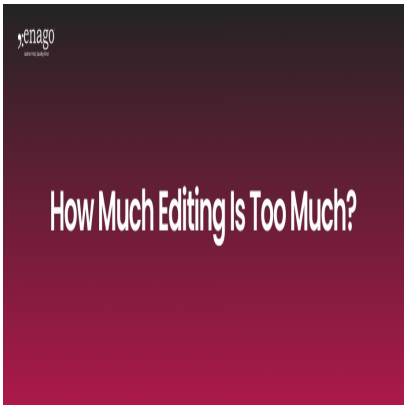

Description

A growing share of researchers use external help to prepare manuscripts: in one recent survey of clinical researchers, about half reported always using professional language-editing services and another quarter used them sometimes – a pattern that reflects widespread reliance on editorial support, especially among non-native English speakers.

This prevalence makes the question of limits critical. Editing improves clarity, readability, and compliance with journal formats, but excessive or undisclosed intervention can blur lines of authorship, introduce ethical risks such as ghostwriting, and undermine accountability. This article defines the common types of editing, explains when editing becomes problematic, outlines practical safeguards for authors and editors, and gives actionable guidance to preserve integrity while achieving publishable quality.

What editing means in academic publishing

Editing covers a continuum of activities that vary in depth and intent. At one end, *proofreading* corrects typographical errors, punctuation, and minor formatting. *Copyediting* addresses grammar, consistency, and adherence to style. *Substantive* or *developmental editing* involves restructuring, improving argument flow, clarifying methods and reasoning, and sometimes reframing sections of a manuscript. Finally, *editorial assistance* or outsourced writing can include drafting or heavily rewriting text on behalf of authors. These distinctions matter because the ethical and authorship implications increase with the depth of intervention.

Why boundaries matter: authorship, accountability, and perception

When editing remains within the narrow bounds of language and presentation, the responsibility for content data, interpretation, and conclusions stays clearly with the named authors. However, when an external party substantially shapes argumentation, interprets results, or drafts substantial sections, questions about *who did the intellectual work* arise. In biomedical literature, undisclosed substantive assistance has been linked to ghostwriting scandals, with significant reputational and regulatory consequences; editors' and journals' guidance emphasizes transparency about the nature and extentof writing support.

How to tell when editing goes too far

- **Change in intellectual content**: Edits that alter hypotheses, reinterpret results, or change the study's claims go beyond language work.
- **Loss of the original voice or disciplinary framing**: When the manuscript no longer reflects the author team's conceptual stance or disciplinary conventions, substantive intervention may be excessive.
- **Unattributed drafting**: If a third party drafts large sections without being named or acknowledged, ethical concerns up to ghostwriting may apply.
- **Authorship uncertainty**: If the editor's input would meet journal authorship criteria (conception, design, interpretation, drafting, and final approval), omission from the byline or acknowledgments is inappropriate.

Editors and authors should treat these markers as red flags. Journals and institutions generally expect disclosure for substantive editorial or writing assistance; failure to disclose can lead to corrections, retractions, or sanctions.

When editing is appropriate: common scenarios and recommended scope

Editing is both necessary and acceptable in many scenarios. Common, permissible activities include:

- Correcting grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure.
- Standardizing terminology and style to meet journal requirements.
- Clarifying language so methods and results are understandable without changing scientific content.
- Formatting references and figures to publisher templates.

Substantive or developmental editing is appropriate when it is transparently requested and the authors retain intellectual control. In these cases, the editor should work iteratively with authors, track changes, and document decisions in a way that preserves author responsibility for the science. This collaborative approach was emphasized in editorial-practice discussions as balancing reader needs, client (author) expectations, and respect for the author's voice.

Practical steps for authors: preserving authorship and integrity

Authors can adopt concrete practices to keep editing within ethical boundaries:

- Define scope before work begins. Explicitly specify whether the service is proofreading, copyediting, or substantive editing.
- Use tracked changes and comment threads. Accept or reject edits deliberately rather than automating acceptance.
- Keep drafts and records. Retain versions and correspondence that document who contributed what.
- Acknowledge assistance. If contributors do not meet authorship criteria but provided substantive help, name them in the acknowledgments and disclose any funding or commercial ties.
- Review and approve final manuscript. Every named author should read and approve the final version and be willing to take public responsibility for its content.

