

To make a silk purse: The contract between reviewers/editors and authors

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As professionals we are sometimes asked to examine a report, a letter. ... A lucky few have even been tapped to review and edit a manuscript for *GEOPHYSICS*. Those tempted to think that this requires simple scanning should think again. This is a journal, an archival record; to get a manuscript ready for publication is the equivalent of cutting and polishing a gem ... or refinishing an old masterpiece ... or working with precious woods. ... It is all about eliminating imperfections while enhancing natural attributes without altering the nature and essence of the piece.

John Rennie, the editor in chief of *Scientific American*, satirized, in the April 1998 issue, the editing process at SA. Granted that SA's *raison d'être* is different than GEO-PHYSICS', they do receive manuscripts from the scientific community and transform them into articles for consumption. What I'm trying to illustrate through his humor is that, even before the actual editing starts and sometimes after it is done, the process is anything but smooth or easy. Wrote Rennie:

Upon arriving at our offices, the envelope is promptly opened. ... The administrative staff collects the ... contents and passes them to the editor in chief (that is, me), who immediately reaches for his large bottle of aspirin. A string attached to the aspirin bottle opens a valve on the coffeemaker, pouring a gallon of hazelnut Colombian directly into the waiting mouth of the article editor. Twitching with caffeine, that editor is now ready to begin her work.

Editing is a highly complex process and quite impossible without a lot of heavy machinery. First, we feed the manuscript through the *Dejargonizing Passive Phrase Reallocator*. Operating on quantum-mechanical principles of wave-particle equivalence, it changes sentences such as "Samples obtained from Site 46 were subjected to analysis by multiple investigators and subsequently reintroduced to the environment from which they had been collected" to "We examined the specimens, then put them back." The *Implicit Inflection Remodulator* makes sure that sentences carry some form of punctuation at least every 200 words, whether they need it or not. Most awe-inspiring is the *Randomizing Optimum Structural Facilitizer*, a cross between a paper shredder, a house fan and a sewing machine, which takes apart a manuscript at the subatomic level and reorganizes it. It's roughly at this point in our work that the brilliant scientist contacts us, informing us that the manuscript we are working on was sent by mistake and that the real one is on its way. Also, he would like his vacation photographs back. I then reach for my aspirin again, and the editing begins anew." (*Scientific American*, April, 1998, p. 6)

Rennie's point is simple. Editing and (I include) reviewing are demanding, taxing, complicated and, usually, thankless tasks. They are also supremely important! There is probably no better real-life example of the adage "to

Author's note: This column is dedicated to my favorite professional reviewers/editors: my wife and Dolores Proubasta, the Associate Editor of TLE—two classy ladies who make silk purse texts out of sow's ear manuscripts.

make a silk purse from a sow's ear."

Although all authors believe their first-cut manuscripts are ready for publication, this is rarely the case. As a rule, new manuscripts need one or more rounds of tough reviewing and severe editing by honest, dedicated professionals—both volunteer professional scientists or engineers and paid professional editors. Reviewers and editors must tell authors the truth, and authors must be willing to hear it. To reach the goal of a crafted, useful paper, all parties involved enter a balanced cooperative—a *de facto* contract. If one were to draw such a contract, it might look something like the example I made (facing page).

My wife suggested that under "Authors' Acceptance" I add: "I will send the editor/reviewer expensive gifts, especially at holiday time—a little blue VW bug here, a trip to the Bahamas there." Clearly, my wife travels in some fast circles in her editing and reviewing—and all I got was this T-shirt!

Blockettes. From time to time interesting, amusing, or insightful snippets come to my attention. I'd like to pass these on to you in a subcategory of this column I'll call *Blockettes*. Here is one dedicated to those who, before submitting a paper, run it through the spell-checker instead of carefully proofreading it one more time.

My New Spell Checker

Eye halve a spelling chequer
It came with my pea sea
It plainly marcs four my revue
Miss steaks eye kin knot sea.
Eye strike a key and type a word
And weight four it two say
Weather eye am wrong oar write
It shows me strait a weigh.
As soon as a mist ache is maid
It nose bee fore two long
And eye can put the error rite
Its rare lea ever wrong.
Eye have run this poem throw it
I am shore your pleased two no
Its letter perfect awl the weigh
My chequer tolled me sew.

—*Sauce unknown*

Contract Between Editors/Reviewers and Authors

This contract is divided into two parts. Part I addresses the Editors/Reviewers' responsibilities. Part II addresses the Authors' responsibilities.

I. EDITOR/REVIEWER

I.A ACCEPTANCE

In agreeing to review, evaluate, and make editorial suggestions to the manuscript:

- 1) I will stand by my review as complete, honest, and fair.
- 2) I will review based on both scientific and textual content.
- 3) I will provide a complete review, including helpful suggestions, in a reasonable time frame.
- 4) I will be direct, concise, and constructive throughout the review.
- 5) I will remain objective and avoid undue negativism and personalized comments and/or suggestions.
- 6) I will remove myself from the task if at any point I can no longer act by the above criteria.

I.B GUIDELINES

I am willing to base my reviewing/editing on the following guidelines:

Strengths—What are the strengths of this manuscript?

Value—Is the subject of interest, worthwhile, novel, timely, unique? Is sufficient content or progress noted to justify publication? Does it present the value of the work to the reader or is that left as an exercise for the reader?

Content—Can the abstract stand alone (e.g., within a database)? Is the reader properly oriented by the introduction? Are the basic concepts presented clearly? Can only an expert follow this manuscript?

- Is the background adequately presented? Too little? Too much?
- Is sufficient detail given to allow duplication, checking, or extending of results?
- Are sufficient data given? Are the data presented clearly?
- Are methods adequate and accurate to yield trustworthy results?
- Are vagaries or limitations exposed, discussed, and put into perspective?
- Do the results have error bounds (literally and/or figuratively)?
- Is there a valuable conclusion and are conclusions substantiated by the text?

Balance—Is the length of each section proportional to its importance? Is proper space devoted to interpretation and discussion?

Language—Are syntax and grammar acceptable?

Emphasis—Are significant results and important points emphasized?

Presentation—Has the author included only necessary figures and mathematics? Are more/fewer figures needed? Are figures clear and concise?

Acknowledgments—Is appropriate credit given to others who contributed to this work?

References—Are cited references (reasonably) available to readers?

Figures—Are figures used wisely or simply stuffed into the manuscript?

Craft—Does the manuscript meet the format of the journal?

Suggestions—What are the weaknesses of this manuscript and how can they be improved?

II. AUTHOR

II.A ASSUMPTIONS

In preparing and submitting this manuscript for reviewing and editing, I have attempted to report on useful, original, and valuable work in a clear and concise manner. Further, I have attempted to present a finished, complete document meeting the guidelines and format of the journal. I agree not to use the reviewing and editing process for finishing document preparation, stimulating new ideas, or avoiding my own editing responsibilities.

II.B ACCEPTANCE

In agreeing to allow my manuscripts to be reviewed and edited:

- 1) I will consider all the comments, criticisms, and suggestions of the reviewers and editors. I will not preemptively dismiss these comments, criticisms, and suggestions, but will address each in my written reply to the journal, if I choose to continue the process toward publication.
- 2) I will respond to the comments, criticisms, and suggestions of the reviewers and editors in a timely manner, as set forth by the journal.
- 3) I will maintain a professional attitude and demeanor in all interactions with the journal, the editors, and the reviewers. **E**