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**. Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.

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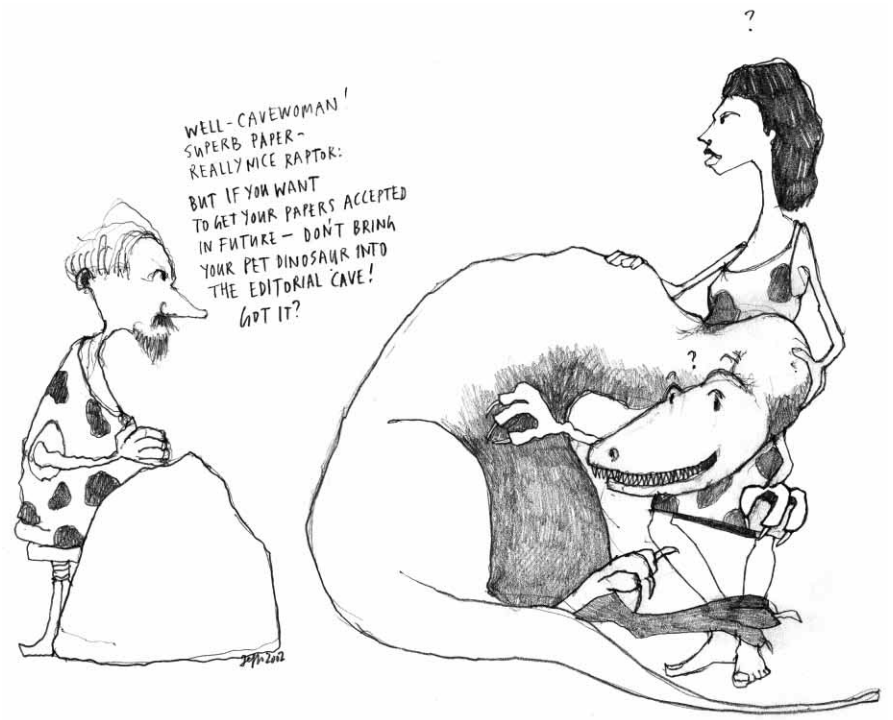

How to publish in your favorite journal

What do you have to do to get a paper into your favorite journal? First, don't sleep with the editor. It undermines your credibility. I say this not from personal experience but from my observations of scientists and editors and my perspective as a cavewoman scientist. Scientists are far too willing to discredit their fellow workers (especially those who have published in high-profile journals); sleeping with an editor will only encourage them. And editors have short memories – it's a protective device that enables them to reject a paper one day and call up the author the next and ask them to review a competitor's paper on the same topic. The editor may not have glowing memories (or even *any* memory) of you when your name surfaces on the title page of a newly submitted manuscript, no matter what your previous interactions. So don't do it! And don't marry an editor. That way you'll avoid conflicts that are otherwise unavoidable.

Before proceeding further, a disclaimer. Who am I? And what qualifies me to give advice? Well, while I have published in my favorite journal more than once, almost all of my recently published papers have been rejected, sometimes more than once. Take a paper of ours that appeared in *Nature* a few years ago. It was rejected by *Science*, then by *Nature* and then reconsidered only after we added three months' worth of data. During the review process, one of the reviewers revealed himself and offered to collaborate to perform the experiments that he had recommended be included. We did the experiments ourselves, but asked that he be excluded from review of the revised manuscript owing to conflict of interest. The editor did not consider this a conflict and sent the revised paper to the same reviewers. Despite this, the paper was accepted. Incidentally, our only *Science* paper was rejected first by *Nature* without review, then by *Science* after two *favorable* reviews. It was only reconsidered after several lengthy talks with the editor and a month's more work.

Even *JCS* – which I hold in high regard because of its (usually) reasonable editorial handling and refereeing – can cause bloodshed. After hearing us present data that had required years of work, a *JCS* Editor invited us to submit it. The manuscript was favorably reviewed, but the reviewers asked for further data that seemed impossible to obtain. Although, in the end, it did not take that long to obtain the additional data and revise the paper, the delay in

publication almost resulted in a nervous breakdown by one of the authors (me). There was blood, sweat and tears on the final version of that manuscript.

The above are just some of the battles and skirmishes I have experienced over manuscripts. In fact, I have made almost all the possible mistakes one can in trying to get a paper accepted. If that qualifies me to tell you how to do it, then here goes.

