

◆ Labor of Love: Reflections of a “Small Journal” Editor

Editor's note: This article is based on the after-dinner remarks the author made after receiving the 1982 CBE Meritorious Award. It appeared in CBE Views (5[4]:5-8) later in 1982, the year the Council turned 25. As the Council observes its 50th birthday, the article offers opportunity to see how much has changed and how much has stayed the same in the past quarter century.

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I suppose that the trials, tribulations, and triumphs of all editors are not, in the last analysis, so different. Yet certain aspects of the job of “running” a small journal, typically a quarterly publication of a specialized biological society with a membership numbering merely in the hundreds, might be worthy of brief review here. Most of my examples stem from my own 14-year hitch as “Head Ed” of a century-old journal, the *Transactions of the American Microscopical Society* (affectionately called “TAMS”). Currently, I am Managing Editor of an upstart publication (under 30 years of age), the *Journal of Protozoology*, in which position I am only beginning to accumulate bruises.

The editor of the journal of a small society is, above all, a volunteer editor, and an unpaid volunteer at that. He or she labors for love—or doesn’t accept the job in the first place. Typically, there is little help at any level and highly limited funding; there may be special stationery but seldom any stamps. Volunteer reviewers of manuscripts only add to the problem. Your “small journal” editor (hereafter, for simplicity, called a “small editor” and a “he”) is most likely a researcher, an author, and an underpaid faculty member of some department of biological sciences where little free time is provided for activities beyond the teaching and advising of students expected of everyone. (I was lucky in that I was my own departmental chairman during all of my editorship experiences.) The small editor

has had no professional training in such esoteric areas as editing, copy- and proof-reading, managing journal finances, and the like: only self-motivated, self-taught, self-confident, masochistic individuals need apply!

Time and money are especially critical for your small editor, although naturally they affect all kinds of enterprises. But without paid help, without a stable (if any) budget, and without money for phone calls, the kind of editor under discussion is really in a peculiar fix. The pains and frustrations inflicted, often without warning, are all the more difficult to bear when they can’t be shared: it’s simply difficult to get much sympathy or empathy when there’s only ONE of you.

I’ve mentioned the hardships of (lack of) time and money. Do I dare suggest publicly the third great handicap under which the small editor (and his BIG editor colleagues as well) must strive? An editor’s biggest headache comes in a form, allegedly human, known as *authors*. Our indispensable clientele: how shocking that they’re not appreciated! Yet, without a thick skin, the patience of Job, and an enduring sense of humor, the hard-hit small editor would probably not last through a single cycle of his journal, laboring as he must under the curses of author incomprehension, author uncooperativeness, author irresponsibility, and sometimes even downright stupidity (I’m trusting that no author will have read this far if these remarks are ever published!).

Does it strike you that I’m a wee bit paranoid about this? Well, I might’ve agreed with you if an amazing event hadn’t occurred a few years back that I was privileged to witness. I’d like to share this incredible happening with you now.

In a certain unnamed university where I once resided some years ago, the cubbyhole office alongside mine was occupied by a rather weird gent—he must have been 95, but had tenure, so they couldn’t let him go—whose entire space was full of unpublished rejected manuscripts. A teaching assistant used to come in every day and prop the old prof up so that he could read

his yellowing papers over and over again; otherwise, we all left him alone.

Well, the inevitable happened, and it was my destiny to be the only living soul around: a short cry; I rushed in; but the old gent had already departed for that Authors' Haven in the Sky, with his latest rejection slip in one hand and a rather unpleasant grimace on his face that seemed to say, "I'll make that editor miserable yet, if it kills me!" In his other hand, he was clutching a crumpled piece of parchment paper, as if he were trying to prevent its ever being read. So, naturally, I pried it loose and read it. For the first time in the history of editor-author relationships—which surely are traceable back to the Stone Age when the first writer left out an important comma that his editor, in irate disgust, had to chisel in—I will here reveal what was on that parchment, vindicating me 100% with regard to my suspicious attitude toward contributors to our journals.

The aged document was riddled with errors in spelling and punctuation, naturally, and was smudgy and nearly undecipherable in places, but I offer a cleaned-up version here. The credo, obviously long and widespread among authors, youthful and otherwise, from around the globe, was entitled:

"OUR TEN COMMANDMENTS: of the Authors, by the Authors, and for the Authors"

A chilling thought, right there. And here are the very words that followed that insidious title (you'll probably be as horror-stricken as I was when first I read them):

1. Thou shall not, under any circumstances, read the Instructions to Contributors before, after, or during preparation of your manuscript. Nor shall you even dream of peeking at the Abbreviations and Symbols, or any other section, of the *CBE Style Manual*.
2. Thou shall not double-space anything in your paper. If, by accident, your typist has forgotten and double-spaced the text, at least you should see to it

that the bibliographical references (in a style of your own choice), the figure explanations, and the footnotes are as single-spaced as humanly possible. Furthermore, use very narrow margins everywhere: this will save paper and also make your manuscript look shorter and thus more acceptable.

