
EASE-Forum Digest: December 2007 to March 2008

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Where to begin writing a paper?

Mary Ellen Kerans had noticed that young non-native speakers of English in Spain started writing their papers with the methods section. Was this widespread or a practice used by non-native speakers because the language of the methods section is easier? Most forum participants favoured starting with the methods. Carol Norris reported that her students in Finland first wrote a rough abstract, then the tables and figures (usually belonging to the results), before going on to the methods. James Hartley did not think the order in which scientific papers are written could be specified. He had started with the introduction in both the articles he was currently writing. The last steps would be finalizing the working title and the references, and writing the abstract. Others also felt that the abstract should be left until last.

Every case is different, Will Hughes agreed. He thought the sections of the paper should be written in the reverse order to that in which they appear. Researchers should start by thinking about what kind of conclusions they wish to draw. He presumed they will have done the work and read the literature before they start writing.

Returning and tailoring papers

Margaret Cooter guided the "where to begin" discussion to how strict journals are about sending back papers that violated their "instructions to authors" and how much authors change their papers to fit the journal they are submitting to. Sylwia Ufnalska supposed that journals receiving a large number of submissions would be more likely than less popular journals to return manuscripts that violated their instructions. "Hazardous" was the word used by James Hartley for the practice of resubmitting the same article to another journal without adjusting the paper to the "new" journal's style or making changes consequent upon reviewer's comments.

Alas, instructions to authors do not make good "bedtime" reading. Helle Goldman of *Polar Research* bemoaned that their carefully crafted instructions are ignored, despite the journal's receptiveness to feedback from contributors and attempts to tailor instructions to avoid more of the aberrations frequently found in submitted manuscripts. Nevertheless the journal's practice was to point out problems with format and presentation after the reviewers' comments were in, rather than to return manuscripts at the outset. Helle did think it was pushing things a bit far when the covering letter sported the name of the previous journal to which the manuscript had been submitted.

The ophthalmology journals Diana Epstein manages immediately return manuscripts which do not comply with their instructions for correction. She added that the

same reviewer might be invited to review by the "new" journal and then the reviewer might not be amused to see that none of the suggestions made had been implemented. She was aware, however, that the American Academy of Ophthalmology considered reviewers have the right to refuse to review a paper they had seen before. In my view a reviewer has an ethical obligation rather than a right to refuse to review again for another journal, although finding an alternative reviewer could be problematic where there were only a few experts in a field.

Andrew Davis wrote that whether the journals he had been associated with returned papers without review would depend on how interesting the topic was and whether the authors could reasonably be expected to put in the work to bring the paper into line with the instructions. He also mentioned that at a recent Elsevier seminar, resubmission of unchanged manuscripts had been identified as the biggest problem facing journals.

Vivienne Mawson had been following the debate in the hope that it would evolve into a discussion about how editors could guide wayward creatures (ie authors) into better ways. Could editors agree, for example, on the use of italics, how papers should be cited in text, and the formatting of references? If copy editors did not have to waste time over such niggly matters they would have more time to improve readability. Mary Ellen Kerans thought that the effect of journals cutting back on serious copyediting was that whereas one could once be confident that journal copyeditors would impose style, now authors are taking more and more responsibility for journal style.

How plagiarism is found and handled

Mary Ellen Kerans asked editorial board editors if their manuscript editors notified them of plagiarism in articles that they had accepted. She also asked manuscript editors if they noticed plagiarism and, if so, if they notified anyone.

Colette Holden responded that as a freelance editor of books she would occasionally notice plagiarism if she used a sentence or phrase in the manuscript she was editing in a keyword internet search. She always informed her in-house contacts if the sentence or phrase came up as being credited to another author. She acknowledged, however, that the match could be coincidence rather than plagiarism. Aleksandra Golebiowska, who is an in-house editor, also tended to come across plagiarism or unacknowledged quotations when searching phrases online. She notified the managing editor on these occasions.

