

Editorial

Valuable Data + Competent Presentation = Good Science

Repeatedly since he took office, and perhaps more so in recent years, this Editor has been faced with the difficult problem of handling submissions reporting significant and innovative results, but whose presentation was careless.

Even more worrying was the common pattern of authorship characterizing such submissions. In most cases indeed, the first authors were clearly junior scientists who had done the actual benchwork (and seemingly done it well), and who had then labored hard (and failed) to compose a scientific paper worthy of the name. Inadequate vocabulary, ambiguous sentences, distorted grammar, illogical sequence of arguments, missing cross-references, lack of essential information, poor quality of figures, confusing tables, over-interpretation of results, biased bibliography—the repertoire of potential pitfalls could go on and on.

The troublesome feature of such submissions was with the last author, always a senior scientist of high visibility who had been eager to co-sign the paper but had done little to help in its writing.

There are a number of conclusions to be drawn from this revealing state of affairs. First, as implied by the title of this essay, a competent presentation is the second of two *sine qua non* conditions for a good paper—the first condition of course being good research. This may appear trivial, but the number of unprofessional submissions circulating between authors and

editors suggests that it is not always so. In a recent issue of the *New Scientist* (15 March 1997, p. 46), Martin Brookes expressed some fears at the consequences of “short-termism” and a philosophy of “publish at all costs”. Immature presentation is an additional consequence of trying to rush to print.

The second conclusion—more a lesson in fact—is aimed at senior scientists, whose duties as supervisors extend beyond the lab and well into the office. Writing a good paper is more a science acquired through teaching and training, than an art calling for inborn talents. Thus, this Editor recalls with warmth and gratitude the many and dedicated lessons in scientific writing received from his doctoral and post-doctoral mentors, Professor Jean-Claude Etter and Professor Arnold H. Beckett. These lessons were loans, not gifts, to be passed on to the next generation of scientists. By allowing poorly presented papers to be submitted, by not educating their students in scientific writing, some supervisors today fail to act as thankful scientists and responsible teachers. This is not a viable attitude, as they should come to realize if encountering enough positive examples.

Perhaps one of the graces of editorship is the privilege of educating the educators

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