

## EDITORIAL

### Communicating with the Editor

In a previous Editorial I discussed the way in which the editors conveyed their views to the authors, and considered the limitations imposed by having to communicate with authors through letters and reports, compared with the ideal of sitting with an author and going through the comments and points raised.

When I took over as Chairman of the Editorial Board, Margot Skipper, who had served as Editorial Assistant under several Chairmen, warned me to look out for the occasional Editorial Report that could be misconstrued or even regarded as gratuitously offensive. I am also aware that when we are writing to authors whose first language is not English, idiomatic expressions and some terse comments can be difficult to understand and may occasionally give offence. I have to admit that occasionally we have the urge to be fairly brusque with an author, but I hope that we are polite, even when our comments are very critical indeed.

Getting a paper to the state where both editors and authors are happy for it to go forward for publication does require a two-way dialogue and in this Editorial I would like to comment on authors' communications with the editors and the Editorial Office. This is one area where efficient communication can, firstly, save time by reducing the need for iterating the paper between authors and editors and, secondly, eliminate unnecessary disputes.

In our Editorial Reports we try to be as explicit as possible and to identify the places in the manuscript where we believe that the authors need to consider what has been written. Many authors helpfully detail their responses point by point. These responses may be that a change has been made or that more material has been included. There may be a defence of what originally appeared, which incidentally is, and should be, expected of an author who has usually spent much longer constructing the paper, and deciding what he or she wants to say, than any reviewer however conscientious they might be.

Some authors, however, return a revised paper with little or no comment. In these cases the only way one can identify changes is to compare the two versions of the paper, which can be extremely time-consuming. Some authors apparently ignore some points that have been made, even when the Editorial Report identifies them as critical for acceptance. Such revisions usually mean returning the paper to the author and further delay. If the author rejects a comment then it is so much easier to say so, and explain why the original version is considered preferable.

Where a paper has been rejected I am always open to read an author's defence, and during my time as Chairman I have received some very cogently argued defences which have always been considered sympathetically. My personal feeling is that an appeal against a rejection needs to be detailed and argued very carefully. Occasionally the defence itself is as interesting as the original paper, but sometimes the authors' emotions show through and the defence questions the competence of the reviewers, and sometimes not just their competence! My response to such letters is that our reviewers are the authors' peers and I accept that no one is infallible, but I consider that an argued case carries much more weight than haranguing the editor.

Very often our Editorial Reports suggest alternative approaches which the author may

have already considered and rejected. It would help us to have this explained in the author's reply.

I suppose the most difficult comment for an author is that the discussion (or some other part of a paper) could usefully be shortened by 'such and such' an amount. Ideally we should give some explicit guidance by marking the typescript where we think the author could shorten the relevant parts. Sometimes this is not possible because shortening is often best achieved by looking at the text as a whole and seeing whether by altering the order in which the arguments are presented one could eliminate repetitions or improve the clarity of the argument.

Some authors regard what they have written and submitted as a work of art where changing one word, let alone the order of an argument, would destroy the intrinsic value of the paper. My personal experience is that there are very few pieces of scientific writing which fall into the 'work of art' category; most can be improved by sensitive editing, which involves looking at each sentence with an open mind and analysing the flow of arguments very critically to examine alternatives. Some authors have this skill, others rely on helpful colleagues, usually with thick skins, who can contribute objectively to improving a paper. Such improvements usually result in a shorter, clearer presentation and a paper whose impact is improved, because as I have remarked before, most readers will read, or start to read, a paper once, and all authors need to catch and interest the reader by a clear and concise presentation of their work.

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