3. Thou shall not create a title for your paper that reveals its subject matter in any comprehensible way. In fact, an erudite title, one filled with taxonomic Latin names and dates, will impress editor, reviewer, and reader alike, not that the opinions of any of these folk are of importance.
4. Thou shall not pay any attention to critical comments sent to you when your manuscript is returned, rejected by some lame-brained editor who did not appreciate its great significance. On the contrary, it should be posted immediately, without alteration in style or format, as well as content, to some lucky second journal. This procedure may be repeated as often as is necessary.
5. Thou shall not submit more than one copy of your manuscript, and it should not be on bond paper. Then go off on sabbatical leave with no forwarding address. The editor can take care of such little details if he insists on being so fussy about them.
6. Thou shall not reveal the name or strain designation of your experimental organism in your paper. Any intelligent reader—which does not include the editor, of course—automatically knows full well what kind of animal, plant, or microbe your esteemed laboratory is engaged in studying.
7. Thou shall not pay any attention whatsoever to the alleged difference between restrictive and nonrestrictive terms and expressions with respect to your usage of commas. Don't get involved, either, in the "which" hunt *that* some editors seem to derive so much enjoyment from (or, from *which* editors seem to derive so much enjoyment?). Also, keep in mind this holy admonition: why use two commas when one will apparently do? Better

yet, be inconsistent throughout your manuscript in the deployment of commas: this will drive the typical editor up, if not over, the wall; with luck the society will replace him with a person who is less finicky about such inconsequential matters.

8. Thou shall not check any references to the literature used in your text against those you cite in your bibliography. Editors enjoy trying to match them up, so for once allow them to have their fun.
9. Thou shall not butt your figures or set them up in any way that might by chance fit the page of the journal to which you are submitting your paper. Also, do all your numbering and lettering freehand, preferably in the wee hours of the night after a good stiff Scotch-on-the-rocks or two. Do not mount such figures or identify them by any label on the back.
10. Thou shall not answer—better, don't even read—any letter from the editor concerning your manuscript. He's only trying to cause trouble, and it should be beneath your dignity to stoop to responding. Finally, do *not* pay the slightest attention to deadlines of any sort. Keep this in mind particularly when receiving proofs of your paper, which you should alter substantially before returning them, at your convenience, a few weeks or so later.

Well, I should end on a happier note, surely! There *are*, of course, compensations, rewards, and satisfactions in the lives of small and other editors, once you've survived your first trial year or two in office. And by the time I had fondly edited 8,321 pages (not counting covers!) of the venerable *TAMS*, including memorable *Festschriften* and other special issues, my heart was heavy at leaving its editorship ("parting is such sweet sorrow" notwithstanding).

In all seriousness, a number of contributors do actually write or call and thank the editor for aid rendered, help that may have ranged from simply improving the abstract, or supplying it, to sitting down for several

hours and rewriting the results and discussion in a way that you happen to know that the particular author could never have accomplished alone. Stylistic and “editorial” emendations flow right off the end of your pen after a little experience: for the small journals, it’s simply unfair to reject a manuscript for such deficiencies and often too time-consuming or too difficult to counsel the contributor on ways that he/she could arrive at the same improvements. At least 99% of the authors do appreciate editorial help, including the rewriting of their titles and lead sentences. It’s easier, of course, for us to fix typos and grammatical errors on the spot than to correspond with the author about them. Humanizing or making dry data or dull presentations more palatable seems not to be objectionable to the author either; in general, all construc-

tive criticism is welcomed. Many an author who contributes to a small journal comes from a small teaching college where both time and facilities are as much or more at a premium than they are at the small editor’s institution!

In these remarks, I have avoided such ghastly problems as Index Key Words, missing Abstracts, “data is”, “less data”, the supporting society’s going temporarily broke, indigent authors and unpaid page charges, repeatedly “lost” copies of both manuscripts and journal issues sent to colleagues in such places as India, US postal service’s raising rates, IRS’s declaring us *non-nonprofit*, failure of society officers to meet editor’s deadlines (secretary’s and treasurer’s reports, past-presidential addresses, and the like), university departments threatening to make editors and

reviewers pay for postage, reviewers missing deadlines and misplacing manuscripts, and maybe even printer’s workers taking Christmas vacations that jeopardize getting that December issue out before it actually is January 1st of the next year!

Let me conclude that (authors’ anti-editor credos notwithstanding) the great majority of small editors truly enjoy their small jobs on behalf of their small societies; they accumulate a lot of small pleasures from receiving small compliments from their small contributors and readers. We really don’t regret our “labors of love” one small iota.

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