

## Perspective in journal publishing

In the field of journal editing, perspective is near the pinnacle of the pile of important things. Editors focus on perspective as they select what will be published in their journals, and this has bearing on readers and authors alike. For the reader, an understanding that perspective is a priority for editors explains the relative importance of material that is published in a scientific journal. For the prospective author, it clarifies how editors determine content; this in turn should help authors prepare papers that will be viewed as additions to the knowledge base that exists in the primary literature.

To use a common idiom, journal editors are not interested in reinventing the wheel. Within some *AJHP* sections (Letters, Frontline Pharmacist, How To, Management Consultation, and some Notes), prior literature comparisons are not necessary. With full-fledged reports, however, it is important to know what a new work adds to the existing body of knowledge on the subject. Ironically, authors often overlook this important concern.

It's always a bit dangerous to use examples to explain something, because the examples never fully apply to the next similar circumstance. Nevertheless, I will use an example to try to clarify the jobs of editors and authors. Let us assume that a practicing pharmacist sees that a medication is being used in a way that is wasteful. Perhaps the drug is available in both an oral and an injectable form, and the expensive injectable form is being used when the less expensive oral form would achieve the same therapeutic result at a fraction of the cost. Perhaps this pharmacist develops a successful educational program to correct the situation and then decides to pursue publication of these results to (1) show other pharmacists how to achieve the same success and (2) show the non-pharmacy world how pharmacists can reduce the cost of health care. Assume further that the paper is clear, concise, and otherwise well written. Will it be published? If the journal to which it is submitted has ample material from which to choose, the answer will depend mostly on what already exists in the professional literature on that subject. If someone else has published similar findings, journal editors may reject the more recent refrain. Why? Because there is usually substantial competition for the space available in the pages of a publication, and papers

that add something new will always get priority.

In reaching the difficult decisions on what to accept and what to reject, journal editors—and the peer reviewers they recruit to help—anxiously search a new submission for evidence of its uniqueness. In the best papers, the introductory paragraphs succinctly summarize what is known of the subject at hand and what is added by this new paper. In the worst submissions, it is painfully clear that the authors never even considered this issue. Occasionally a submitted paper has a unique perspective that needs no explanation, but generally the incremental addition offered by the paper needs to be noted explicitly.

How can authors establish perspective for their work? The best way is to keep abreast of the professional literature. Every month new papers are published that may bear on their area of interest. Each of those papers has a reference list that should consist of the most relevant background on the subject. It is usually possible to do a manual search of back issues of professional journals by going to a medical library that stores such material, but this can be a time-consuming chore. These days, it's much easier and quicker to do the initial search electronically. For the author who is not particularly computer literate, medical librarians are available to help.

Of course, the author must ultimately read each paper that is to be cited. It can be embarrassing and a disservice to editors and readers for authors to compare new work with earlier publications with which they are not familiar on a firsthand basis.

Unfortunately, some authors of otherwise well-prepared manuscripts overdo this "perspective thing." They describe each and every relevant and remotely relevant previous publication on the subject of their paper; 10 or 20 pages later they mention how their work relates to what has gone before. This style might be desirable in a master's degree thesis, but it is a waste of time for authors and editors of the primary literature. For this type of publication, perspective can almost always be achieved in a page or two.

Timing and luck play minor roles in establishing perspective, too. Good papers occasionally get passed over by editors because a work of very similar scope, perhaps with a remarkably similar "new twist," has been recently submitted and accepted for publication unbeknownst to other authors and readers. It happens.

The primary literature should continuously build upon itself with minimal duplication and repetition. Authors and readers who embrace this concept will enhance their appreciation of what is published, and why.

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