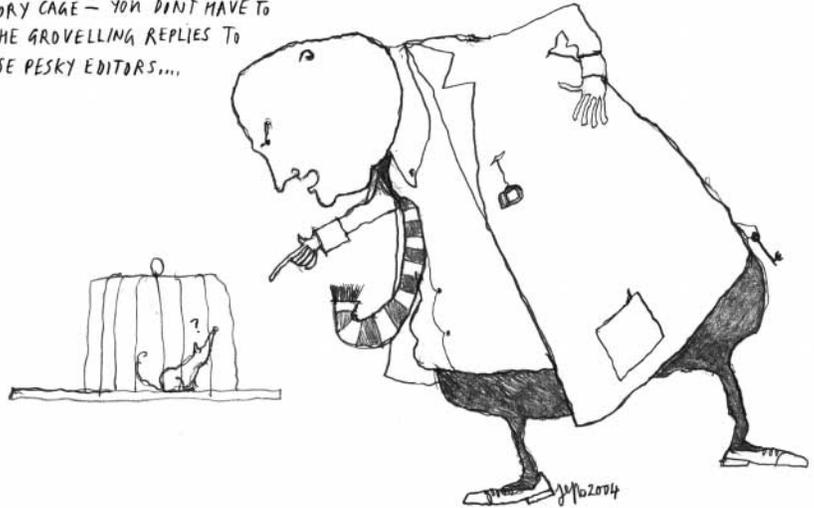


An occasional column, in which Mole, Caveman and other troglodytes involved in cell science emerge to share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Messages for Caveman and other contributors can be left at caveman@biologists.com. Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.

IT'S ALL RIGHT FOR YOU, MATEY,
SNUG N' SAFE IN YOUR NICE LITTLE
LABORATORY CAGE - YOU DON'T HAVE TO
WRITE THE GROVELLING REPLIES TO
ALL THOSE PESKY EDITORS....



All the lonely people

Where do they all come from? Editors that is. There are several classes of editor, ranging from those academics editing 'not for profit' journals that financially support academic societies to the professional editors who edit commercial journals that exploit the scientific community to make a profit for their shareholders – sorry, who provide an essential service in scientific communication and selflessly endeavour to promote the best science. We have all fallen foul of each sub-type of editor at one point or another. Here are my favourite three.

Academic editor, major international journal

This editor is one of many, and rigorously follows the guidance of the referees. This species is the easiest to forgive, although not always the easiest to understand. After all, this editor knows that sending three years of your life to three anonymous competitors (sorry again – colleagues) is in itself a random act of faith. Usually one referee comes back saying "excellent, sound, exciting, fully supported by the data and of massive general interest" a second mumbles ineffectually about the lack of controls on the colour of the ink you used to illustrate the uninteresting point on figure 3D, part(ii), top panel, left. The third is a professional critic. The third stridently dismisses your entire career as "meaningless pap worthy only of small children and the conceptually challenged". The third most probably thinks they missed their vocation as a film

critic and has never quite forgiven the fates for this slight on their abilities.

How is our poor academic editor to respond? Should this unloved and under appreciated person, who only wants to add to the CV another measure of international standing, actually read the paper and take sides? Surely editors have better things to do? Someone has to count the individual pixels on the screens of pocket PCs after all. No, this editor obviously has to abide by the decision of the chosen referees. This editor open up the 'tools for editors' link on the web browser and clicks guiltily on the "I am sorry, but the referees found serious flaws in your manuscript and thus we are unable to publish your work" button. This editor drags and drops a few mollifying sentences: "Thank you for submitting to our journal and we hope you will consider us again in the future" (fat chance you miserable...) and "I advise you to approach a specialist journal" (right, and what do you think you are – one of the holy trinity?).

Academic editor, specialist journal

This editor pretty much runs the show alone, theoretically supported by an editorial board of the great and the good, most of whom wouldn't dream of sinking so low as to publish in a 'specialist' journal (the verbal emphasis on specialist has the kind of sneer usually associated with analysis of a politician's intellectual ability). Anyway, this editor is on a mission to prove something unfathomable, but which clearly can be expressed through the pages of this

specialist organ. Often, by this time, your paper has been through one set of referees (see above) and you have fine-tuned it to perfection, controlling colours used to print all figures (even though you know you will balk at the page charges for colour figures and it will all ultimately be published in monochrome). You write an obsequious covering letter, sit back and wait for two things, the inevitable carping of the referees and for your grad student to do that key control that you just know is the missing fulcrum of your story.

