

Review of Manuscripts from the Perspective of a Senior Editor

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In the publish-or-perish world of the researcher, a senior editor of a scientific journal such as *PLANT DISEASE* can be either a roadblock or an expressway. It is the duty of the editor to assist the researcher to publish his work and, at the same time, to maintain the informational quality of the journal. If manuscripts are reasonably well composed and have received thorough reviews, the editor's tasks are straightforward, easy, and, quite frankly, satisfying. An editor can quickly judge whether a manuscript contains significantly new information and, consequently, is

acceptable for publication. The editor can then offer suggestions for strengthening the presentations or correcting problems in formats, statistical analyses, tables, etc. But the editor's duties are not so simple, rewarding, or successful if the manuscript or reviews have not been carefully prepared. Many manuscripts submitted for peer review and eventual publication contain problems that increase: 1) the work load on reviewers and editors, 2) the likelihood of rejection, and 3) the time period between submission and acceptance.

Manuscripts submitted to *PLANT DISEASE* are not always ready for the journal's review process. Some manuscripts do not appear to have been reviewed or edited prior to submission and have numerous errors in organization, typing, spelling, composition, and grammar. These errors are likely to create a negative bias in reviewers and editors; the bias increases the chance that the manuscript will be rejected. A few manuscripts are so poorly written that they must be revised before they can be evaluated by reviewers and editors (currently, about 10% of the new submissions are in this category). Sometimes it appears that an author is attempting to use the journal's editorial board to convert a rough draft into an acceptable report. This pernicious action, whether real or perceived, affects the review system, because repeated encounters with "rough drafts" may cause reviewers and editors to lose their desire to serve on the journal's editorial board.

Most new manuscripts require some revision or can be improved by editorial adjustments before being accepted for publication. Senior editors are expected to work with the authors in this final stage of the preparation of manuscripts. The opinions and suggestions of reviewers are extremely valuable in this process, but the review process does not always function smoothly. Some reviews are so brief or cryptic that editors are forced to make decisions based on insufficient data or to request additional reviews. As part of the revision process, suggestions of an editorial nature are offered to the authors, i.e., ways to improve the flow or organization of the text and to clarify ambiguous sentences and confusing descriptions. Unfortunately, authors all too often correct only the specific problems noted by the reviewers or editors and leave similar errors elsewhere in the manuscript uncorrected.

Many manuscripts contain inappropriate or confusing expressions that detract from the quality of the presentation. For example, technical jargon used in the laboratory or field

may not be acceptable in a manuscript because the jargon is: 1) not recognized, 2) ambiguous, or 3) nonsense. The terms "rinsate," "plate tests," and "disease pressure" provide examples in the respective categories. Nouns strung together to modify yet another noun may lead to an ambiguous, awkward modifier train. For example, does "active aphid density thresholds" mean "density thresholds for active aphids" or "active thresholds for aphid density"? Previously, nouns could not be used as modifiers. Now, short ones can, but such use of proper nouns has not been accepted. Thus, an expression like "*P. syringae* strains" is not acceptable.

One inappropriate expression found frequently in manuscripts results from the personification of inanimate things. In phrases like "the data show" or "the analyses suggest," objects or processes are given properties of rational beings. Often, personification is used to introduce conclusions, previous reports, etc. This usage represents an artificial transfer of responsibility from the researcher to the research, i.e., "the data" (not the authors) are responsible for the interpretation of the results! Personification usually represents wordiness; it can be deleted without affecting the meaning or clarity of the text. Moreover, the absence of personification in manuscripts imparts a highly desirable crispness to the text.

Certain uses of "-ing" words also lead to inappropriate or confusing expressions by introducing dangling participles or ambiguity, sometimes creating nonsense. In the sentence "Inoculating leaflets yielded diverse symptoms of disease," "inoculating" could be a kind of leaf! A second example is "Inoculum was prepared by shaking cultures in a flask, centrifuging, resuspending in distilled water, and standardizing to 1×10^7 cfu/ml with a spectrophotometer." After reading this sentence carefully, one might inquire: 1) Who shook the cultures? 2) Did that person stand in a large flask to shake the cultures? and 3) How did the spectrophotometer manipulate the concentration of the suspensions?

Many manuscripts are afflicted with redundancy (superfluous or verbose information). Examples include: 1) sentences in the ABSTRACT devoted entirely to materials and methods or to noninformative statements such as "The results . . . are discussed" (ideal abstracts have essential methods and data woven succinctly together); 2) statements in the text made to direct the reader's attention to a figure or table ("The results of . . . are presented in Table . . ."); 3) protocols of techniques listed in the description of each test in which they are used; 4) the same experimental values presented more than once in a combination of tables, figures, or text; 5) nonessential values listed in tables or figures; and 6) DISCUSSION sections composed of reworded RESULTS rather than thoughtful analyses of the research just presented and its relation to that reported previously. Occasionally, redundancy occupies so much space that important observations and concepts are inadvertently omitted by authors or hidden in the verbiage and overlooked by weary reviewers.

In summation, well-conceived and well-prepared manuscripts are likely to receive favorable reviews and be published in a timely manner. Authors may ensure that their manuscripts are reasonably well prepared by seeking the advice (reviews) of knowledgeable colleagues and then making the appropriate revision prior to submission. Authors who routinely have problems with the preparation of manuscripts or are not entirely fluent in English should have their manuscripts edited by someone who understands the language. Finally, authors should keep in mind that errors in published papers are immortal!