

Organizing an Abstract Editing Service to Encourage Research by University Students, Teachers, and Staff

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Date Received: 23 July 2020 Date Revised : 17 August 2020

Date Accepted: 18 August 2020 Date Accepted online : 29 September 2020

Abstract

This article offers recommendations for approaches to establishing a university-wide English language editing service for students, faculty, and staff in countries where English is not the native language. Based on experience and user feedback since 2015 from the Thammasat University Library Abstract Editing service, these suggestions are intended to help streamline service techniques and obtain optimum results for academic research papers and theses with international impact.

Keywords: Abstract, Editing, English language, Thammasat University Library Abstract Editing service.

Introduction

The need for, and usefulness of, a university-wide abstract editing service.

In countries where English is used as a native language, or with high proficiency, it can still be productive when universities offer assistance with English writing. Skilled researchers and

writers in these countries may appreciate advice, especially if they are not specialists in English grammar, style, and related matters. Students, including those who are focusing on English language studies, can benefit from related advice.

To cite one example, the Technical University of Munich (TUM), Germany, offers a proofreading service¹ as well as English coaching sessions based on individual academic writings.² According to the English Proficiency Index (EPI), a ranking of countries and regions by English skills, Germany routinely places in the top ten internationally among non-native English speaking countries, with “very high” status.³

By contrast, in Asia according to the EPI, Thailand⁴ ranks above Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Mongolia, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Cambodia, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, but progress must still be made in raising its current status. As a result, the Kingdom has many highly skilled students and faculty who have excelled in academic goals in different fields, but still struggle with communicating these achievements in standard written English.

In such cases, a university service assisting writers of theses and academic research projects can be especially useful to promote and facilitate intellectual attainments for an entire educational community.

Advantages of a voluntary free service

In addition to the need for skilled English language editing advice, a free service for the university community is explicitly intended to assist all students, faculty, and staff, including those with low incomes and no spare funds to pay for professional editorial services.

Rather than requiring that students pay a mandatory editing fee, the free and voluntary nature of the project ensures that it remains a complement to other solutions individually chosen by students, instructors, and staff.

These options rarely include hiring experienced professional editors of English language writings, who have worked for publishing houses and in journalism in the English-speaking world. A few such experts do exist in Thailand, but they tend to be paid well for their professional

expertise at high-profile venues such as the English language daily newspapers, *The Bangkok Post* and *The Nation*.

Internationally, experienced professional editors demand relatively high pay for their work, which would put them outside the price limits of most TU students, faculty, and staff.⁵

At universities, editorial services chosen by students tend to be less formally organized, often relying on personal acquaintance. A number of people who edit English writings in Thailand are not native speakers of the language, nor do they have high-level professional experience in the publishing or journalism worlds. Others may be native English speakers, but are not primarily specialists in the English language, publishing, or editing. These informal, unqualified editors accept relatively low fees and make minimal changes in the writings they edit, due to the volume of what they are asked to work on.

The result does not amount to in-depth counseling, and writers of Thai English who use such services do not receive a good indication of what their writing would look like if it were written in standard idiomatic English. Some of the most glaring errors might be corrected, but texts are left largely uncommented upon, with minimal intervention. This is also the case for such online services as Grammarly.com, an American multinational technology company that developed a digital writing tool using artificial intelligence and natural language processing,

Educationally, this informal, partial, paid approach does not offer students, faculty, and staff members a wide range of possible choices for refining and improving their English language usage. Only with a thorough professional edit can Thai English writers see where potential improvements may be made, so that they may freely choose to accept or reject the advice with the most information available.

When the Thammasat University Library Abstract Editing service was launched in April 2015, the library was directed by Srichan Chancheewa. The service continued under the leadership of the current director, Assistant Professor Akekarin Yolrabil. The library staff associates assigned to the abstract editing service were helpful and essential components of the project.

The present writer, who has had extensive experience as an editor in English language professional publishing and journalism in the UK, France, and the USA, was assigned the task of editing all abstracts.

Results

From the beginning, the abstract service has been the library's most popular service, based on user feedback. The feedback for over 889 abstracts⁶ edited from January 2019 to June 2020 registered 97.49 percent satisfied responses (see chart below).

