

EASE-Forum Digest: October to December 2011

You can join the forum by sending the one-line message "subscribe ease-forum" (without the quotation marks) to majordomo@helsinki.fi. Be sure to send messages in plain text format

Are eprints prior publication/self plagiarism?

Most scientific journals warn authors in their instructions that they will not consider manuscripts for publication if the paper or a substantial part of it has already been published elsewhere. Eprints (electronic preprints) are versions of articles that are circulated via the internet for open commentary before submission to a journal for publication. This practice is common in high energy physics. Nevertheless physics journals continue to flourish. Things are different in the biological sciences. Following the lead of arXiv, the most successful physics preprint server, *Nature* set up a similar server for sharing pre-publication papers called *Nature Precedings*. However, as Alan Hopkins noted, *Nature* found it necessary to recommend that authors should review the editorial policies of any journals to which they were thinking of submitting before uploading to the Precedings site. This is because some journals, eg *NEJM*, refuse to consider later versions of the circulated preprints for publication as they view the material as already published. Other journals, as Liz Wager pointed out, are more liberal. BioMed Central journals specifically state that they will consider reviewing manuscripts that have been posted on a preprint server, giving *Nature Precedings* as an example www.biomedcentral.com/info/about/duplicatepublication. The *BMJ* will consider preprints but expect authors to send them copies of previous versions for them to access if the material is redundant www.bmj.com/about-bmj/resources-authors/article-submission/what-we-mean-publication

Alan had raised the possibility of an accusation of self-plagiarism and suggested that any future journal papers might include in the Acknowledgements a statement such as "a pre-publication version of part of this paper was published on line on *Nature Precedings* (doi etc) and we thank colleagues who provided feedback on our interim findings".

Authors could benefit from reading reviewer guidelines if they could find them

John Taylor had two questions for the EASE forum relating to author guidelines. He noted that these varied in content and length but mainly gave instructions on manuscript format. Reviewers, whose comments are decisive for publication, assume that authors have complied with the specified format. Reviewer guidelines are less frequently published by journals. He thought reviewer guidelines on the *Human Kinetics* website were excellent (<http://journals.humankinetics.com/reviewer-guidelines-for-ijsc>). John argued that if authors familiarised themselves with such reviewer guidelines, which are more substantive than those

generally given to authors, they would be better equipped to secure a favourable outcome for their manuscripts. John's first question was "Does your journal issue specific reviewer guidelines available on the web to the author?" His second question related to a common reason for rejection [at least for rejection without review] "not suited to our readership". He asked whether any journal provided guidelines that specified a style for an ultra-specialist readership that would be familiar with the terminology or for a broader band of readers, including the layman, where a less formal style may be accepted [I would say would be essential].

Carol Norris applauded John for bringing up this topic because it highlighted a problem for the Finnish authors with whom she works. As guidance given to authors is mostly inadequate, she advises her authors to examine articles published in the target journal or search for editorials and announcements on style. Carol thought editors should read EASE's model guidelines compiled by Sylwia Ufnalska. They might then realise how brief or vague their own guidelines were and improve them. Sylwia said the guidelines emphasize that manuscripts should be complete, concise, and clear but obviously reviewers need to consider some additional qualities, like reliable and interest to readers. She thought however that as the guidelines had been translated into 18 languages they should help authors who were non-native speakers of English to avoid basic mistakes when preparing their manuscripts, which would save both their and the journal's time.

Liz Wager pointed to the *BMJ* guidelines for reviewers and the checklist the journal produces for authors — informally known in-house at the journal as the 'reject your own paper list' (www.bmj.com/about-bmj/resources-reviewers and www.bmj.com/about-bmj/resources-authors/forms-policies-and-checklists/bmj-right-journal-my-research-article). She also mentioned that COPE is developing some generic reviewer guidelines focussing on ethical aspects such as confidentiality. These should be available sometime in 2012 (on www.publicationethics.org). The committee at COPE compiling these guidelines is headed by Irene Hames who invited forum participants to send good (or bad) examples of guidelines dealing with any ethical aspects of reviewing to her at irene.hames@gmail.com. She also mentioned that she had searched for advice to reviewers given by journals when she was researching material for her book which gives guidelines for good practice in peer review and manuscript management in scientific journals. She found many journals only communicated guidance, checklists etc to reviewers as part of the review process. She had reproduced some of the review forms and guidance in her book (pages 238-260) and included some advice on what constitutes a good review on pages 78-82 (for details of Irene's book: *Peer Review and Manuscript Management in Scientific Journals: Guidelines for Good Practice*, see <http://eu.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-1405131594,descCd-reviews.html>).

