Techniques for ensuring that your next paper is quite unsuitable for publication

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It has long been assumed by the medical-scientific fraternity that the intended end-point of research is publication of one’s results in a respected journal, there to be read and examined in perpetuity. The publication procedure involves completing and analysing the study, selecting the journal, writing and revising the manuscript, submission, peer review, and finally editorial decision. A lay person might infer that the key to success in this procedure would be: 1. To design and perform an adequate study; 2. To write a clear and succinct article in the style of the journal concerned.

As editor and referee to various medical journals, I have been forced over the last few years to conclude that it is the primary aim of many authors not to have their paper accepted for publication. This conclusion is reached not only because the design and execution of some studies are poor (this does, after all, require some thought and expertise), but because the presentation of some manuscripts is such that they can be intended only to antagonise the reviewer and editor. Whilst on a priori grounds this may seem unlikely, it does account for the 70 to 90 per cent rejection rate experienced by many established journals. In judging these remarks the reader should remember that those papers he does see in print have been modified by the sequential efforts of reviewers, editors, and sub-editors.

The present paper is designed to fill this newly identified need, and provides a guide to how to obtain the maximum chance of having one’s paper rejected.

Recommended technique

Title page

Unlike the readers of magazines, editors usually read the first page of a paper first, and first impressions really do count. An appalling title page is therefore a key component in having a paper rejected. Unfortunately title pages carry little information and are therefore comparatively resistant to being made repugnant. Overall appearance does matter, however, and it is always possible to select the worst photocopy for the top copy, and then sprinkle some coffee over the lower right part of the page.

White, high-cream coffee is preferable as it ages fairly unpleasantly with time.

A title is unavoidable on the title page. It should bear as little relation to the rest of the paper as possible, and certainly must misrepresent any results. A few too many lines may help, but gross excesses at this stage are likely to be viewed by the editor with amusement rather than irritation. Do not forget to include a couple of subtle spelling mistakes, and to change from capitals to lower case halfway through.

First names should be given in full if the journal uses initials only, and initials if it uses first names. Even better is to vary the style. Do not forget to include your degrees if these are not required. With papers from more than one institution use numbers to distinguish which author works where. Put some of these numbers before author’s initials, some before the surname, and some after the surname. Then use stars and daggers beside the addresses. Do not forget that some journals like the institution to be stated independently of the postal address; ignore this requirement.

Also worth ignoring are any requirements for a short title. An alternative, but requiring more effort, is to make it a long short title. The title page’s appearance can be further enhanced by the addition of inappropriate material. Suggestions include the key words from page 2, grant numbers in gay profusion, word-processor file numbers, and any notes you may need to make next time the telephone rings.

Second page

The second page is usually reserved for a Summary or Abstract, but you can easily forget these and move directly to the Introduction. If you do write a Summary (for a journal requiring an Abstract) ensure it contains three sentences of introduction and three of conclusion, but as little data as possible. Do not state if differences are statistically significant. Make as much as you can of non-significant ‘differences’—all editors hate the term ‘trend’. A good ploy is to use as a Summary the abstract for that meeting you went to five years ago. This is sure to have slightly different data from the main bulk of the paper as you had not completed the study at that time.

Are key words required? Then omit them. Or provide several key phrases of decent length.
This is also the place to consider pagination. As this is page 2, number it page 1. Alternatively, number page 3 as page 1 and number this one ‘i’ or ‘ii’. There are lots of possible variations on this theme.

Introduction

This is the first opportunity you have to write a Discussion section for your paper. It is important not to forget that all the major work in this field has been done by yourself (reference the paper and all five meeting abstracts). Do not be tempted to refer to material from other authors. The Introduction should confine itself to work which is not really relevant to the main gist of the paper, and as well as Discussion should include some Methods and Results. It is so rare for aims to be stated succinctly in this section that the editors are likely to accept any paper that even attempts to do this, and you may feel you should avoid them at all costs.