Abstract Editing Service Satisfaction Survey (Answered 319)												
Title	very satisfied		somewhat satisfied		neutral		somewhat dissatisfied		very dissatisfied		Total	Weighted Average
1. publicizing of service	82.02%	260	14.83%	47	2.84%	9	0.32%	1	0.00%	0	317	4.79
2. speed of service	80.88%	258	17.24%	55	1.25%	4	0.31%	1	0.31%	1	319	4.78
3. user satisfaction	74.45%	236	18.93%	60	5.05%	16	0.63%	2	0.95%	3	317	4.65
4. service overall	78.37%	250	19.12%	61	0.94%	3	1.57%	5	0.00%	0	319	4.74

A selection of typical comments⁷ from that time period were analyzed for basic themes. Insofar as some comments included two or more observations about the service, the following general conclusions could be drawn:

Users expressed appreciation, in order of frequency that subjects were mentioned:

- 1) Speed, convenience, and efficiency of the service, including on weekends and holidays (42)⁸
- 2) Quality and thoroughness of editing, including in specialized terminology (40)
- 3) Hope that the service continues (38)
- 4) That the service is free (36)⁹
- 5) Politeness and helpfulness of library staff in answering questions (17)

In typical comments, one user was "very impressed with the quick care, consideration, and great willingness to help," while another praised how the edited abstract was "as if we had

written it ourselves in the first place. The edited document pointed out details of errors and provides corrections, making us more aware of wrong points.”

Comments about areas for further improvement

On a few occasions, feedback, in order of the frequency that the subject is mentioned, suggests that students would appreciate further developments to the TU Library Abstract Editing service. For example, in terms of announcing the service to the Thammasat University community:

- 6) The service should be publicized more thoroughly so that more students become aware of it (19)¹⁰**

In addition to students who were concerned that the TU Library Abstract editing service was not more widely known, others requested if the service could be extended to longer texts or other aspects of thesis presentation:

- 7) Service should be expanded to help with longer texts, from those under six pages in length to entire papers (15)¹¹**

There were also editorial follow-up questions, suggesting that more advice or detailed coaching might be helpful for some students:

- 8) Users asked for further specific advice about cutting or otherwise altering abstracts, with further questions about word choices or grammar (12)¹²**

The TU Library Abstract Editing service makes every effort to encourage students or others with outstanding questions to follow up so that further help or explanations may be offered. In only a couple of instances did this result in students visiting the library to speak in person to the editor, although they were always welcome to do so. Limited student time availability usually made e-mail exchanges more efficient.

Other students requested further contact details, although contact details for the TU Library Abstract Editing service are announced on the TU Library website. Perhaps further

contact information might be added to the email message with which the edited abstract is returned to the student:

9) Request for contact details of editor (8)¹³

Also, it was considered whether to present an informal seminar presentation for students, offering hints and suggestions for avoiding mistakes with abstracts. This idea was not pursued, since each university faculty and individual class already offer abstract preparation advice to students, and the intention of the TU Library Abstract Editing service was merely to complement, and work to further support, already established didactic programs.

How to better organize further dialogue with writers of abstracts to clarify suggestions is a future subject for future service improvement. Already, the TU Library website and abstract submission page make it clear that the edited version merely contains suggestions for betterment, and that students are not being graded or otherwise evaluated by the service, which is intended to improve communication in English language by TU-affiliated writers.

Other comments pointing to possible future areas of improvement include technical website matters:

10) Issues with the system platform being temporarily out of operation or other related technical problems (6)¹⁴

Summary of potential improvements based on user feedback:

- 1) Further publicize the service on a continuous basis so that it becomes better known to the Thammasat University community.*
- 2) Indicate to students, faculty, and staff that depending on scheduling, content, purpose, and other factors, help may be offered for somewhat longer texts.*
- 3) Make it clear that further advice or explanations are available when needed from the editor.*
- 4) Repeat email and phone contact details for the service, including in the email to which the edited abstract is attached, so that users may easily follow up if needed.*

- 5) *Evaluate whether an informal presentation by distance learning or remote education (Zoom) might be helpful to offer suggestions to TU students who must write an English language abstract.*
- 6) *In case of computer issues, provide a clear way for students to report any problems, instead of through the anonymous surveys which cannot be replied to.*

Conclusions

As user feedback has implied, the service could be more widely and consistently publicized, so that all members of the TU community who would benefit from it can be aware of its existence. Also, such issues as whether longer texts can be accepted for editing under certain circumstances might be explained on the TU Library website. In addition, more clarification may be added to encourage any user with further questions to submit them by email or phone rather than on an anonymous feedback messages where no reply is possible.

Additional explanations for suggestions about English usage, matters of style and vocabulary, are sometimes needed and could be provided for in more specific ways, so that any student who might not understand why a certain suggestion was made would be able to immediately request a fuller explanation.

Repeating contact details in the email which returns the edited abstract might also clarify ways that the student, instructor, or staff member can obtain further information if needed.

