

A tribute to reviewers

Further to Kozak's correspondence on copy-editing¹, I would like to share my own experience with reviewers. When I sent my first manuscripts to a leading journal some 30 years ago, they came back in a packet twice as large. The Editor's covering letter mentioned that the papers could not be published in their present form, though their substance may be of interest to the reader. It concluded with a note of encouragement, hoping I would find the courage to practically re-write both papers. The accompanying reviewer notes drove me to tears. Entire paragraphs were re-arranged to render a logical sequence to the narrative. Boring tables were sketched as graphs on tracing sheets to illustrate their ability to underscore trends. Repetitions and irrelevant discussions were struck out, and the winding and seemingly endless conclusions trimmed to bring out the essence of the work.

Some 25 years later, I had to wait more than a year and a half to have another manuscript reviewed. The Chief Editor came back with a letter that I shall long treasure. It mentioned that the paper was controversial because it was against prevailing perceptions and understanding

about the subject, and had to be sent to more reviewers. However, none of the reviewers could find anything questionable or unconvincing in it. The paper would therefore be accepted unchanged, with the hope that it may be of long-term reference value. If this paper indeed lives up to the expectations of the editors, much of the credit would again go to the reviewer community.

The reviewer is not merely an umpire to judge whether a manuscript is 'in' or 'out'. He/she is a coach and mentor, with the privilege of anonymity. The first reading can be a cursory one to determine whether the work itself is of potential interest. 'Is it worth salvaging?'. If that is indeed the case, the reviewer needs to determine what is in it for the reader, rather than demonstrate what he knows about the subject (or, what the author does not). Critique needs to be constructive, however harsh it may seem. For example, 'This observation does not make sense', or, 'that conclusion is non-sense' are worthless comments, unless backed-up with compelling arguments or references.

Reviewers assume even greater importance in the present times. Skills in writ-

ten communication are taught less and less; more and more authors write in an alien language. At the same time, the attention span of readers is steadily dropping. Outright rejection of a paper merely because it is poorly written throws twin babies out along with the bathwater. Potentially interesting work remains inaccessible to the research community. And one more demoralized young researcher may conclude that the 'call centre option' is preferable. Given these circumstances, the editorial process assumes even greater importance. This is indeed a challenge, considering reviewers are essentially volunteers, burdened with many other responsibilities. Going by announced pay scales for copy-editors, one may well have to volunteer for that job too.

1. Kozak, M., *Curr. Sci.*, 2008, **94**, 963.

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Some suggestions to the funding agencies

To utilize national resources more judiciously and productively, each funding agency should possess the entire database of every other funding agency and function accordingly. They should take steps to avoid duplication of research projects, and institutional and regional imbalances. They should be in a position to judge whether the output of individuals/institutions is commensurate with the total funding which they have received. Funding agencies should have adequate stipulations to ensure due outcome of the project without harming the mandatory activities in the universities. Some stipulations which they can think of are officially delinking the Principal Investigator (PI) – particularly with huge grants – from teaching and administrative responsibilities till the projects are completed, providing temporary additional faculty to

compensate for the PI's preoccupation with the projects, ensuring physical presence of the PI in the laboratory at least for two-thirds of the total tenure of the project, making accountable various levels of hierarchy in the institution regarding the usage and maintenance of equipment, deputing responsible persons periodically to inspect the PI's laboratory in terms of its assets and their usage, and interact with the workers about the manner and progress of the work being carried out.

It is not possible for a university to keep pace with the office, laboratory and residential space requirements of every faculty member and other workers employed in the projects. Hence funding agencies should grant some money for this along with the projects. Funding agencies should seriously ponder over the fact that most projects are wound up

without accomplishing the goals because of insufficient capital, expertise and time. Funding agencies may have as much uniformity as possible in their procedures like number of copies to be submitted, mode of selection of workers in the project, manner of utilization of grants under different categories, etc. Further, the practice of accepting advanced copies on-line or hard copies without the knowledge of any level of hierarchy in the host institute, must be done away with. Last, but not the least, every funding agency should post on its website all details since its inception.

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