

Editorial Policy at Agricultural Experiment Stations

Eileen K. Schofield

In recent years, several modifications have been made in the editorial office of the Kansas Agricultural Experiment Station (KAES). First, the editing of manuscripts for external publications was changed from mandatory to voluntary (i.e., at the request of the author). Then, when the long-time editor and associate editor both retired, the administration expanded the office to include writing of news releases and feature stories. The current editor oversees these activities, aided by a part-time assistant editor (writer). The associate editor is responsible for editing manuscripts for external and station publications. A part-time graphics artist completes the staff.

More recently, we initiated a series of seminars on how to write and illustrate a scientific paper and how to deal with the media. Last year, it was suggested that we include computer programs in our system for assigning contribution numbers. To seek the opinions of our researchers on this suggestion and other aspects of our editorial policy, we conducted a survey.

Internal Survey

A questionnaire was mailed to approximately 380 KAES scientists in various departments on the Kansas State University campus and at our five branch stations around the state; 202 questionnaires were returned. Respondents were not asked to sign the questionnaires, so no follow-up mailing was possible. The major results are summarized below.

- Editing is requested regularly by three-quarters of the respondents, mainly for journal articles.
- Respondents feel that editing is helpful and increases the chance that their manuscripts will be accepted for publication.
- Two-thirds of the respondents prefer voluntary editing.

The author is associate editor for the Agricultural Experiment Station at Kansas State University, Manhattan. She has been an ACE member four years.

- Half of the respondents think that contribution numbers should be assigned to computer programs.
- Between two-thirds and three-quarters of the respondents say that seminars on scientific writing are helpful to students and faculty.
- About three-quarters of the respondents regularly read KAES publications and think they are effective in presenting research results.

National Survey

When tabulating the results of our internal survey, we became curious about editorial policy at other experiment stations. In the spring of 1985, we mailed a short questionnaire to experiment stations in 50 states, plus the District of Columbia. After a few reminders, all but one responded. The results show that no two stations do things the same way. However, several trends are obvious.

- Most stations assign contribution numbers, especially to station publications and journal articles. (Only four consider computer programs.)
- Most stations edit manuscripts for station publications.
- Slightly more than half of the stations edit manuscripts for external publications.
- Editing is done at the request of authors at two-thirds of these stations.
- Most stations have one full-time and one part-time editor.
- Half of the stations that do not now edit did so in the past. The major reason cited for discontinuing editing was lack of time.
- Less than half of the editors give seminars on scientific writing; only about one-quarter teach courses in that subject.

Discussion

The answers to our internal survey indicate that our editing service and our seminar series are useful to KAES research scientists. They also reinforce our opinion that a voluntary approach to editing is preferable. Because of the generally favorable response to assigning contribution numbers to computer programs, a method for doing that has been approved. Additional comments on policy from a number of respondents were especially helpful.

As a sideline, we learned a bit about the personalities of our researchers. Some respondents returned the questionnaires in the envelopes in which they had been mailed, bearing the respondents' names and departments. A few assertive individuals also signed the questionnaires. Finally, there were some who made an effort to be anonymous, by returning the questionnaires in envelopes that could not be traced even to a department. From the first two groups, we were able to identify responses from 28 university departments and three branch stations. These provided a good cross-section of KAES scientists, in large and small departments and several colleges.

The national survey confirmed our impression (from conversations with other editors) that editing of manuscripts for external publications has been phased out at a number of stations. The reason is probably the emphasis on larger departments with more news writing and publishing, including research magazines. It also showed that voluntary editing is preferred by most stations.

Both surveys proved worthwhile as quick ways to find out what our scientists think about KAES policy and to compare that policy with national trends.
