

Features: Their Nature and Nurture

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In the course of performing the duties of feature editor, I am frequently asked about the suitability of certain topics and about the procedures and policies for writing a feature: "Will my topic fit?" "How do I write a feature?" "Who do I contact?" "Are features reviewed?" "How much is it going to cost?" I also occasionally receive unsolicited manuscripts, sometimes in a roundabout way. These are often good but usually require extensive revision. Several have become very successful articles.

All this can be taken as a positive sign that there is

solid interest in features among the APS membership and plant health workers in general and that many would like to use features to communicate their work, ideas, and experiences. It also suggests a considerable level of unawareness about the "who, what, and how" of features. A review of the scope, purposes, and policies of features should help answer some of the common questions, elevate awareness among prospective authors, and encourage contributions.

Feature articles are solicited narratives stressing the uniqueness, successes, and practical applications of some subject within plant pathology. They are not meant to be literature reviews or heavily documented research papers. Articles often deal with specific diseases, successful and/or unique control measures, economic effects, or research experiences with diseases of broad interest. The authors should have considerable experience with their subject and be willing to share their insights and observations. Feature articles have international interest and are used by teachers and by professionals outside plant pathology. Consequently, background information on the subject is important as well as the current status and outlook. Heavy technical jargon and complicated phraseology should be avoided. All features are peer-reviewed, and authors have the opportunity to react to reviewers' questions and suggestions. Authors receive and check galleys of the edited text before the article is published.

With regard to length, a manuscript should be 8 to 16 double-spaced typed pages with as few citations as possible. Authors are responsible for the accuracy of the citations. Color illustrations are expected, and appropriate black-and-white photographs and graphic illustrations are acceptable. In the few instances when color illustrations are inappropriate or unavailable, the feature editor consults with the authors regarding illustrative material for the article. The appropriateness of color illustrations is evaluated with the manuscript, but the final decision on the use of color and the number and size of illustrations is made by the PLANT DISEASE editorial staff in St. Paul. The authors supply a brief biography plus a black-and-white photograph to be printed with the article.

Because of the high costs of printing color, Council requests that the authors share the expense with the Society. A \$600 contribution reflects half the average cost for color publication;

the average is used because mechanical considerations and costs vary. The size and number of color illustrations are not determined by the \$600 amount. There are no page charges, and reprints are available at standard prices.

These guidelines were formulated by the editorial advisory board and approved by Council. The originators of the feature article concept realized that inflexible rules and strict instructions for content, style, and format would not accommodate the broad diversity of topics, the varying degrees to which topics had been reviewed previously, the changing emphasis and shifts in research areas, and the biases and styles of authors. A certain degree of flexibility in and latitude of interpretation of the guidelines is often needed. The authors, the feature editor, the editorial advisory board, and the editorial staff work together to publish each article.

Over the last year or so, some of the newer research thrusts of our science have begun to "test the waters" of feature articles. One of these is in the area of developing and testing computer software for use in epidemiological modeling, disease loss assessment, and statistical design and interpretation. Computer applications have—and will continue to have—an increasing impact on applied plant pathology. Some differences and unique considerations will need to be met for publication of articles on these topics, and members of the editorial advisory board and Council are being made aware of them.

Genetic engineering and other biotechnological solutions to plant health problems are other research areas growing in importance. The ideas and promises of these new areas of biology are being given the hard sell in the print and electronic media, and we are all obligated to acquire some level of understanding of their techniques, potentials, and possible limitations. Informed communication and interpretation of these topics to students, growers, and other clientele may well become required of many of us in the near future. As applications to plant pathology are identified, more features to inform and educate us on advances in these fields will appear.

From the outset, an important function of features has been to convey success stories in plant pathology. But to ensure abundant, wholesome food supplies and to avoid and ameliorate the regional and global effects of environmental problems, we need future successes in research, extension, and teaching. Some of the problems having important direct and indirect implications for plant health maintenance are deterioration of atmosphere quality, possible changes in regional climates, decline of some ecosystems, agriculture as a major source of pollution, fears of genetic tinkering, and resurgence of diseases long considered controlled or eradicated. Our credibility as keepers of plant health may be judged by our successes—or failures—in providing answers and solutions. In the meantime, what are the facts and fictions? What are the needs? A few feature articles have tackled these complex and sometimes delicate issues. More are needed.

The feature article, an experiment when PLANT DISEASE began publication over 5 years ago, is itself a unique success story in plant pathology journalism. Just as the qualities of an adolescent largely reflect the qualities and hard work of the parents and society, the success and quality of PLANT DISEASE features reflect the volunteerism and quality of ideas of the APS membership and other plant health specialists. I ask for your help. We need your ideas for topics and the names of prospective authors. Think about it. You may have a story to share in a feature article. Let us hear from you!