In this way, the abstract editing process, as some providers of feedback have stated, remains an educational instrument and learning experience as well as a support for university research. Instead of simply pointing out errors with suggestions for fixing them, the goal is to provide enough information so that similar mistakes in English might be avoided in future.

For other universities, planning such a service would first require the presence of an experienced professional editor willing and able to devote the necessary time in addition to other professional duties on a continual basis, with no days off, and with no extra payment.

While this may be a considerable hurdle to achieve, a strong sense of devotion to the educational goals of the university by staff, editor, librarians, and all others involved is required for any university abstract editing service to help students, faculty, and staff at any international institution of higher learning.

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¹ <https://www.gs.tum.de/en/supervisors/tum-gs-services/proofreading/>; last accessed 20 July 2020.

² <https://www.sprachenzentrum.tum.de/en/languages/englisch/english-coaching/interactive-editing/>; last accessed 20 July 2020.

³ <https://www.ef.com/wwen/epi/regions/europe/germany/>; last accessed 20 July 2020.

⁴ <https://www.ef.com/wwen/epi/regions/asia/thailand/>; last accessed 20 July 2020.

⁵ Examples of relatively costly international professional editing services for academic research projects include those offered by Elsevier (<https://webshop.elsevier.com/language-editing-services/phd-thesis-editing/>) and Cambridge University Press (<https://www.cambridge.org/academic/author-services/services/editing/?#pricing>).

⁶ While the service's computer tally indicates 889 abstracts between January 2019 and June 2020, there were in fact a higher number of abstracts and other texts edited, since some were submitted by staff outside of the website used for submissions. On some occasions, an instructor would submit up to six abstracts attached to a single email message. Also, some instructors, notably from the TU Faculty of Nursing, submitted entire articles which were duly edited.

⁷ The TU Library Abstract Editing service asks those who submit abstracts for editing to expect to wait up to three business days before the abstract is returned. Keeping in mind that students often complete work assignments at the last minute, our staff makes every effort to return the edited abstract within 24 hours and

sometimes even within the same day that it is submitted. Students and others appreciate this speed, as well as the thorough, respectful attention that is given to their research projects.

⁸ The service works under a tight deadline for students who require their edited abstracts to be returned as soon as possible, so is a 7-day per week service, requiring long hours to edit the full number of abstracts submitted. In any university staff administering a similar project, this requires a certain amount of dedication and availability under all circumstances. Naturally, the TU Library Abstract Editing service continued working during the recent COVID-19 pandemic campus shutdown.

⁹ The TU Library is aware that some students are making efforts to produce academic research with very modest budgets, so the fact that the TU Library Abstract Editing service is free has added significance.

¹⁰ Efforts are made periodically to announce the TU Library Abstract Editing service on the TU Library Facebook page, the TU Library website, and other relevant platforms. Given that some feedback suggests that the service should be more widely known, devising other ways to publicize the service may be a future path of development.

¹¹ When the TU Library Abstract Editing service is asked to help with texts longer than an abstract, we always try to fulfil every request possible, especially in terms of research articles by the TU Faculty of Allied Health Sciences by nurses, doctors, and other public health professionals which are urgent and timely for the public good. So when we are asked to edit full-length papers, we do so whenever possible, given time limits, in what remains a free service. Especially for economically disadvantaged students, the service tries to do everything within reason to assist on a practical basis. When time permits, when the service is asked to help with longer texts than abstracts, especially when they are intended for public use to promote TU research internationally or in the Kingdom, every effort is made to cooperate.

¹² Although it is impossible to reply directly to anonymously submitted feedback, if the student repeated the request, using the email address or phone number for the service on the TU Library website, every effort would be made to help.

¹³ An office contact phone number is provided on the submissions page of the TU Library Abstract Editing service on the TU Library website, but may not be noticed by some students, who may need additional reminders. As the user comments are submitted anonymously, occasional requests for follow-up information

are not possible. Since anonymity is important in all feedback surveys, it may be useful to add information to the abstract submission guidelines to further remind users that if further explanations are needed, it is necessary to write directly to the service's administrative assistant, rather than submit such requests by anonymous feedback.

¹⁴ Indeed, there have been a few minor glitches with the computer system that were promptly corrected by the TU Library webmaster, Dulyarat Gronsang, and his staff. A related issue was that administratively, the service previously used a Hotmail.com email address to return edited abstracts until it was discovered that the emails with Word document attachments from the Hotmail address were classified as junk mail and not delivered to the inboxes of some students, causing a few delays. The official administrative email address for the service was changed to Gmail, and so far there have not been any problems of this nature with reception.

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