Tom Lang also mentioned Robert Neumar's book

“Introduction to Performing Peer Review of Biomedical Research,” published by the American College of Emergency Physicians which is written from the reviewer’s perspective. Alan Hopkins provided a useful list that he had compiled from questions he had asked journal editors when he had been asked to act as a reviewer (see box). Valerie Matarese suggested one of my favourite resources, which is an online version of a CD-ROM for reviewers at <http://www3.us.elsevierhealth.com/extractor/graphics/em-acep/>

As to how useful training reviewers might be, Liz referred to a randomized trial published in the *BMJ* which concluded that even though the reviewers enjoyed the training, it wasn’t very effective (Schroter S, Black N, Evans S, Smith R, Carpenter J, Godlee F. Effects of training on quality of peer review: A randomised controlled trial. *BMJ* 2004; 328: 673-5).

Can the title of a scientific paper affect its destiny?

Andrew Davis was interested in which non-scientific factors affect the probability of a manuscript being 1) accepted for publication, 2) read after publication and 3) cited. He asked the forum if anyone knew of research on the effect titles might have on a paper’s destiny. He was also keen to learn about personal views of what titles should be. Irene Hames felt titles should be concise, accurate, interesting and relevant. They should attract but not mislead readers. She liked Day and Gastel’s definition of a good title, “the fewest possible words that adequately describe the contents of the paper” (p39 in “How to write and publish a scientific paper”, 6th edition, published by Cambridge University Press). Irene also commented that titles are often a blind spot for everyone involved in the review and publishing process. Manuscripts can go through the peer-review process, end up as nice papers but have terrible, long or even incomprehensible titles. Editors should pay special attention to titles.

As for research on titles, Irene referred to a piece in the *Research Trends* newsletter which focussed on the influence of titles on citation, looking at length, punctuation and humour. Tom Lang was not so enamoured by this article but read it for yourself at <http://www.researchtrends.com/issue24-september-2011/heading-for-success-or-how-not-to-title-your-paper/>

Authors’ comments in quotes

What a lot of nice helpful people contribute to the EASE Forum! I wanted to know how to distinguish an author’s comment on a quote, from the text of the quote and gave the example “They felt they had a duty to remake (or civilize) the uncivilized world”, where the words in brackets are the author’s comments and not those of the person he quotes. The general consensus was that “[or civilize]” should be written in square brackets. Round parentheses inside the quotation would, as Rod Hunt pointed out, imply that the enclosed material is part of the quoted text. Chris Sterken suggested adding a footnote that the comment was added by the author as did Rod Hunt who advised stating something like the “present writer’s interpretation” or “my emphasis”. Angela Turner would write “The author considers ‘remake

to mean ‘civilise’” in the footnote. Finally, Karen Shashok guided me to some work on using verbatim quotations in reporting qualitative social research by the Social Policy Research Unit at the University of York <http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/pubs/pdf/verbquotresearch.pdf>

Ratio symbol

In the hope that no one would accuse me of taking advantage of my grand position of forum compiler, I ventured a second question. Authors seem to be using slashes willy-nilly for anything they fancy. My understanding is that a complex of two substances should be written A-B complex and a ratio should be denoted with a colon as A:B, but a recent trend is to use hyphens in both cases where I would interpret the hyphen as meaning ‘or’. I work with a troublesome statistician, ie he does not unquestioningly agree with everything I say. The final hyphen straw came when said statistician referred to the volume of distribution as ‘The ratio V/F’. On being told that it should be V:F, he maintained that ‘/’ is mathematically the correct term for ratios and ‘:’ is not used mathematically to express ratios. Who was right?

Mary Ellen Kerans’ experience was that the slash commonly denotes ratios, probably, she thought, because they’re usually reported as a number as a result of the implied division (but wait for Tom Lang’s take on the below). She gave FEV1/FVC as an example and planted some screen shots into her email from a concordance of “ratio” derived from a variety of medical disciplines, supporting my statistician usage. She included extracts from British English text to counter suggestions that this was an American phenomenon.