Two referees nit-pick their way through your work like starved primates and return a total of seven pages of typographical errors, misplaced fonts and queries about the faint band you hadn't even noticed. It's heartening when someone's postdoc takes their first exposure to the art of refereeing so seriously, even if they seem to have entirely missed that pivotal lack of a control (what hope for the future?). The editor sends you a long letter apparently missing the entire point of your research, making editorial suggestions that clearly indicate that the editorial perusal of your manuscript occurred through spectacles tinted so lavishly as to make the view of this corner of the scientific world as corkscrewed as a pig's tail. The third referee simply couldn't be bothered, which means you escaped another failed critic venting their righteous anger, and you don't have to consider that new beast: the sub-specialist journal.

The fun now is to compose a four-page missive strenuously thanking the referees, subtly pointing out their major lapses in judgement and/or ability and pretending that the new blot you added answers not only point 6 from referee 1 (which it does) but also points 12 and 14-22, not to mention all of the second referee's concerns (points which, of course, were entirely justified by your misplacing the objective tense of sentence two, paragraph six on page seven). Now you try to work out what this editor really wants, so you can explain why publishing your manuscript would obviously support his/her view of the world, cure all mankind of delusions and generally help bring about peace, love and understanding. You will certainly miss the mark somewhat, but you can be pretty confident that such editors are so desperate for flattery that they will either not notice or not mind. Anyway, the sheer weight of paperwork you and the two

referees have produced is going to overwhelm – imagine the decision at six o'clock on Friday evening: shall I wade through all this and make a decision based on the finely argued issues and the balance of scientific judgements or should I click on “Dear... I am pleased to report that your response is satisfactory and we are sending your manuscript to the typesetters”? There's no contest, since the editor wants to nip off for a well-deserved beer.

Professional editor

I have saved the professional editor until last, like a kid picking through a plate of food and putting aside that least favourite morsel – it has to be eaten sometime, but it leaves such an unpleasant taste. Professional editors: where do they all come from? Opinionated, terminally dense, out to prove something (anything – they don't care what) and, worst of all, resentful of your success (everything being relative). These hounds from hell control the gates to stardom; they collectively deliberate on your promotion, on your grants awards and on the quality of the people who are foolish enough to apply to work with you. They control your life, they lie in wait behind the bushes as you stagger home tired and exhausted, they make phone calls to your partner and children, they huddle together at conferences and plot to destroy your career, they want to steal your house and repossess your car... (sorry again – I am OK now, the pills help).

Every once in a while you stumble over something that actually matters – something that will sell itself and have your colleagues turn a nice shade of green. You've finally understood what should have been obvious to everyone all along. How it works. Why it was so confusing. So apparently complex. But really so simple. You've made a discovery. Not an incremental advance, a true discovery. A Nobel Prize winning... no maybe not. But really a discovery. People will remember. Grant awarders will applaud. Your institution might even appreciate you. You write it up. You re-write it up. You give it to a few trusted colleagues. You re-write it again. And again. You finally wrestle with the Internet submission program. At last, an e-mail. It's been received. It is to be considered. It is party time – if you had the energy.

Six weeks pass and you feel progressively like a character in a novel by Kafka. Life goes on, you make the motions but always you are waiting, waiting. Finally that e-mail, three referees: one positive; one persuadable; one ignorant – well, negative. Even though the editor has written, “Thank you for your submission. Unfortunately the referees do not find that your work has progressed the field significantly enough to justify publication in our esteemed organ”, you know this is what they always say (never, “please re-submit...”; that's beneath their dignity) and you can persuade the negative referee – you just know you can. You cajole and encourage the lab to start two more years' work and complete it in two months. You prioritise. You rewrite. You add. You subtract. To cut a long story short, you send back a much improved, focused and succinct description of your life's endeavour.

Then the professional editor sends straight back a professional editor's e-mail. “Your work does not address the fundamental question”. “Your work is not of general interest”. “Your work is flawed because you cannot conclude anything from your main assay”. “Your work...” They don't know. They don't understand. They really just don't get it, do they? They are clinically brain dead, born stupid. They should not be allowed to make these career shaping (for your postdoc and for you) and career breaking (your big grant is up for renewal) decisions.

Where do they all come from? They come out of that cadre of postdocs who can't hack it. Not the really bad ones, but the ones that you and your colleagues nursed along with love and affection so they could make their little contribution. The ones for whom you dreaded writing the reference for: “Dr X is a good lab scientist but I couldn't in all honesty recommend them for a faculty position at your institute because they really just don't get it”. Big mistake. They end up so powerful. So bitter. When, I wonder, are we labrats going to do something about this?

Jabberwock

Journal of Cell Science 117, 3705-3706
Published by The Company of Biologists 2004
doi:10.1242/jcs.01321