The Introduction of the paper is also the best place to begin the destructive task of introducing obscure and confusing abbreviations. The technique is quite simple. Just look for a complex combination of adjectives and nouns that occur at least once more in the paper. It is best if this is as far distant from the Introduction as possible, but that it should then recur frequently. This will mean that the reviewer and editor are forced to flip through your irritating paper in an attempt to decipher what the abbreviation stood for. To be more confusing you have to be quite inventive—try using a well recognised abbreviation with a new meaning (anti-insulin diabetic serum—AIDS).

Methods

This section probably offers you more scope in having your paper rejected than any other. Pay scant attention to detail. It may be that your experimental design is so poor that little effort will be needed in making this apparent to the reviewers. However, you will have to be careful here. Many valid and useful studies are also submitted to journals without adequate details of the methods of patient selection, characteristics of the control group, or details of when blood samples were taken. Experienced reviewers therefore soon gain the habit of trying to divine the quality of a study in the absence of any detailed understanding of what was done, or to whom. Thus, to ensure your paper is rejected you will actually have to make it clear that your control group was grossly mismatched and was studied three years after the experimental group. Equally, the use of the term ‘at random’ is common even with experimenters who have used formal randomisation schedules, though you of course mean that you recruited patients from the ward only on days when admissions were not too heavy. As your drug is intended for the amelioration of hypertension, you will have selected only patients with Cushing’s syndrome, and studied them three days after trans-sphenoidal hypophysectomy. Point this out, but do not explain why. Give clinical characteristics in Table 3 (omitting the control group), but include only information barely relevant to the study.

Analytical methods should not be given, except by reference to obscure chapters in symposium books long out of print. Useful information to be avoided will include normal ranges and intra- and inter-assay coefficients of variation. As you are unsure what these are, this should not be a problem. It would anyway be complicated by your change of hospital halfway through the study, and the consequent changes in assay methods. Do not make this obvious, but just drop gentle hints that it might be the case.

Statistical techniques will give you more of a problem. Most reviewers will not challenge you for fear of revealing their own ignorance on the subject, and the statistical expert retained by the editor has such complicated ideas that he will generally be ignored. To have your paper criticised on statistical grounds you therefore have to be really outrageous in your use of simple tests. A few hundred students’ (sic) ‘t’ tests or the use of a one-tailed test will usually bring forth a mild rebuke. Calling a difference an increase even when not significant will be ignored by most referees. Try using no tests at all.

It is important to delete all mention in the manuscript of whether your observations are presented as mean, median, or mode, with standard deviation, standard error, confidence limits, range, interquartile range, or whatever.

Results

This section is better termed Results and Preliminary Discussion, and often contains the only discussion relevant to the paper. Remember also to include any methods you forgot to include in the previous section. If you are careful with the presentation of your data it should in any case be possible to make it bear little relationship to the protocols described in the Methods section.

Presenting hard data in as confusing a fashion as possible is a complex art, and made more difficult when you have such a paucity of results anyway. A few years’ apprenticeship as an editor might help here. If you have made more than one type of measurement in the study be sure to present them as a ratio, but only after transformation of either the numerator or the denominator. This makes the units nearly uninterpretable.

In presenting any data ensure that you demonstrate fully your acquaintance with non-SI units, and your contempt for the indivisible litre. After highlighting all your non-significant ‘increases’ and ‘decreases’, try filling a few paragraphs with non-significant ‘correlations’. Remember to data snoop extensively through all your results looking for all possible kinds of relationships, and place victorious emphasis on any where $p$ is (thankfully) less than 0.05.

The Results section is complemented by your Figures. Produce these in profusion and in clashing styles. Use at least two art departments, and do one figure yourself in well-aged Letraset. Label the axes at 2 mm intervals with illegibly small figures. Indicate what you have measured on the vertical axis, but do not give units; vice versa on the horizontal axis. Give concentration units per cent,
though you used per millilitre in the text. Omit some or all of the error bars, and do not indicate statistical significance. Cleveland has collected many beautiful examples of how your predecessors have misrepresented their data in diagrammatic form [1]. Figure legends should be as brief and uninformative as possible, and you should accidentally transpose those of Figures 8 and 13. This is easy if you fail to indicate which is which on the back of the glossy prints.

