seems like incompetence or lack of talent to a novice is merely a normal event for an accomplished writer:

The writer had been editing what he thought was a final draft when he saw that more substantive changes...
were in order. The flurry of editing activity was replaced by reading aloud and scanning the text as the writer realized that his language was inadequate for expressing a goal which he began to formulate as he read . . . The next draft was totally rewritten following the sentence in the draft: “when the teacher listens to the student, the conference can be short” (pp 162-163, my italics).

That last phrase also shed light on two important points in the passage I’d remembered from Calkins’ book. When she wrote it, she was still a primary school teacher doing her first research:

Although the only writing I’d done until then were papers for school, Murray agreed to work with my writing. Every six weeks, I’d take a day off from school and make the three hour drive to the University of New Hampshire where Murray would confer with me for thirty minutes and then I’d turn around and make the three hour drive back . . . Whatever happened during those conferences, it not only made the trip worthwhile, it also transformed my writing and teaching of writing (p vi, my italics).

I saw that a conference with Murray was short and effective, and any number of things might happen. I would soon learn to see those conferences as part ethnography, part mini-lesson about heuristics, part real-time demonstration of revision or starting and re-starting, part visualization with a writer of how to undertake the next phase of revision. Writers explored and focused on essential messages and learned ways to see what was worth writing about. When I use my own approximation of this method with scientists, by the end of a conference authors can be very explicit about what a text needs, and motivated to provide it. “I’ll move this sentence up to the head of paragraph two of the Discussion and see how it works.” “I’ll tie the conclusion closer to the objective.” “I’ll re-draft this part strictly chronologically, first.” True, such advice is available in any “how to” book — but the difference is this part strictly chronologically, first. “True, such advice cannot be very explicit about what a text needs, and motivated to provide it. “I’ll move this sentence up to the head of paragraph two of the Discussion and see how it works.” “I’ll tie the conclusion closer to the objective.” “I’ll re-draft this part strictly chronologically, first.” True, such advice is available in any “how to” book — but the difference is that a writer-and-process-centered approach helps an author decide how to go about working the text. Possibly Murray’s approach to writing is what Stella Adler’s method is to acting.

Calkins’ response to a half-hour conference gave me my goal for the 1980s: to study how Murray managed to make such a short intervention worth driving six hours. Before my own early meetings with scientific authors I rehearsed Murrayan questions I’d written on index cards. They were gleaned from his books or inferred from the writing process literature of that period — a line of research Murray helped inspire. How did the writing go? Do you think there are weak points? What are you worried about? What do you think might help? Why did you do this research — how/where have you made that motivation clear? Explain to me why you’re including this reference/paragraph/information about . . . When will you start the next draft? What part of the manuscript will you work on first? And then?

I doubt that Murray imagined his method being applied to scientific authors. In fact, the “process-oriented approach” his name is associated with gave way to other schools that are much more popular with teachers of academic writing because they emphasize what the finished product should look like. Murray’s often-quoted phrase, “I write to know what it is I didn’t know I knew,” was considered appropriate only for expressive, exploratory writing — apparently not part of prospectively planned academic reporting. Scientists, after all, look at their data, know what they know and simply report it logically, in relatively straightforward formats, right? But Murray had engaged in all sorts of writing for publication, and I think he’d have felt as much empathy for a novice writer of a discussion section as for any other writer. He’d have known there was nothing intrinsically easier or harder in finding meaning in a clinical or bench experience compared to the more apparently personal experiences that are the usual subjects of creative writing.

The last of Murray’s columns published by the Boston Globe while he lived, in December 2006, was about the challenge and joy of a blank page. He wrote it to explain why he preferred the writer’s job to the newspaper editor’s: At the looking-back time of the year, I think of the jobs I was offered — and didn’t take. Mostly I was offered promotion to editor. Editors make more money than writers. Editors stroll through the city room clasping their hands behind their backs and peeking over writers’ shoulders while they write. Editors go to meetings. I’d respond by saying, ‘I’m a writer. I want to stay a writer. No promotions please.’ Those trying to hire me assured me I could do the job. I told them I knew I could do the job. I wanted to remain a writer because I didn’t know if I could do the job.

There is no single must-read Murray book for science editors, for most of his work on writing targeted young adults or their teachers. For those curious about how he could unleash the desire to write and give confidence, a place to start reading would be a webpage to commemorate his work at the University of New Hampshire’s Writers’ Project (http://www.nhwritersproject.org/newfiles/Remembering_Donald_Murray.html).