

An occasional column, in which Caveman and other troglodytes involved in cell science emerge to share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Messages for Caveman and other contributors can be left at [caveman@biologists.com](mailto:caveman@biologists.com). Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.



### **‘Send me all of your reagents and ideas. We want to work on the same experiments’**

As scientists we know the value of collaboration in our work. It is where ideas and expertise are shared, reagents are given away, and when young scientists learn to think about scientific advances being made as a group effort rather than on an individual basis. Collaboration, however, requires trust, respect and an eye to mentoring: trust that your ideas will not be stolen or misused; respect for the hard work and effort that brought you to the collaboration; and mentoring for the young scientists who want to develop in this area as independent scientists.

Such formal collaborations are fun, important and usually very productive –

truly, they are one of the best parts of science culture. But what about the type of collaboration in which another laboratory doesn't want to interact with you on a long-term basis but simply wants a unique cDNA, antibody, cell line or transgenic mouse that your laboratory developed. In this case, the other laboratory may want the reagent for a line of research that is completely different from that going on in your laboratory, but then again they may want to do the same experiments for which you made the reagent. Do you send it to them immediately? Do you refuse the request, or at best ignore it? Do you lie that you have a small quantity of the reagent that is only sufficient for the work in your laboratory or that the reagent is no longer available (the freezer melt down of '98)? Do you inquire about the line of experimentation that they want to follow? Do you demand that sending the reagent is contingent upon a formal

collaboration between you and the other group, or that you are a co-author on any publication that arises from the use of the reagent? Do you try and restrict the latitude or direction of the work that can be done with your reagent by the other group?

In my opinion, there is only one response to such a request. It is the first one above: that is, send the reagent immediately. Do not ask questions, do not demand a collaboration or co-authorship on papers, or restrict the work that will be done by the other group.

It is not easy to make this (right) choice of response. I know from first-hand experience. I have had individuals ask for specific reagents whose stated goal is to do the same experiments as we are performing with that reagent. Another

laboratory wanted our reagents for a specific series of experiments that we were not planning to do; this group then turned around and used the reagents for the same line of experiments that we were following. I was asked to re-supply a reagent to a group that had not received the reagent from my laboratory directly; it turned out that a different group, who had received the reagent from us, had sent it to that group as part of their collaboration! In each case, I sent the reagent.

Yes, I am aware that postdocs and students made the requested reagent for their own work in your laboratory, and, therefore, the request may be so that another laboratory can do the same work (helping a competitor to compete against you?). That is why I always hope that the same conditions of a formal collaboration hold for the request for

reagents, that is trust, respect and an eye to mentoring: trust that the receiving laboratory will use the reagent appropriately, acknowledge where they got it from, let you know how their experiments went and not give it away without permission; respect for the hard work and effort that went into the development of the reagent for research in the originator's laboratory (and not everyone else's); and an eye to mentoring so that postdocs and students who made the reagent have the time and scope to develop their research. I always hope that 'respect' and 'an eye to mentoring' will forestall other laboratories from asking for a reagent to compete directly with my laboratory in ongoing experiments for which the reagent was made. But, when it doesn't, I send the reagent anyway.

**Caveman**

## CORRESPONDENCE

### The (f)art of criticism

Dear Esteemed Colleague,

UGH! OOK! Grr grrr grrr oog oog oog! Having dispensed with the usual pleasantries in our native tongue, I will now switch to a modern language (English, for convenience), which will allow me to express certain necessary complex concepts, such as 'irony', that our simple and elegant cave-speak lacks.

I am writing in regards to your recent Sticky Wicket article on the "(f)art of criticism". I completely agree with everything you said, and I think this essay should be mandatory reading for anyone reviewing articles for any journal. So, I'm not writing to argue or complain! But I cannot help but point out the irony of this essay appearing in *Journal of Cell Science*, a journal that, at least at one point, provided reviewers with a convenient check-box labeled 'too descriptive', so that they wouldn't have to waste the time required to type out this phrase. I don't actually know if this check-box still appears on review forms for JCS. It is possible that in the intervening years someone on the Editorial Board had the good sense to remove this frankly absurd feature.

However, should this prove not to be the case, I would like to offer the following modest proposal: in order to make things easier on the reviewers and editors, in addition to a check box for 'too descriptive', additional check-boxes could be added for 'controls are inadequate' and 'little new in the way of insights into the mechanisms involved'. In fact, instead of check-boxes, they could make it a scratch-and-sniff!

Wallace Marshall

Dear Caveman Marshall,

*Thank you for your correspondence. I often worry that Cave-Speak is being forgotten, or is being corrupted by allowing it to 'evolve' as the Americans are doing to the English language. By the way, in the context of your Cave-Speak, I entirely agree with your sentiments about Harvard.*

*Ah yes, the opinion boxes! You are right to bring this point to our collective attentions. I had forgotten them. I like your suggestion about how to increase their number and pungency, particularly through the use of 'scratch-and-sniff' boxes.*

*Personally, I do not have strong feelings or smells about these boxes. As I have tried to enumerate on several occasions, it is the role of the reviewer to write an opinion of the work in the manuscript from a scholarly standpoint (the point of "The (f)art of criticism" – that is, to make clear statements in the critique about the scientific content of the work. It is then the role of the Editor or Monitoring Editor to use that opinion to make an informed decision about the suitability of the work for publication (in the journal). 'Opinion' boxes are not part of the critique, and the Editor or Monitoring Editor is not obligated to pay them any attention. When a critique is well written, opinion boxes are superfluous. Anyway, it would be hard to judge a manuscript by the ticks in boxes, as one reviewer's pick of an opinion box may not reflect their critique or be the same as another reviewer's – even though their critiques might be similar. A neolithic corruption of one of the Bard's great phrases is appropriate here: "The smell of a rose to one person is as mammoth droppings to another!"*

*Caveman*