

Compilers' note: In preparation for a recent conference, one of us (HS) sought the original text of the Council's definition of a scientific paper. The search led to the Science Editor office, where a copy of the newsletter issue containing the definition resided. Reprinted below is the article containing the definition (Council of Biology Editors Newsletter, November 1968, p 1-2). We are impressed with both the prescience and the precision of the document.

WHAT CONSTITUTES PRIMARY PUBLICATION?

This question has been discussed by the Council on several occasions, most recently at the TENTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE in 1966. The conclusion drawn by the 10th Conference included recommendation for appointment of an ad hoc committee for exploration and formulation of a working definition.

The Committee chaired by Dr. Ellsworth B. Cook has submitted its report. The report was accepted by the Board and the Committee has been discharged with commendation. The report follows:

Proposed Definition of A Primary Publication

Before research findings are meaningful, they must be communicated to the public. Over the years, many media have been employed to accomplish this. Initially, this exchange of ideas took the form of oral communication, and later expanded to correspondence among colleagues. The increase in the number of scientific investigators brought about other methods. During the past century, the chief medium of communication among scientists has been the printed periodical. Original contributions, including disclosure of new data or ideas, have come to be considered primary publications. In addition to their functions in communication and documentation, primary publications establish for investigators the priority of scientific observations and ideas. Reference and retrieval-type publications, consisting of citation indexes, abstract services, and other means for providing summary and broadened distribution or awareness have come to be called secondary publications. They have important functions in the communications network but they do not establish priority: they record, index, or retrieve the priorities already established in primary publications.

During the past few decades, various new methods for dissemination of research findings and/or related intellectual processes have been developed—such as photographic reproduction, visual and aural electronic reproductions, and, most recently, computer storage and retrieval techniques. These, of necessity, dictate a reconsideration of standards as to what constitutes acceptable publication, especially primary publication.

An adequate definition of a primary publication (i.e., the first public recorded disclosure of observations or experiments or both, and/or the results of related intellectual processes) must encompass new technological developments in the field of communications.

The purpose of this report is to develop realistic criteria for such a definition in the light of recent, and even projected technical developments. The following wording is recommended:

An acceptable primary scientific publication must be the first disclosure containing sufficient information to enable peers (1) to assess observations, (2) to repeat experiments, and (3) to evaluate intellectual processes; moreover, it must be susceptible to sensory perception, essentially permanent, available to the scientific community without restriction, and available for regular screening by one or more of the major recognized secondary services (e.g., currently, Biological Abstracts, Chemical Abstracts, Index Medicus, Excerpta Medica, Bibliography of Agriculture, etc., in the United States and similar facilities in other countries).