Inclusivity, Accessibility, and the Author Journey

Juanita-Goossens-Roach

Disability & Neurodiversity Ambassador, Cambridge University Press & Assessment

International Society of Managing and Technical Editors

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Inclusivity is THE buzzword and can mean so many different things to everyone, but it should be just that: inclusive.

Cambridge Dictionary defines inclusivity as:

· “The act of including someone or something as part of a group, list, etc., or a person or thing that is included.”

· “The idea that everyone should be able to use the same facilities, take part in the same activities, and enjoy the same experiences, including people who have a disability or other disadvantage.”

What It Means to Me and to the Author Experience: Why is accessibility important when being inclusive?

For me, as a physically disabled, neurodiverse woman of color with mental health issues, inclusivity means many things: being recognized for who I am and the job that I do; being able to bring my whole and authentic self to my job, my work and my workplace; being a role model through talking openly about mental health and breaking down the stigma barriers; but most of all, being able to do the job and the work that I am employed to do.

But it means more to me than just “what it means to me.”

Accessibility is key for me, not just for myself as a woman with a physical disability and being neurodiverse, but how accessibility then impacts the author experience that we all deliver with our submissions, journals, publications, and organizations. For without our authors, we would not have submissions, no throughput, no content published, and, in some sense, we would not have organizations and jobs ourselves!

Here, I will explore practical, applicable approaches that Cambridge University Press and Assessment is doing, which professionals can take to utilize in their Editorial Offices/journals/organizations.

I will be using the term “administrator,” which will cover anyone who undertakes the manuscript processing of a journal, be it an Editorial Assistant, Peer-review Administrator, Editorial Team (including Editors, EICs), and sometimes referred to as Managing Editor or Assistant Editor although these roles can have additional tasks outside of manuscript processing admin.

Three Points in the Author Submission Journey: Pre-submission, Peer Review, Post-Acceptance:

Let’s split this into three points in the authors’ submission journey: pre-submission, peer review, and post-acceptance.
Pre-Submission:

· Point of contact: ensuring the journal’s main inbox/point of contact is easy to find both on the submission site and the journal’s webpage.

· Admin-author service: journal administrator providing individual responses to author queries.

· Auditing instructions for authors (Instructions for Contributors/Authors [IFCs/IFA]): similarly, are the journal’s instructions for authors clear on what is needed (e.g., file types, disclosure statements/acknowledgments), any formatting requirements (e.g., structured abstracts, manuscript sections), anonymizing requirements.

· Format-neutral original submissions: making it easier for authors to transfer from one journal to another, minor adjustments/amendments on their submission rather than jumping through a different set of complex hoops for different journal submissions.

· Author submission services and tools: there are a number of pre-submission tools that authors can use to assist them with any submission requirements, including pre-submission checking (AI tools, not manual checks), English and grammar services, translation services, and even peer-to-peer mentoring and author submission guidance. It is important to note that these services and tools are at the authors’ discretion (i.e., voluntary to use, not mandatory), and there may be a fee that the authors would pay.

· Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG): Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) international standard, including WCAG 2.0, WCAG 2.1, and WCAG 2.2. WCAG documents explain how to make web content more accessible to people with disabilities.

Peer Review:

· Administrator continuing to provide individual responses to author queries using clear language, conscientious of language differences, variations, idioms, idiosyncrasies, etc.

· Clear and easy-to-follow on-screen guidance: auditing and maintaining these instructions and ensuring they align with the journal’s instructions for authors.

· Auditing peer review processes: clear and straightforward submission process for authors, and are these in line with the on-screen instruction and the IFCs?

· Auditing submission requirements: is it needed at initial submission or rather at the revision stage? And then, are these in line with how the submission site is set, with on-screen instructions for authors and with the IFCs?
Status updates: not necessarily manual and individual updates – other than as requested – as that will only add to an administrator’s workload (and no one has time for that!) but rather amending the status seen on-screen in the author’s Author Centre; this does not have to be an exact point in peer review, but a balance between too vague (i.e., in peer review) and too specific (one report received) as with the latter, the status of a manuscript can change several times in a short amount of time (i.e., moving from awaiting reviewer assignment, to awaiting reviewer scores, and also back if sourcing further reviewers).

Post-Acceptance:

- Clear post-acceptance workflow: shared with the Editorial Office/journal Publisher/journal internal Editor?
- Corrigenda/errata workflow: shared with the Editorial Office/journal Publisher/journal internal Editor? Possibly include on the journal’s external website.
- Understood (but approximate) time frames in the post-acceptance workflow: how long from acceptance to publication? To proof received? Online/print publishing?
- Is this clearly laid out in the acceptance and post-acceptance e-mails to authors?
- What might they be asked, and from where? E.g., an external source other than the submission platform/journal Editorial Office/usual contact they have had throughout the peer review process.
- Named contact whom authors can contact with any questions, be it the post-acceptance process or author publishing agreement forms.

Where to Start? Think as an author!

A bit of a weird way to end this article with how to start!

However we interact with technology, we have all filled out forms/surveys/questionnaires and often think, “Why do they need to know this?”, “Will this form ever end?”, “How long is this going to take?” and many other similar questions as we fill out such forms.

So approach improvements to the author experience by stepping into the role as an author: how they interact with the platform, with the IFCs, with the journal, and then assess their needs.

Is the submission process too cluttered, asking for too much hoop-jumping and too many submission requirements, all of which can be off-putting to authors?

Do we communicate at the right level of interaction with the authors?

And most importantly, is there someone they can contact with any questions, and is this clearly displayed and easy to find on a journal’s webpage?
Can we do more? Of course we can!

What we would like to see but, more so, what is within our remit to change? With AI tools, services, etc., comes a fee involved for usage – nothing is free, as the saying goes: “there is no such thing as a free lunch” – but there are small yet impactful changes that we can make so that the author experience is as good, accessibly and inclusive as it can be