
Use internal reviewers

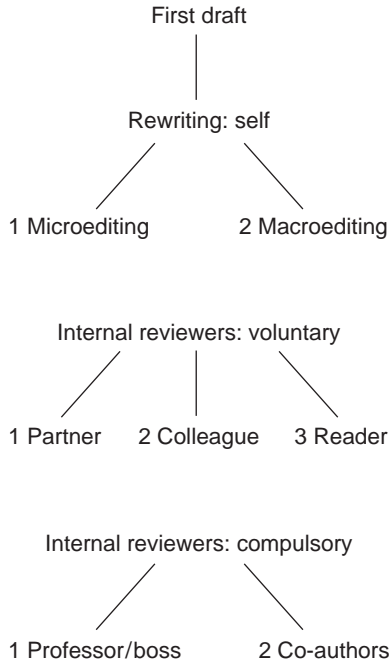
‘My boss could do with a course on managing writers effectively.’

‘Hit me again . . . and again . . .’

This may be one of the shortest chapters in this book, but it deals with the process that is often the longest and most painful. You will have sweated over your statistics, selected from half a mile of references, and agonised over the exact phrasing for a dozen difficult concepts. Now, as you bring your beautiful baby into the world, people are about to tear it limb from limb. And these are the people who are meant to be your friends.

Remain focused on your goal: you want to be a published author. Good advice from other people will be invaluable, essential even. However, much of the advice you get will not necessarily be good, and may even reduce your chances of becoming published. How do you handle this?

One step forward is to divide this process of internal reviewing into two stages: voluntary and compulsory (Figure 9.1). During the voluntary stage you should choose those whose opinions you value and invite their comments in a

Figure 9.1: Rewriting and reviewing

structured way. You remain free to choose those comments with which you agree. The compulsory stage can come later, and involves showing your manuscript to those whose opinions you are less free to discard. These are co-authors and ‘bosses’. Your role is to hear what they have to say, accept it when they have something to contribute, but negotiate when they are trying to impose changes that, in your view, are going to decrease the chances of becoming published. The second stage, therefore, is more about negotiating skills than writing techniques.

Voluntary reviewing

One of the reasons that this stage can become so unpleasant is the way we approach it. We send off our article to a number of colleagues with a brief note saying ‘Any comments?’. This is asking for trouble: the only way they can fail in this task is to say nothing. So they make dozens of pencil marks, each of which sears into your soul as a sign of your inadequacy and lack of education.

Choose carefully who you will invite and why. You will probably need four different types of feedback, and therefore you should choose at least one person for each question. When you ask for their help, be specific about what you want them to do.

To an outsider: can you spot any stupid mistakes?

We all make basic errors, such as: ‘The doctors did all they could to elevate the discomfort’. We therefore need someone with common sense, plus the motivation to catch us out. Partners do this task particularly well. This can be deeply distressing for authors, who have to face the evidence of their fallibility, but the humiliation is worth it because it can prevent some terrible errors.

To a linguist: is the language appropriate?

If English is not your first language, consider asking someone to look over your article for style. There are various views on whom you should ask. Some say you should choose a professional linguist, such as someone who has studied the language at university. The danger is that they may be slightly out of touch with modern idioms, and I recommend instead someone

who still listens to the BBC. You need someone to be able to point out that the following aren't quite right:

- she was cycling from Menarche onwards
- the apparent islands are in reality branches of a richly arborising tree-like structure.

Keep it in perspective, however. As Bill Whimster has written: 'I believe that editors will not be prejudiced against a [poorly written] paper unless they cannot understand what the author means or unless the paper is already borderline in terms of its message and proof, originality, importance or suitability for the journal'.¹⁵

To a colleague: are there any major omissions or logical flaws?

Try to avoid at this stage showing your manuscript to the world's greatest living expert on your subject. You will almost certainly fall off their agenda, which is to show you that they are the world's greatest living expert. At this stage you need someone with a similar level of knowledge to yours who can point to any major gaps that may have occurred, such as a fault of logic in your argument or a major paper you have missed.

To another colleague: if you were the reviewer what would you say?

Find someone who is typical of your target audience, by which I mean the journal's editor and reviewers rather than its readers. If you know someone who has done any reviewing, ask them how they would react if they were sent this paper.

Compulsory reviewing

Now you must play a completely different game. This is the compulsory internal reviewing, in which negotiation skills become a vital tool.

Co-authors can cause trouble. In the worst scenario, they will have wanted you to have written a different article. As suggested in Chapter 3, one way of reducing this kind of dispute is to make sure that, at an early stage, all co-authors agree with your brief. At least then you have some common ground on which to fall back.

Even if you can get them to agree the article's message and market, co-authors will quibble about the style. This can be tiresome. It can also be dangerous when they insist, for instance, that you adopt a style that you know from your market research is not suited to your target journal. Your only recourse is to show them your evidence, and argue your point with as little emotion as possible.

Then there are professors. What do you do with those who, after you have carefully researched your market and noticed that it prefers to use short words and the active voice, carefully change it all back again on the grounds that you are not writing scientifically? In principle, it is better to negotiate than it is to argue or to sulk. Point out what the style of the journal happens to be, and back it up with evidence from that journal. You may not win the argument, but at least you will have tried. (And when you become a professor, you can remember not to fall into the same trap.)

You are unlikely to win every battle. If you are the first author, then in theory the decision is yours, though that becomes academic (if you will pardon the pun) if you are a very junior doctor and your critic is a very senior professor. At this stage we are really talking about damage limitation.

Before proceeding to Chapter 10 you should have:

- improved your manuscript by taking into account the best comments from a wide range of people
- prevented others from making it unpublishable.

BOOKCHOICE: Taking advice from professionals

Winokur J (ed.) (1999) *Advice to Writers*. Pantheon Books, New York.

If you have got this far you can start calling yourself a writer. So treat yourself to this book, which will amuse you and help you to improve your writing at the same time. Author Jon Winokur has combed autobiographies, diaries, letters and books to come up with more than 400 bits of advice by writers for writers, arranged in 36 sections from agents and characters to the writer's life and writing advice.

Some of it, such as the sections on agents and dialogue, will not be relevant to the writing of scientific papers – but much of it will be. On general matters, be consoled by John Berryman on reacting to criticism: 'I would recommend the cultivation of extreme indifference to both praise and blame because praise will lead you to vanity, and blame will lead you to self pity, and both are bad for writers'. Consider James Thurber's 'Don't get it right, get it written' or TS Eliot's 'Whatever you do . . . avoid piles'.

There's good advice on style that will come in useful at this stage. 'A good style must first of all, be clear. It must not be mean or above the dignity of the subject. It must be appropriate' (Aristotle). 'When you say something make sure you have said it. The chances of your having said it are only fair' (EB White). Or 'Read over your compositions and when you meet a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out' (Samuel Johnson).

There's also some advice on specifics that backs up many of the points made in this book: 'Short words are best and the old words when short are best of all' (Winston Churchill) or 'You should not take hyphens seriously' (Sir Ernest Gowers).