1. Think creatively, work hard and get a fabulous result

Back in the old days, during the last century, it was possible to publish careful studies with interesting observations in your favorite journal without a major battle. It's different now, but more on this later. Today, findings that you may consider important can be denigrated by critical reviewers as 'descriptive' (what isn't descriptive?) with the recommendation to submit to a 'speciality' journal. To publish your work today, it is increasingly necessary to have discovered a new organelle, defined a new mechanism or solved a scientific problem – things most of us aspire to doing only a few times in our careers. Nonetheless, it is possible to make important discoveries by careful observation and creative thinking, and this now seems to be requisite for publishing not only in the journal of your choice but in *any* journal. So if you aspire to publishing your work, put in time thinking creatively and then perform your experiments carefully.

2. Write a carefully interpreted paper in the appropriate format

Interpreting your results and writing up the implications of your findings can take longer than doing the experiments themselves. It can also require a great deal of inspired and creative thinking, on a par with designing the experiments in the first place. These are the creative aspects of being a scientist and part of the reason you decided to become a scientist. So, go to it. And don't forget to read carefully the information provided for authors and put your manuscript into the correct journal format. This avoids offending the editors at their first sight of your paper and can save time later in the editorial process.

3. Think of all the reasons why your paper should be published in that journal, condense them into a short paragraph and write a one-page letter to the editor

This is to help the editor, who often has stacks of newly submitted manuscripts on his/her desk and must decide which to send for review. Editors have short attention spans, and one page is the limit for the amount of time they are likely to devote to grasping the importance of your manuscript. The letter must include the names of 4-5 suggested reviewers, their addresses and other contact information, leaving room for only 2-3 sentences about your findings and their implications. So be concise and state your results in such a way that their importance is clear. It doesn't hurt to add a sentence about the significance of your findings, but don't use the phrase 'holy grail' – I have this on good authority!

4. Submit your manuscript

This can now be done electronically so your manuscript arrives at the editorial offices in cyberseconds. Of course, it also means that rejection of your paper without review can occur very rapidly, in a few days – shorter than the time that it would have taken the manuscript to arrive at the editorial offices by regular post or even courier.

5. Pray

I find that it helps to pray. It creates a favorable aura for our manuscripts. It also helps to soothe my anxieties as I hurriedly scan my e-mail each day, waiting for, but dreading, a response from the editors. I pray for enlightenment to descend upon the editors and for them to recognize the importance of our work immediately and send the manuscript for review. I pray for good reviewers who will not only *read* our manuscript carefully but believe our results if they are striking and unexpected, and who will make helpful and insightful comments but not ask for unreasonable data.

The next step

Scenario 1

The editor's message reads, "We *should* be happy to consider your manuscript further if…" This is usually followed by a phrase indicating that you must provide data describing the detailed regulation of the protein in the cell or the crystal structure of the purified complex. Translation: the editor is interested, but s/he wants to know if you have more data, or actually *wants* more data, before proceeding.

Read the message carefully before replying. One of the mistakes authors frequently make is that they are so anxious when they receive the editor's letter that they scan it quickly without really reading it. This has caused me, and I'm sure others, to believe that my manuscript was rejected, when in fact the editor was highly interested in publishing our findings. The phrasing of statements in the letter can be unusual – i.e. the sentences are not worded in the way that you or I would word them. This brings me to another point: there is a special language used by editors in their communications with authors that I call editorspeak. It is designed to protect editors and journals against litigious authors and is characterized by the frequent use of the subjunctive. You should read the message carefully to find out what the editor actually thinks of your findings and which of the reviewers' comments s/he regards as important. Usually the editor will state exactly what is required for the journal to consider your findings further, qualifying possible actions by use of the subjunctive.

If additional data are called for, try to provide them. You may have data that address the point in question, or a short experiment may suffice. If so, tell the editor and submit a revised manuscript. If the data would require years or a lifetime to collect, tell the editor: "We believe, for a first report of our highly unexpected and important findings, a crystal structure of the complex, as called for by Referee 1, is beyond the scope…" The editor may or may not agree. Note that editors tend to say what they mean. They also mean what they

say. *Don't challenge them*. You may find your manuscript back in your hands sooner than the editor's letter gave you reason to expect.

Scenario 2

The editor's message reads, "We regret that we are unable to consider your manuscript further." (Note the absence of the subjunctive.) Translation: the editor is not interested in considering your manuscript further.

Read the message carefully, paying special attention to the reasons given, especially if the message does not appear to be simply a form letter. Consider whether you can correct this prior to submitting to another journal. It is possible, of course, not to accept the decision of the editor and to request a retrial – that is, a reconsideration. This is usually not successful, as editors do not like to reverse a decision once made. There are instances, however, in which the editor has cursorily dismissed the findings without reading the manuscript or the reviewers have misunderstood a major point. In these cases, the editor might be persuaded to reconsider the manuscript. I have also heard of rarer instances in which the authors go over an editor's head to the editor-in-chief of the journal and plead their case, asking that a paper that has been summarily rejected without review be considered. This can – even more rarely – eventually result in publication in the journal. It is not something that should be done routinely, however, and once in a lifetime is probably also too frequent.

