

Good practice for author queries

When you work as an editor, you will often need to query things you find in the text. For example, there might be facts that don't seem quite right, figures that don't add up, wording that is unclear or ambiguous, images that don't match their captions, names that are inconsistent, references that are wrong.

Querying well – to ensure smooth running of the project and good working relationships – is an art. The author will have worked hard on their text, and they should be treated respectfully and with tact.

Everyone involved in the project is likely to be short of time, so queries need to be easy to answer to make the process as efficient as possible. It should be clear who the queries are addressed to – is it the client, the author or another editor? Too few queries and the text might never be as good as it could be; too many and you could jeopardise the schedule.

Our trainers and mentors were asked for their tips on effective querying. Here are some of their thoughts.



Be clear, concise, complete and accurate, with correct punctuation and no typos.

Be polite and considerate.

Query missing information (unless it's about cross-references that can only be put in at proof stage).

Phrase queries carefully, and prompt the author for a useful response.

Try to word a recurring query as one general query (perhaps highlighting all the instances) rather than repeat it over and over again.

Make sure you get the tone right. It must always be respectful, never scornful. Queries should be constructive and collaborative, not critical or belittling.

Suggest a variety of ways of rewording something if the meaning is ambiguous. Some authors need help to show them why their meaning is not coming through as clearly as they think.

Be tactful, using wording such as 'Not all readers will know ...', 'This may not be understood ...', 'To make this accessible to a wide range of readers ...', 'This is unexplained [offer gloss] ...', 'Is this the source you meant [details]?'

Always allow for obtuseness: explain what makes you think there's a problem, and suggest at least one solution.

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Don't query every minor change. However, if you have made changes to references, names and so on, always tell the author why you have done this.

Don't simply write a statement about what is wrong or inconsistent and leave it at that. Add 'Please clarify', 'Do you agree?', 'Which spelling do you prefer?', or whatever is appropriate.

Don't forget to say please. This single word can often be used to great effect with an otherwise terse-sounding query. A good tactic is to phrase anything that could possibly be taken as criticism of the author's knowledge or writing style as a question.

Don't query something purely to show off your own knowledge – a sure way to irritate!

With thanks to Margaret Aherne, Hester Higton, Gerard Hill, Annie Jackson and Lorraine Slipper for their collective wisdom, which formed the basis of the tips given above.

Do you have any other tips for perfecting the art of querying (and therefore encouraging good communication with your clients)? If so, why not share them on the CIEP forums or social media?

Further information

The CIEP [website](#) contains lots of helpful information and advice about working as an editor or proofreader, including how to achieve best practice in communication and collaboration with clients.

Have a look at:

- the **21 top tips** for good working relationships (one set of tips for editors and another for clients): [ciep.uk/resources/top-tips/21-top-tips-to-make-the-most-of-your-project-manager-or-managing-editor](https://www.ciep.uk/resources/top-tips/21-top-tips-to-make-the-most-of-your-project-manager-or-managing-editor)
- the various provisions of our **Code of Practice** (which all members of the CIEP agree to comply with): [ciep.uk/standards/code-of-practice/section-5#sect5.3](https://www.ciep.uk/standards/code-of-practice/section-5#sect5.3)
- our **Editorial Syllabus**, which spells out the knowledge and practice needed to pass our editorial tests: [ciep.uk/standards/editorial-syllabus](https://www.ciep.uk/standards/editorial-syllabus)
- and of course the many **FAQs** (you can guarantee most questions have been asked before!): [ciep.uk/about/faqs](https://www.ciep.uk/about/faqs)

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