These steps protect both the author team and the integrity of the published record. Evidence shows researchers frequently rely on editorial services to overcome language barriers; transparent practices prevent that assistance from turning into misattributed intellectual contribution.

Practical steps for editors and editorial offices

Editors and journals should set and communicate clear policies about permitted editorial assistance, disclosure expectations, and consequences for undisclosed authorship. Recommended office-level practices include:

- Require authors on submission to declare any editorial or writing assistance and its source.
- Distinguish between language editing and substantive writing in policy text and author instructions.
- Encourage or require contributor statements that align with common authorship criteria, clarifying the role of any non-author contributors.

These policies deter ghostwriting, protect readers, and maintain trust in peer review. Historical analysis of ghostwriting cases in medical publishing underscores the need for robust, enforceable disclosure protocols.

Examples and lessons from research and editorial practice

Empirical and professional discussions underscore the balance editors must strike. Editorial training and codes of conduct encourage prioritizing the reader's comprehension while respecting the author's intellectual contributions; some editorial guides suggest that "editing well" should bolster both clarity and professional standards without erasing authorial responsibility. Case studies of excessive unseen involvement, particularly in medical fields, show the reputational and ethical harms when assistance is concealed.

Checklist: how to act when uncertain

- Before commissioning: define the scope (proofread, copyedit, substantive edit).
- During editing: use track changes; request queries instead of silent rewrites on substantive

issues.
- Before submission: obtain signed contributor and authorship statements; disclose any paid editorial assistance.
- If major content changes are needed post-review: discuss authorship and acknowledgments with coauthors and the editor.

These steps form a defensible workflow that preserves accountability.

Common mistakes and how to avoid them

Many problems arise from vague expectations or poor documentation. Typical errors include accepting extensive edits without review, failing to disclose paid editorial help, and assigning authorship or acknowledgments inconsistently. Avoid these by agreeing on scope early, maintaining version control, and following journal and institutional disclosure policies.

How is editing different from ghostwriting?

Editing improves clarity and presentation; ghostwriting supplies or conceals intellectual or drafting contributions and typically lacks transparency. While editorial assistance is legitimate when disclosed and limited, ghostwriting misattributes authorship and erodes trust. Editorial bodies and research into publication ethics treat undisclosed substantive writing as a form of misconduct with possible corrective or punitive consequences.

Tips and tricks for preserving authorial voice while improving quality

- Ask editors to annotate suggested conceptual or structural changes rather than replace them silently.
- Request a sample edit to confirm style and scope of editing intervention.
- For non-native English speakers, prioritize clarity over stylistic homogenization; keep domain-specific phrasing where it carries meaning.
- Use a dual-review approach: after the external edit, have a coauthor or mentor review edits to confirm scientific accuracy.

A partner, not a substitute: when to consider professional services

For authors challenged by language, structure, or journal templates, professional manuscript editing can help refine expression, correct formatting, and improve chances of passing desk review. Enago's manuscript-editing services can help refine paraphrase and citation practices reducing the chance similarity checks will flag text that needs clearer attribution and provide a tracked, collaborative workflow that preserves authors' intellectual control. Consider such services when language or format constraints create barriers to peer review, and align any paid assistance with journal disclosure requirements.

Final note

Maintaining the boundary between helpful editing and excessive intervention is both a technical and an ethical task. Clear agreements about scope, rigorous record-keeping, transparent disclosure, and collaborative workflows protect authors' intellectual ownership while achieving the clarity and conformity that journals expect. When uncertainty persists, authors and editors should default to transparency: disclose any substantive assistance and document decisions. For teams seeking support that preserves authorship and compliance, professional manuscript-editing services can help, provided their role is defined and reported appropriately.

Category

1. Reporting Research

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