It is, of course, terribly upsetting to receive a rejection, considering the months of work that have usually gone into a paper. One high-profile journal used to begin its rejection letters with 'sadly', as in "Sadly, we cannot offer to publish your manuscript." Receiving a 'sadly' letter provoked one scientist I know to tell the editor that, *sadly*, he would *never* submit a paper to the journal again so long as he lived. This was especially sad, since a year later he had highly unexpected results that he wanted beyond anything to send to the journal in question. Happily, the scientist was eventually able to bring himself to call the editor and proffer his findings for publication, and the editor was able to rise above the situation long enough to carry the paper through the editorial process. *Never* say never – never is a very long time. And editors, even those with short memories for bedfellows, tend to remember authors who call them and say never and other strong words on the telephone. Not only that, but journals keep files on authors (and reviewers), where incidents such as this are recorded for eternity (or so long as the hard drive continues to spin).

Scenario 3

The editor's message reads, "We believe, in principle, that we should be interested in considering your manuscript further." Translation: the editor is interested in considering your manuscript further.

Read the message carefully, remembering that your manuscript has *not* been accepted. In fact, your paper may be well on its way to being published before you receive a letter accepting it for publication. An invited review written for a prominent journal by another scientist I know was rejected *after* he had received the page proofs. It was finally accepted after several harried discussions and after he hastily corrected the fault that had caused offense. Delaying acceptance of work that the journal is obviously interested in publishing to a point late in the editorial process is a mechanism to ensure that authors provide requested data or make the changes to the text 'recommended' by the editor.

Usually an editor's message like the above implies that your manuscript has been sent for review and is accompanied by the reviews. When you respond to the referees' comments, address each point in order, using the same numbering. This helps the editor to know that you are not evading one or another criticism and also helps him/her read through your responses quickly without having to search to match your response to the referee's point. If you truly want your work to be published by the journal, supply any additional information or data requested, if humanly possible. Above all, be cordial: (most) editors are human too. The process at this stage is much like a negotiation between you and the journal, with the editor as the intermediary. And remember that your manuscript is *not* accepted yet.

The changing publishing scene

It is more difficult to get papers published these days than ever before, because publishing is changing. E-publishing makes everything faster: submission, review, *rejection*, resubmission, publication. It also reduces the impact and longevity of your findings (keep working!). Learn to write effectively. Writing is a skill and requires practice. Study the techniques of others and emulate the styles of those who write well. Remember that different journals have different styles. If your work is multifaceted, involving two-hybrid screens, protein biochemistry, structural analysis and imaging of live cells, sending your manuscript to a journal that publishes only short reports may not allow your findings to be presented in their full glory. Try instead a journal that gives you enough space to present an intellectual framework for your work and develop arguments that support your interpretations of your results. If your findings are based on only a few experiments, but are completely unexpected and have immediate implications for your field, try a journal that specializes in rapid, short reports of unusual significance.

The best way to determine whether your findings would be suited to a given journal is to read the papers the journal publishes. Does yours fit in? If in doubt, ask your friends and colleagues for their opinions or, even more to the point, ask an editor of the journal. Many journals allow pre-submission enquiries, which will give you an idea of how a paper would fare if submitted. Papers are not published by authors, rather publication requires favorable opinions of the work by others in the field and the help of editors. Seek these out prior to submitting your work by presenting your findings at meetings. Note the reactions of your colleagues and competitors; carefully consider their questions at your poster or after your talk. If you hit a wall and your paper is returned without review, reassess your strategy. Try adding new data, rethink your results, rewrite your findings in another format.

Last resorts

Reset your goals temporarily and submit the work to your next-favorite journal, or even your second- or third-next-favorite journal, but publish it. Talk about your findings. If they really are important, the next paper will probably be equally important, and the editors, who will have noted your first paper, will know about your work and be more receptive. Alternatively, if you think that editors are your stumbling block to publishing in your favorite journal, try becoming an editor temporarily. Edit an issue of a journal or a book to acquire an indelible idea of what it can be like to be an editor. But don't go over to the dark side!

Well, good luck! I've had quite a time chiseling all these thoughts into stone, although I've not yet worked out quite why the journal wants this in triplicate – I was assured it would be accepted without review. Anyway, I'm off now. I'd better tend to my Retrograde Raptor, who's tethered to the tree outside my cave. A great way of getting around, but unlike most of his kind he only moves backwards. Something wrong with his neck apparently – I've found, though, if I tighten the reins so his neck doesn't rub against his head, he can go in either direction.

Cavewoman Anaya