Cutting and pasting from articles being cited in a manuscript is something Kersti Wagstaff reported she often detected in the manuscripts she copy edits. Frequently the

manuscript will have been written by a “very-non-native-speaker” author (eg Japanese), for whom cutting and pasting is easier than summarizing in different words. Mary Ellen thought many of us would include “cutting and pasting” in the category of more “venial” plagiarism. Her impression was that journals are now less tolerant of copying whole phrases, even when they are referenced to their source, (unless the words are within quotes) than they had been 15 years ago. She thought this was partly because copied phrases make an article stale and unfocused. “Patch writing”, where single-sentence phrases or larger chunks are repeated from elsewhere, she added, needed to be paraphrased to re-focus and contextualize so that the reader’s attention was directed to the newly contributed scientific information. Mary Ellen’s team notify the editorial office when they come across extensive cutting and pasting. In less extensive cases, they handle the problem directly with the author and advise the author how to avoid plagiarism if rewriting is needed. Here she usually “edits out” the plagiarism in one or two sections to show the author the sort of rewriting that is wanted.

The one editorial board editor who contributed to the discussion, Will Hughes, said that it was referees who usually passed suspicions of plagiarism to him. His task as an editor-in-chief was to investigate. He had found that even some apparently blatant cases of verbatim copying had innocent explanations, with genuine mistakes on the part of submitting authors. Therefore, he was cautious where there appeared to be plagiarism and before making allegations would request information about the origin of passages or data in a paper. His journal received 200 new submissions last calendar year and he had cause to investigate 1-3 times a year. In Will’s experience, problems of this nature can be extremely complex, both technically and emotionally, and the sensitivities are very difficult to deal with. He advised that it does not help anyone to launch accusations without first entering into dialogue with the people who appear to have misbehaved.

Can data be used freely, or is permission required from copyright owners?

Authors often use datasets from outside sources in their scientific papers. Some sources are available for anybody to use provided the source is cited (eg data sets from statistical offices), wrote Marcin Kozak, who then asked about other sources such as a book, article, or software. Do you need to obtain permission from the copyright owner to compare known methods in statistics papers? Rhana Pike thought if data sets are published anyone could use the data for reanalysis because it is the form of the presentation that is copyrighted rather than the information contained in the written document. However, copyright may protect “compilations” of information such as catalogues, databases,

dictionaries, directories, and tables, even though individual facts or items in the compilation were not protected.

Pippa Smart illustrated how form rather than content is protected by explaining that no permission would be required if you used only the source data to calculate your own results which you then published, citing the dataset on which you based your analyses. Reproducing source data sets, eg in tables or figures, within your article to illustrate your research would require permission, unless the amount copied was small enough to fall within the “fair use” defence to copyright infringement.

Andrew Davis listed the ways in which data are legally made available to the public and pointed out that illegally obtained data are not free for use; taking photographs of data without the owner’s permission is a growing problem. Another irritation Andrew highlighted is that increasingly data repositories are asking for direct payment for data and hiking up their prices. He felt this problem should be given urgent attention not only because some of the data have been obtained with the support of public funding but also because charging for data hinders comparison between results.

Another iniquity pointed out by Andrew was that coauthorship was increasingly being demanded as a condition for providing data, even though the Vancouver guidelines (www.icmje.org) exclude the mere provision of data as a criteria for authorship. (For the arguments for and against software developers being included as authors see Welker JA and McCue JD. Authorship versus “credit” for participation in research: a case study of potential ethical dilemmas created by technical tools used by researchers and claims for authorship by their creators. *J Am Med Inform Assoc* 2007;14(1):16–18.) Andrew had recently had such an experience requesting DNA sequences. Andrew urged that all scientists adopt Professor David Tilman’s policy: “We’ll never extract everything possible from our data so, after three years from collection, all our data is freely available on our web site.”

Reme Melero drew attention to an Open Access data tool for the much-needed integration of data between different disciplines. The approach borrows from licensing concepts established in the open source movement for developing free computer program software. More information is available at <http://sciencecommons.org/projects/publishing/open-access-data-protocol/>

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