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English as an International Language: Web-Based Help

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PERSPECTIVES

English as an International Language: Web-Based Help

Historically, the languages of medicine were Greek, Arabic, Latin, French, and German. Today, English is the language of science.¹ Approximately 30% of all articles submitted to the *American Journal of Neuroradiology (AJNR)* are from North America, and with the exception of those from the United Kingdom and Australia, the rest are from non-native English speakers. This is in accordance with what other journals experience. *Science Editor* reports that more than 60% of manuscripts submitted to journals are by “English-as-an-International-Language” (EIL) authors.¹ Dr. John Benfield² refers to the difficulties of authors, reviewers, and readers confronted by non-native speakers as “English language burden.”

The command of the English language is very important because improperly written “foreign” articles have a greater possibility of rejection and, when accepted, require more revision. For example, in an investigation that studied the rate of English-language errors, the average rate of errors per manuscript was 22 for those originating from the United States compared with 49 for those from Italy. The acceptance rate was 32% for American manuscripts versus only 9% for Italian ones, and the acceptance rate diminished progressively as the average rate of errors in the use of the English language increased.³ Because English will continue to be the language of science in the foreseeable future, I would like to suggest some Web-based help for our EIL authors:

1. **Tokyo Medical University and the International Medical Communications Center** (www.emp-tmu.net, accessed on December 19, 2008). This is a free teaching site for authors who are interested in the English language for medical purposes. Its first section of reading materials includes terminology and written exercises. The second part contains videos of doctor-patient consultations and interactive questions designed to improve communication skills.

2. **AuthorAid** (www.authoraid.info, accessed on December 19, 2008). Here, researchers can obtain advice from a community of scientists, access documents and presentations on writing and publishing, gather information of worldwide workshops on scientific writing, and obtain mentoring by highly published researchers and professional editors. Although this site is not specifically designed for medical researchers, it contains some helpful features.

3. **American Medical Writers Association** (www.amwa.org, accessed on December 19, 2008). This organization has 5600 members encompassing journal editors, publishers, reporters, statisticians, and translators. Its Website offers information on conferences related to English-language medical writing and a freelance directory of specialists whose help can be enlisted by interested authors (most of these professionals charge for their services).

4. **ScienceDocs** (www.sciencedocs.com, accessed on December 19, 2008). This Elsevier-certified company offers

translation and scientific editing by experts from more than 50 universities worldwide (many highly prestigious). Services by biostatisticians are also available. Customizable options such as a journal matching service and study design consulting can also be requested.

5. **The Medical Editor** (www.themedicaleditor.com, accessed on December 19, 2008). This firm has more than 15 years of experience in scientific editing, proofreading, and copyediting of articles, chapters, books, and all continuous medical education-related activities. Services I found on this Website that are somewhat different from others include formatting (text, tables, figures, etc) according to the requirements of specific journals and checking the accuracy of references by verification through the National Library of Medicine Website (PubMed) or other data bases.

6. **American Journal Experts** (www.journalexerts.com, accessed on December 19, 2008). This Website specializes in editing and proofreading for authors. Unique to this site are 2 types of services: urgent (turnaround time of less than 24 hours) and conventional (10 days). Reviewers include MDs and PhDs from 10 major universities.

7. **Squirrel Scribe** (www.squirrelscribe.com, accessed on December 19, 2008). This site offers the usual array of professional editing services as well as fact-checking. It will review and edit grant proposals destined for submission to the National Institutes of Health and National Science Foundation.

8. **The Project Lingua from Global Voices On-line** (www.globalvoicesonline.org/lingua, accessed on December 19, 2008). This is one of the largest on-line translation communities. The site is not designed to specifically provide medical or scientific services but, rather, is a social-interaction place geared to opening lines of communication between bloggers and translating blogs. Through this site, authors can find professionals who may be interested in providing translation services.

9. **Cucumis** (www.cucumis.org, accessed on December 19, 2008). This is a free on-line translation service. All translations are peer reviewed and edited; thus, the site presumably offers high-quality products (I have not tried it). More than 50,000 members interface in 31 languages and 8 writing systems. Members use a system of virtual pay points to “buy” services in exchange for those they have previously provided.

10. **Free on-line dictionaries.** These may be useful to some (I actually find the traditional print dictionaries to be more complete). Here is a short list of the Web sites with on-line dictionaries that I have bookmarked in my computer (in no specific order): wordlingo.com, yourdictionary.com, wordreference.com, Miriam-Webster.com (also contains a thesaurus), askoxford.com, websters-on-line-dictionary.org, and dictionary.cambridge.org.

11. **Free on-line translators.** Many of these services are available, but in my experience, they do an adequate job only for the simplest phrases. They generally provide the user with a small window in which to type the text needing translation. Some of the most popular include babelfish.yahoo.com, babelfish.altavista.com, and the language tools from Google. I asked all of these services to translate the following sentence into Spanish and French and got an adequate translation: Our results show that the *P* values between the populations studied

were statistically significant. Thus, they may be useful as a first line of help.

12. **Help with PowerPoint presentations.** Last, I want to mention ProfCommunique (<http://profcommunique.umn.edu>, accessed on December 19, 2008). Here, you can send your PowerPoint presentation, abstract, or script for English-language editing. Members of the Department of Radiology of the University of Minnesota do all of the work. Text and format may be edited, and the members will even make an English-language recording of the conference script to guide the authors! Their Website lists their fee schedule.

This editorial does not constitute an endorsement by myself, *AJNR*, or the American Society of Neuroradiology of any of the companies and products listed above. Most of the sites are of a commercial nature, and users should obtain an ex-

pense quote before agreeing to their services. The fees increase with the complexity of the material. My goal was to inform our EIL authors, who find themselves unable to submit a manuscript or a presentation in English, of some services they may find helpful that can be easily found in the Internet.

References

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