From the Editor

The Write Way

Nathan S. Blow, PhD.

Editor-in-chief, *BioTechniques*

Several year ago when I joined *BioTechniques* as editor-in-chief, we launched two main editorial initiatives. First, publish techniques that would immediately enhance the research efforts of a wide range of scientists. Second, assist authors in communicating these methods and results more effectively to readers—a challenge I still see today.

As a graduate student, I recall many occasions when, after reading an article, I was left wondering what was going on, why certain experiments were performed in lieu of others, and where the work fit within the realm of related studies. For a time, I thought maybe I was not smart enough, that I was just not “getting it”. Fortunately for my fragile graduate student ego, there were times where I would get it right away; the aim was clear, the experiments were logically presented, and the overall significance of the work was communicated effectively. Since finishing my degree and a postdoc, and subsequently taking a position as an editor, I have come to realize that some authors don’t do their readers any favors.

Writing a manuscript can be challenging and draining. The time commitment is huge, with each revision growing more cumbersome, and many authors are already working on new experiments even as they write up or edit the old ones. As editors, we are very aware of this reality. Still, writing a manuscript is arguably the single most critical component to being a scientist—one for which, in many cases, formal training is minimal. Bearing this in mind, I thought it might be worthwhile to highlight some of the “trouble” spots we encounter when evaluating manuscripts submitted to *BioTechniques*.

- 1) *Know what you want to highlight and discuss.* I have a simple mantra when speaking with colleagues about their submissions: Tell me in a single sentence why I should read this manuscript? Time is scarce these days—experiments, grants, department duties, and more compete for a researcher’s attention. Distilling the essence of your research or your new method, into a single sentence enables you to provide an anchor of understanding for the reader. This is the rationale behind the “Method summary” section now seen at the bottom of the first page of each *BioTechniques* article.

- 2) *Know your history.* Any new study is a piece of a large puzzle, a part of a more complete body of past research. Explaining how your work fits into that puzzle provides readers context for understanding its purpose and significance. It can be argued that this is obvious—all articles have references. But the sheer amount of scientific literature is growing at an amazing rate, with new online-only journals popping up weekly. No one can follow every new development, which is why authors must create the proper framework in which to discuss their research advances and educate their readers.

- 3) *Don’t “play down” or “play up”.* While you might think the importance of your work is obvious to all, remember that in the age of the internet the line between a “general interest” journal and a more “discipline specific” one is blurring. Your article could end up reaching a much larger audience than you initially expected, so make sure its significance is clear. At the same time, don’t overreach when stating the implications of your findings, don’t suggest future directions that are too far flung—nothing creates more doubt than excessive and unfounded speculation.

- 4) *Have someone outside your group read the final manuscript.* The perspective of someone outside your lab, or even your field, can help you understand how accessible your manuscript is to readers. It’s best get to feedback from as many people as possible. This means you must be able to accept criticism, something that is not easy for anyone at first. But, the more you do this, the more you will enhance both your writing and research efforts.

In the end it is important to remember that when it comes to writing a manuscript, informal training gained through reviewer comments, interactions with colleagues, and even discussions with journal editors is as important as formal training. Share your thoughts, or even writing tips, with us at bioeditor@biotechniques.com and we will follow-up in the coming months.

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BioTechniques 54:235 (May 2013)
doi 10.2144/000114020