Karen Shashok referred to the *AMA Manual of Style*, 10th edition, which states that where ratios are expressed as words *to* rather than a colon should be used (p. 343) but a colon should be used where ratios are presented as numbers or abbreviations (see 8.2.3., Colon). However, the Manual also states (section 8.4.5) that a forward slash may be used to express a ratio (eg, the male/female [M/F] ratio was 2/1). Tom Lang, a statistician himself, thought my statistician was wrong. His understanding was that a proportion (fraction) is a relation in which the numerator is included in the denominator: foetal deaths/all deaths. Whereas a ratio is a relation between two independent quantities: foetal deaths: live deaths. The numerator is not included in the denominator. This is what Wikipedia says too (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ratio>). So I reckon I am right, *ratios* take a colon.

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Discussion initiators

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Reviewer check-list*

The following are typical check-list points that a reviewer might be asked to respond to. Authors should also consider these points before finally submitting their paper and ask themselves the same questions.

- Is this an original work that to your knowledge has not been published previously?
- Is the subject matter appropriate to the scope of the journal? (If not, suggest journals that might be more appropriate.)
- Title. Does the title give a clear and accurate description of the subject of the paper?
- Abstract and key words. Have the authors provided a concise abstract or summary that provides sufficient information on the rationale, the procedures followed and the main outcomes and conclusions? Have the authors provided appropriate key words?
- Does the paper make a worthwhile contribution to the state of knowledge or does it merely repeat existing information? Does it have international relevance?
- Has the author provided an Introduction that describes the rationale for the work, indicates familiarity with the 'state of the art' of the subject, with clear objectives and/or hypotheses which are followed up in the sections that follow?
- If the paper reports on an experiment, was the experimental design appropriate?
- Methods. Are the methods and materials described adequately (ie at a level of detail that would enable an informed researcher to repeat the investigation, but without excessive details that an informed reader would be expected to know)?
- Do any of the methods involve regulated procedures or other ethical issues (eg the use of live animals) that require approval by an ethical review committee? If so, is there clear evidence that standards have been fully met?
- Is there an adequate description of the methods used for data analysis and are the data analysis procedures appropriate for the work reported?
- Are the results clearly set out and the key findings described accurately?
- Has the author interpreted non-significant findings as though they were significant?
- Is the order of presentation consistent with that given in the objectives and methods sections?
- Tables and Figures. Are the tables and figures (if applicable) clear, with appropriate statistical significances given?
- Are all the tables and figures (graphs etc) provided appropriate, and do they have precise headings that describe exactly what they are intended to show?
- Is there any evidence of excessive duplication in presenting results in tables and figures?
- Are figures provided at a resolution that will allow for adequate reproduction in the printed version?
- Discussion. Does the discussion follow a clear and focused structure? Does it address the objectives as set out in the Introduction and consider the findings in relation to appropriate literature? If the work has a public policy relevance, have the authors indicated their familiarity with policy objectives.
- Conclusions. Are the conclusions adequately supported by the results as given and the intellectual interpretation that the authors have applied to them?
- References. Have the authors made appropriate use of published literature and presented the references in a format that is compatible with the style required by the journal?
- Spelling, grammar and style. Is the paper written in clear English that requires only minor editorial corrections, or is there a need for more substantial revisions?

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The origins of EASE

Maeve O'Connor

The European Association of Science Editors (EASE) is about to celebrate 30 years of existence — but a lot happened before 1982. EASE's ancestors were the European Association of Earth Science Editors (Editerra) and the European Association of Editors of Biological Periodicals (EAEBP). Both organizations started up at the end of the 1960s with examples from North America to follow. The Conference of Biological Editors (CBE) had been founded there in 1957 and in 1966 it gave birth to the Association of Earth Science Editors (AESE). Earlier, back in Europe, UNESCO was encouraged by the international unions IUGS and IUBS to promote similar organizations on this side of the Atlantic.

European earth scientists, sensibly, called their organization Editerra when it was constituted in Paris in

December 1968. The biologists, who had formed their organization in Amsterdam in April 1967, first lived with the initialism EAEBP. To everyone's relief they settled for the name European Life Science Editors (ELSE) at their first General Assembly at the Royal Society in London in 1970.

To start with, both organizations had various projects in mind. Editerra immediately produced a comprehensive list of subjects to be treated in a looseleaf handbook for editors. John Glen became editor of the handbook at Editerra's second General Assembly in Lämme, Finland. Various working parties also came into being. Similarly, ELSE set up working parties on style manuals, refereeing, relations between primary and secondary journals, medical ethics and copyright.

From its very beginning, Editerra produced typed