

EASE-Forum Digest: March 2018 – June 2018

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Abbreviations only used once and explaining "standard" abbreviations

It is not uncommon to find a string of words in a scientific manuscript followed by the abbreviated form in parenthesis. If the abbreviation is not used again Erick García deletes it when he edits the manuscript. He gave Unconsolidated Undrained Triaxial Compression Test (UUTxT) as an example of when he had found an abbreviation only once in a text. Editing out, however, had met with protests from his author clients who maintained including such abbreviations was necessary when they are better known than the written-out form in the particular scientific discipline. Eric asked if there was a standard or a guideline he was missing.

No standard or guideline was offered by those who participated in the discussion. The only advantage as Ivana Štětínová saw it was that retaining the abbreviation might make the paper more searchable and increase the probability of it being cited. Erick thought he might settle the issue by adding the phrase "known as" before the abbreviation UUTxT. This would tell readers that "UUTxT" is not an abbreviation they needed to memorise to fully understand the author's thoughts. Sylwia Ufnalska considered adding "known as" unnecessary.

In general, all discussants agreed that abbreviations make a text difficult to follow. Therefore, non-standard abbreviations should only be used if the term is particularly long, often repeated and the abbreviation makes the text more readable. Are Brean quoted the International Committee On Publication Ethics (ICMJE): "The spelled-out abbreviation followed by the abbreviation in parenthesis should be used on first mention unless the abbreviation is a standard unit of measurement." EASE's recommendations are similar (www.ease.org.uk/publications/author-guidelines). Foppe van Mil felt abbreviations should in particular be avoided in the abstract, as recommended by the EASE guidelines.

As for standard abbreviations, Foppe pointed out that what is a logical abbreviation for one person may mean something totally different for someone else. Are's trick for persuading authors who maintain their abbreviations are standard and do not wish to explain them is to show them how many different meanings their abbreviation has in international society by sending them a link to the web-site www.acronymfinder.com.

Examples of where a term is better known by its abbreviation were given as DDT and DNA, but these are known by laymen. Other abbreviations might be standard for a particular community but not known generally, eg ELISA for enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay in the life sciences. Another example is APC, which was used in the discussion I report next without any explanation. While the EASE community would know what this refers to, no one outside would know and

it has many other meanings—around 200 in Are's acronym finder! Some journals overcome this problem by providing a list of abbreviations which do not need explanation because they are standard for the journal. However, in these days when co-operation between disciplines is becoming increasingly important and laypeople are more and more searching the Internet for scientific information, maybe there is wisdom in explaining abbreviations only known to insiders.

The editor-in-chief's prerogative to set the date of acceptance usurped

By convention the date of acceptance of an article stated in a journal with the published article is the date the editor-in-chief accepted the final version for print or online presentation. Eva Baranyiová pointed out, however, that publishing houses (eg Elsevier, Oxford Academic Press) in their descriptions of accepted manuscripts only give timepoints such as available for pre-print, post-print with no explicit wording about who accepts the manuscript. She had noticed that when dealing with a particular open access journal the editor-in-chief's date of acceptance she had inserted in the online version was different from that appearing in the print version. The publishing house had changed the date to that of receipt of the APC (article processing charge). Eva wondered if anyone else had experience of a publishing house interfering with the date of acceptance.

Duncan Nicholas could not think what benefits there would be in a journal changing the acceptance date to later than the date of editor-in-chief's acceptance letter. If the idea in the event payment took a long time was to reduce the time between acceptance and publication this would only make the time from submission to acceptance longer. Eva explained the reason was to ensure authors did not escape payment. The journal had adjusted its editorial software when the article processing charge had been introduced. Authors now receive "billing information" upon acceptance by the editor-in-chief. The notification of acceptance of the manuscript is then only sent to the authors once payment is received. Thus, arrival of payment is a prerequisite for acceptance. In effect the publishing house was holding back acceptance of manuscripts for as long as it took for payment to be made, which may take days or even weeks. Eva felt this was unethical because acceptance could be of great importance for authors, eg in cases of claims to priority.

Duncan considered this procedure strange. He thought the publishing house had not configured its reviewing software optimally for the purpose of taking payments. There should be no problem if necessary to use the invoice date as the acceptance date. Money arriving is in any event a prerequisite for all open access publications that charge authors.

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