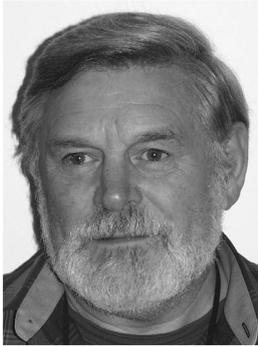


My Life as an Editor - Denys Wheatley



I read Biological Sciences at London University and moved on to the Institute of Cancer Research to do my doctorate. I immediately took a position in the University of Aberdeen Medical School at the invitation of Professor (later Sir) Alistair Currie, and developed an experimental pathology unit, largely devoted to cancer research. It has been my base ever since,

but I have worked in cancer centres and medical schools throughout the world.

My recent essays on how to present a scientifically sound article in *European Science Editing* have come from providing a service to authors, especially those who are non-native English speakers. Hopefully, my recommendations will improve the authors' chances of success with publishing in international journals.

I took over the editorship of *Cell Biology International* (CBI) in 1998, since the International Federation for Cell Biology's (IFCB) policy was to have this official journal serve cell biologists worldwide. I started a 'manuscript presentation service' that became BioMedES Ltd. We now do translations into English and provide modules and courses on scientific writing and publishing worldwide (recently Latvia, Ukraine, Philippines, Brazil, UK and Hungary).

As an editor of several journals, I am often appalled at the poor presentation of articles from native English speakers, and also find that non-native speakers have copied many of their bad habits. Unless editors take some concerted action, the standard of papers, and especially their presentation, will continue to slide. Succinctness has given way to verbosity, redundant words and phrases, clichés, tautologies, blatant petty plagiarism, and more serious misdemeanours. We need a complete overhaul or rethink about how a scientific paper should be written and presented.

I started my career as an editor in the early 1960s when we had to create succinct abstracts (<45 words) of original articles for Biological Abstracts®. I helped Sam Franks in the early days (38 years ago) with *Cell Biology International Reports*, and learned most of my skills the hard way — by necessity.

I became editor of CBI shortly before I became Secretary General of IFCB; the President at the time was in a quandary with regard to the incumbent editor and needed someone to take over, and so he approached me. The journal was in a rut and it took three–four years to get it back on track. I hope that in the next year or two, I can pass on the office to someone else so that it can continue to thrive over the next 10–20 years. In the interim I started what was probably the first online journal published by BioMed Central (BMC) that had an independent editor, namely *Cancer Cell International*. This was followed a couple of years later by *Theoretical Biology and Medical Modelling*, also published

by BMC, because I found theoretical papers – like scientific history papers – sent to journals at the time were taking between one and two years to be reviewed. The latest, six years ago, was an invitation to edit *Oncology News* by Patricia McDonnell, who had only a few months earlier started it.

Editorial responsibilities tend to take over your life, but in retirement it is an activity which nourishes the mind and keeps one busy. Having retired eight years ago, I simply hope I can remain active as long as possible, but by winding down the load to give me a decent lifestyle in my dotage. Since I have several other journals to keep going, I find my duties take up a lot of time. However, I seem to be able to work at a pace that allows me, with my assistants, to maintain them in good shape. I do get time to do some art and play a lot of music.

Journals are largely for researchers, but undergraduate students should read the original literature in their subjects more often, as expected of postgraduates. Unfortunately postgraduates seem to think that they have to focus all the time on their research project and fail to read more widely. Thus they are getting weaker at synthesising information from several fields and making the type of "lateral correlations" that allows the true discoverers in science and medicine to make quantum leaps forward. Education does not stop after graduate studies are over; it ends when life ends.

The most challenging task in the digital era of journal editing is to get people to write papers that are lucid, succinct, and straight to the point. If people knew more about how journals were produced 30–40 years ago, they would appreciate why it is wise to be succinct (the laborious task of composing text and making it ready for printing in a non-electronic era). Today, there is no limit to how long an online article should be. What the author forgets is that the attention span of the average reader is quite short; length can be a deterrent — succinct papers are what we need. 'Cut and paste' is another challenge – it's too easy to indulge in (petty) plagiarism.

My association with the European Association of Science Editors (EASE) has come about only over the last three years. Clearly I should have been involved with such an organization many years ago. Professional organizations and meetings about editing are now of much value, especially with the aforementioned challenges that we need to recognize. We might go as far as to develop a new format regarding scientific publication because the present model results in papers being too stereotyped and reiterative, making many of them dull, boring, and uninteresting.

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