

Scenario 1: Communication and deadlines.

An editor receives an article to edit by email and leaves it in his inbox for a few days, knowing the deadline isn't for a week. The writer emails him again, annoyed, asking if he received the original document. What should the editor have done? What should he do now that he's in the situation?

Response:

The best scenario would be for the editor to respond to the writer within a day of receiving the article. Even if the editor would not be able to look at it for several days, a brief message confirming its delivery and when the writer could expect to receive the edited article would have been better than nothing. This simple act of immediate follow-up could have helped the writer feel validated and build connection between the two parties (Coursera). Additionally, the editor should open any attachments as soon as they are received to ensure that there are no issues. If the editor waits until just before the deadline to open the attachment, only to find that it's corrupted, or a partial file, they will be in the uncomfortable situation of reaching out to the writer at the last minute (Rude and Eaton). This would almost certainly sour the working relationship.

However, in the editor's present situation, they must do damage control. The writer-editor relationship got off to a rocky start, but the editor can use active listening skills to make amends.

The editor should immediately reply. There are several tips the editor should keep in mind when composing his response (Coursera).

- Focus on the purpose of the conversation: the editor can apologize for the delay and confirm that the job will be completed on time (if he believes he can maintain the deadline).
- Clarify and paraphrase information: The editor acknowledges the writer's discomfort but should be wary of mis-attributing any emotions to the writer. If the writer mentioned any specific concerns, the editor could paraphrase this while directing the conversation to next steps.
- Refrain from judgment: This is not the time for the editor to get defensive or make excuses. The writer does not need to know all the reasons why the email was not replied to. The editor can offer a brief explanation if they feel it is appropriate, but the important thing is to acknowledge the writer's message and move forward.
- Set expectations for future replies. If the editor feels it is necessary – and feasible – he can mention that he will reply more promptly in the future. Or, if he knows that is not a reasonable expectation, the editor should inform the writer when they should expect to hear from him. If the editor knows it might take three business days to reply, then he should say that to the writer.

It's unfortunate that the editor finds himself in this position, but it seems like a relatable scenario, and it does not mean the working relationship is doomed. With proper attention, there is a chance that the editor can make amends and the two will be able to move on.

Scenario 2: Working with senior writers.

An editor is asked to help a senior research faculty member write a grant proposal for National Science Foundation funding for his work. The writer is very successful writing grants, and he seems very protective of his work, but he did ask for her help. He emails the draft to her. Typically, she meets with clients before editing their work. This meeting has resulted in much better relationships with her previous clients, and it also helps her writers accept big changes when she mentions them in person first. However, due to his travel schedule, there is no time for her to meet with him and ask about his work. She thinks that the draft needs much more explanation of the benefits of the research he is proposing, and she reorganizes the draft and adds more benefits. She is careful to explain thoroughly in the transmittal letter that the writer is not obligated to accept any of her suggestions (she's careful not to call them corrections). She typically wouldn't suggest all of these changes without discussing the possibility beforehand, but he wasn't able to meet with her. The writer returns from his trip, reads her comments, and is furious. He emails her about it. He's certain she's made it worse rather than better. What could she have done to prevent this? What should she do now?

Response:

This is a delicate situation, and there are a couple things that the editor could have done differently. First, even though the editor was unable to meet with the writer in person, she could have pushed to have an initial conversation via phone call. At the very least, the two could have corresponded via email to discuss expectations for the project. Because this is the first time the editor has worked with this writer, it is important for the editor to explain her process and the benefits of an initial conversation. Without this initial meeting, the editor had to determine the scope of editing without input from the writer.

The editor must now respond to the writer and do two things: amend the working relationship and maintain the quality of the proposal. Active listening skills, even done remotely, can help de-escalate the situation (Campbell). Dietz (2020) gives some ideas about how to handle a struggling writer-editor relationship.

- Be specific about what's getting in the way: the editor should re-state what the writer has said. She should give an overview of what has happened, i.e. they were not able to have an initial meeting, the editor made suggestions based on the purpose of the proposal, the writer is able to accept or reject suggestions.
- Try not to sound accusatory: the editor should focus on "I" statements. It would be easy to blame the writer, but the editor must remain professional. Using "I" statements can help the editor sound impartial and unemotional.
- Come to an agreement about specifics: the editor should summarize her primary suggestions and explain how these changes strengthen the document. She could prioritize her suggestions in a list, which could help the editor determine which changes to keep.
- Decide what will or won't happen and set deadlines: if time allows, the writer should review the suggestions again and then let the editor know which one he accepts. They should set a date for a follow-up meeting before the submission deadline.

Throughout it all, the editor should keep communication focused on the writer's goal: to obtain more funding. If they can set aside their pride, then they can work together to create a successful proposal.

Professor Feedback

Hi Amy. I like how you outlined specific suggestions for handling the two scenarios. Your focus on being specific, especially, is valuable in this situation, because the writer seems to be very particular about his writing and at this point, you know that he is not amenable to a more comprehensive editing approach. Coming to an agreement on the level of edit will be crucial to maintaining a good relationship with this author.

References

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