EASE-Forum Digest: June to September 2017

Abbreviation for percentile

Aleksandra Golebiowska asked if anyone knew the correct abbreviation for percentile. Duncan Nicholas said it was %ile while John Taylor had encountered pctl and P_i, where $_i$ was the percentile.

Length of sections in a scientific paper

Is there any recommendation on the length of each part of a typical research paper? This question, asked by Yateen Joshi, was met with a counter question from Andrew Davis, "should there be such a recommendation?" Some studies may have used complex methods that would need to be explained while others might have produced copious results but the methods could be described in a few words. The general consensus of the Forum was that there could not be one rule to fit all. The length of sections varies and also depends on the discipline, for example Ana Marušić had read an analysis which found the Introduction constituted about 18% of the body of a biomedical article compared with 30% of a social science article, which would include a literature review. The average number of paragraphs for a biomedical paper was two for the Introduction, six each for the Methods and Results and six to seven for the Discussion.

One recommendation found in the literature, which Liz Wager and others reiterated, is that the introduction of biomedical articles should be divided into three paragraphs answering the questions:

- What's the problem? (or why does this topic matter?)
- Why was the research needed?
- What was the study question?

Michael Altus hoped such a scheme would encourage shorter introductions as he had sometimes found introductions contained background material which would be better placed in the Discussion. Valerie Matarese on the other hand had encountered drafts with only a cursory Introduction, despite extensive Methods, Results and Supplementary data, when she had encouraged authors to expand the Introduction.

Hervé Maisonneuve posted a reference to an article relevant to the topic.[1]

Multiple invitations to review

One of the major problems for scientific journals is to find reviewers. Eric Lichtfouse of France commented that his environmental chemistry journal sometimes had to invite up to 15 reviewers before they received comments from two. Eva Baranyiová, based in the Czech Republic, noted a record of 16 requests to review a manuscript sent out by her veterinary journal. To deal with the problem, some journals have adopted a strategy of sending out multiple invitations to review. This has met with displeasure from reviewers who before returning a review had been told their reviews were no longer required. Pippa Smart asked if anyone worked on journals which send out multiple invitations and what they thought of this process. No one who responded to Pippa's post worked on such a journal and all opposed the practice.

Ivana Štětinová considered multiple invitations to be unfair to reviewers. The associate editors of her experimental botany journal, based in the Czech Republic, usually invited two reviewers and only when a positive reply was not forthcoming did they invited further reviewers. If editors monitor regularly, delays in the review process would be minimal and a better alternative to risking alienating reviewers. Ines Steffens of Sweden agreed. His journal, published by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, only sent out multiple invitations for fast-track articles and otherwise identified potential backup reviewers. Eva usually sent requests to three or four potential reviewers but mostly had to send a second set of requests as reviewers often did not bother to reply or had no time to review. In the rare event of an extra review turning up it would be sent to the author, as the comments might still be helpful in preparing a rejected article for submission elsewhere. Peter Hovenkam, who runs a biodiversity journal in the Netherlands, said he never sent out a manuscript without first contacting the reviewer. He himself would not review for a journal that sent out multiple invitations.

Foppe van Mil said his journal, *The International Journal of Clinical Pharmacy*, uses the Editorial Manager' submission and peer-review software, by which editors could assign spare reviewers, so as always to have two reviewers per paper. If a reviewer declined, the spare reviewer was automatically promoted. The system would only revert to the editor to make an additional selection when none of the spares agreed to review, but this happened only rarely.

James Hartley, a professor at Keele University in the UK, thought members of the Forum might be interested in a system for obtaining reviewers used until 2016 by the *British Journal of Educational Technology*. The editor sent abstracts to a panel of several hundred reviewers who had agreed to be reviewers for the journal. Having seen the abstract, individual members of the panel would indicate that they were willing to be a referee. Thereby papers were refereed by people who were interested in reviewing the particular topic.[2]

Advantages and disadvantages of electronic manuscript submission systems (EMS)

Carmel Williams, an executive editor of the *Health and Human Rights Journal* at Harvard, asked for advice from editors who use EMS systems. Richard Loch, editor-in-chief of *Building Research and Information*, said that he had experienced switches from manual to electronic submission systems. The transfer process took about a month. He provided a very informative list of advantages and disadvantages as follows:

the advantages he found were they

- provide continuity and facilitate the handover of information between successive editors
- make sharing tasks with associate editors easier
- allow editorial processes to be monitored, eg time to first decision
- coordinate emails to reviewers and authors, and when a request to review is declined provide the possibility of automatically sending emails to reserve reviewers

and the disadvantages were

- some functions formerly undertaken manually may have to be compromised or are unavailable in a specific EMS system
- technical support can be slow and patchy as some functional problems (or needs) that you experience will not be given priority
- the processes that they provide are somewhat rigid, therefore they may not fit or suit your way of working
- the emails that they generate are less personal (although it is normally possible to alter the specific email that goes out - except for reminder emails)
- the EMS generate a large number of reminder emails (for authors, reviewers and editors), which are typically created automatically and based on a generic text
- there will be times that the system is down (for planned maintenance or unplanned glitches) with a loss of working time for editors
- the detailed information in the EMS is effectively owned by the publisher, so new memoranda of understanding may be needed on how this information is used (or not used)
- although the EMS will claim to be robust (with forms of back-up), concerns remain that it is more fragile than stated. They had experienced loss of data (reviewers' comments) that were not recoverable
- the creation of HTML and PDFs for reviewers may result in some data being lost (eg the title and captions for figures and tables) which make it difficult for reviewers to easily find what they need
- some authors will find it difficult to follow or adhere to all the formatting instructions (types of files, specific file names, etc).

Are journals fusing British English spelling with American style?

John Taylor had come across author guidelines in a British journal that whilst requiring British English spelling specified American punctuation and style, "including measurement units, capitalization, punctuation, references and citations." He commented that American style appears to be increasingly used for style in headings, references etc and wanted to know if members of the Forum had also noticed this fusion in journals. Liz Wager had not encountered this mixture in medical journals. She questioned if there was such a thing as a single US style as differences exist even between the American Medical Association (AMA), Council of Science Editors (CSE) and Chicago style manuals. It was confusing to ask authors to use American style without indicating which manual they should follow.

Elise Langdon-Neuner (compiler)
a.a.neuner@gmail.com

Discussion initiators
Pippa Smart: pippa.smart@gmail.com
Aleksandra Golebiowska: algol@ciop.pl
Yateendra Joshi: yateendra.joshi@gmail.com
John Taylor: john@jgtaylor.com

References
1 Araújo CG. Detailing the Writing of Scientific Manuscripts: 25–30 Paragraphs. Arq Bras Cardiol 2014; 102(2): e21–e23. Available at https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3987331/

2 Hartley J *et al*. Peer choice - does reviewer self-selection work? *Learned Publishing*, 20, 1, 27–29. DOI: 11002/leap.1010

From the EASE website...

New Style Author Toolkit!

Hot on the heels of the Peer Reviewer toolkit, comes a revised Author Toolkit!

In the same style as the PR Toolkit, all the resources are organised into the following main themes and collected together in different pages.

- General Writing Tips
- Peer Review for Authors
- Publishing and Editorial Issues
- Ethics for Authors
- Other Resources

There is not much new in it yet, but new content will be added in the near future, especially an entire module devoted to Open Access, 'predatory' journals, pros and cons and more.

http://www.ease.org.uk/publications/ease-toolkit-authors/