Tables are easier to make confusing, even for the novice, and details will not be given here. Again, data should be given in different units from those used in the text. A solid touch of confusion can be added by misnumbering sparsely labelled Tables containing volumes of data, all to five or six decimal places.

Discussion

Here you have a number of options. The first is to repeat the Introduction. The second is to write a review of all that is known to you about your subject, hence revealing your ignorance. This review should be about twice the length of the rest of the paper, and should not touch upon any results that you may have actually given in the Results section. A third alternative is to dissect these results in great detail, with particular attention to any non-significant differences, and to speculate wildly from them with scant regard to any other published material. Remember in this respect to be totally uncritical about your own study, while scornfully dismissing any other relevant papers. With luck these will include those of one or both reviewers.

A danger here is to assume that the Discussion section is important in having your paper rejected. Do not spend too long making it unacceptable. Many expert reviewers are independently minded, and, having drawn their own conclusions from your Methods and Results, will skip lightly through your Discussion.

References

It is of course very simple to irritate editors into apoplexy by messing up the reference section. Many of the techniques are so obvious and widely practised that they will not be considered here. One subtlety of using superscripts when references should be in brackets, or vice versa, is that it may suggest that your paper has been rejected by another journal, and simply turned around without regard for style. The Vancouver convention [2] has reduced scope in this respect, but many other journals use an in-house style, book publishers often use the Harvard name and year system, and there are many variations in the use of punctuation. Vary the style a little anyway.

Should you work in a limited field there is a chance that you can guess who your reviewers might be. You might then decide not to refer to their work. But, if you do choose to do so, make subtle changes to surnames or initials, and get the last page number wrong. There are endless variations on this theme.

When numbering the references in an incorrect order in the manuscript do not be tempted to make this easy to spot and correct. ‘Pyke and associates showed . . .’ is all too easy if Pyke’s paper is actually number 57. A better technique is to say, ‘C-piptede was measured by radioimmunoassay . . .’, where no reference title mentions C-peptide, and you are actually referring to Holman and Turner’s paper on basal normoglycaemia. Having scanned the whole reference list in attempting to sort this out, the editor is likely to retire hurt, completing his evening’s work by dictating a quick four line letter to you. A simpler technique is to sprinkle your reference list with ‘Submitted for publication’ (meaning manuscript will be prepared after Christmas), and ‘Personal communication’ (overheard in the bar during the Bridlington meeting). This may however strike you as rather crude and old-fashioned.

Final tips

Enough you may think is enough. Well: 1. Do not discuss the manuscript with any of the co-authors—they may improve it. 2. Certainly do not show it to the head of department, unless you can be sure that it will be read under the influence of Campari and jet lag on his next trip back from Dar-es-Salaam. 3. Not having read the instructions to authors you cannot be sure that you are sending too few copies of the manuscript; a better technique is to randomise pages 28 to 30 between the copies, and then staple them firmly together. 4. Should you accidentally stumble on a requirement of signed copyright transfer, or indemnity against parallel publication, ignore it. Alternatively, have all but two of the co-authors sign it, and inexpertly forge the signature of the best known member of the team. 5. Enclose a letter to the editor explaining why you adopted the (pseudo-) protocol you did, hence drawing attention to a major deficiency of your study. 6. Do not advise the editor of your change of address, and his requests for further absurdities to be introduced into the manuscript will rot happily for 6 months in your old pigeon-hole in the research unit.

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Genuine references

1. Cleveland, W. S. (1985) The elements of graphing data. New York: Wadsworth.
2. International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (1982) British Medical Journal, 284, 1766.