



## Reader, author, editor triumvirate

ORHAN C. TUNCAY

*Editor-in-Chief, Orthodontics and Craniofacial Research, Progress in Orthodontics & Cases and Commentaries in Orthodontic Technology; Professor and Chairman, Department of Orthodontics, School of Dentistry, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA.*

In the life of a scholar rejected manuscripts happen. Often it is not because of the content, but the way the data and conclusions are presented. That is, the principles of scientific writing are not met. At the outset, it must be understood that (scientific) writing evolves with the times. It must be current and efficient. This essay will discuss the issues of content and efficient reporting.

A breakthrough paper receives very little criticism even though the language used may not be all that elegant. Breakthrough papers are rare; most of us are worker bees and write interesting papers, but not cause paradigm shifts. In orthodontics, for example, a move from quantitative research to qualitative research would represent a paradigm shift (Tuncay, 2002). The bulk of scientific literature is a reflection of the interaction that has taken place between the writers, peers and editors. Indeed, the relationship between the author, referee and editor is a complex ritual. The editor wants the best papers, the referees are keen to ensure the manuscript contains good science, and the authors are eager to see their work in print hastily without any alterations. The interaction of these dichotomous opinions brings to the reader the best quality information.

It is commonly assumed that the reader will devote a block of time to sit down and concentrate to read and to scrutinize the scientific paper. Unfortunately, such deliberation does not take place often. A misconception is that reading is a focused activity

(Benson et al., 2002). People read in many different forms. Most of our reading is a *distracted* activity. We read in a distracted state of mind during a meeting, while on the phone, or looking to solve a problem on our mind. Moreover, people read either *synchronously*<sup>1</sup> or *asynchronously*<sup>2</sup>. Obviously, asynchronous reading is a distracted activity. Reading can further be classified according to the way people read: *voluntary*<sup>3</sup> or *involuntary*<sup>4</sup>.

"Information glut" is a defining characteristic of our world today. Because so much more is available, people read more than anyone in the past. But this does not mean they have bigger eyes or bigger brains. The abundance of reading material makes competition for the readers' attention severe. Clarity in writing, therefore, is essential. Authors need to be aware of the shortened attention span of the readers. One can achieve clarity and aid the reader by paying attention to the following:

- Use keywords and short sentences
- Incorporate into the text meaningful headings (not necessarily clever ones)
- Bulleted lists are easier and more attractive to read than lengthy sections in any paper
- Authors are well advised to use one idea per paragraph and halve the number of words

Most everyone knows concise papers are more readily accepted than lengthy ones.

Publishers today struggle with the difficulty of predicting the future; especially, how much to invest in

<sup>1</sup>For example, reading in the form of a logical and deliberate progression of writings on slides or newer electronic visual aids used a lecture.

<sup>2</sup>Form of reading without a structure, such as, advertisements, billboards, and the like, are examples of unconnected, unstructured reading.

<sup>3</sup>Examples of "voluntary" reading are: reading a magazine, instruction manual, scientific journal, and the like.

<sup>4</sup>Implicitly, "involuntary" reading is reading the bumper stickers, t-shirts, graffiti on a wall, or other short characters.



electronic publishing (Tuncay, 1999). Online publishing has been more successful in basic sciences than in clinical. Clinicians are tactile people and would like to hold their journals and flip through the pages. From a practical point, one can scan an issue faster in print than on the computer screen. Electronic publishing is unlikely to replace hard copy, at least, in orthodontics within the foreseeable future.

In the field of publishing, editors are the most commonly hated figures. Contrary to common perception, an editor wants to publish all the submitted papers. If all get rejected by the referees, then the editor does not have a journal to publish. Yet it is the editor's responsibility to ensure the quality of data and the language contained in the journal.

It is true, for the editor, there is no greater passion in the world that is equal to the passion to alter someone else's draft. While the editor might be the grammar police, the quality of papers published in the journal depends on the quality of the refereeing. Good refereeing is essential for good content. Referees review the submitted manuscripts as a favor, or service, to the specialty and to their colleagues. Their identity can never be revealed. Authors should feel free, however, to request their papers are not reviewed by a particular person; usually a competitor. Publication in English-language journals has become the industry standard. Uniformity in science is a good thing, but unfortunately, negative findings are not submitted to an English-language journal – if published at all. Another problem with the English-language only publications is the dissemination of information. A good number of scientists prefer to read in their native language. Readers are encouraged to ask for parallel publication in their native-language journal. If the journal does not accept it, perhaps the Internet could facilitate such publications.

It should be clear by now that the triumvirate of authors, referees and editors has long served its

purpose and a change might be in order. The list should be extended to include the referees and the publishers. Readers should feel free to establish communication with the publisher. Commonly, the publisher deals with the editor not even with the editorial board. This can be changed. The reader, for example, should feel free to ask the publisher for multidisciplinary refereeing and ask the referees to discuss the paper among themselves. In turn, the journals should offer to host conferences on a special topic with the idea of publishing the proceedings. Interpersonal relationships are/will be different in the new millennium than the one before – so will science and its reporting. Our contributions to the glut of information ought not cease, but the manner in which the information is generated must be different. Verification of reported data will always be essential, but there is no longer room for redundancy (Tuncay, 1998, 2000). Scientific reporting should be "instantly informative."

## REFERENCES

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