

LETTER

Reality Bites

Dear Editor:

I'm tired of those sappy sermons you call Editorials. I suppose these fairy tales of yours—in which our profession is filled with noble people, admittedly with the occasional human failing, all more or less pulling together in the quest for Truth—are meant to inspire and mislead the young. But when you've crossed the Caucasus Mountains on frostbitten feet as I have, you know the young are better served by practical advice on how to deal with the real world. Let me offer some such advice here. Remember: Reality bites. It's a cold, competitive world—get used to it—and “peer review” provides an oft-neglected vehicle to help you overcome your competitors. Here's how to use it properly.

Faint Praise

1. Always use positive adjectives and descriptors, but with a whiff of mediocrity: say “sound,” “recognized,” and “potentially interesting.” Or omit the adjectives altogether: Say “contributions,” for example, without preceding it with “original,” “significant,” or “important.”

2. Use double negatives, weakly positive qualifiers, and excuses instead of outright criticisms. Say “not unimportant,” “useful extension of previous work,” “careful work in a neglected and underappreciated area.” Do not shy from oxymorons like “empirical integration” or “original confirmations.”

3. Take the long view, but cautiously. Say “likely to become important if its feasibility can be established,” or “results may someday be revealed to have significant implications.” Hint that the goals of the work are too broad, while the work itself is too narrow. Say “imaginative interpretations,” “persistent attempts to address a difficult problem,” or “painstaking exploration.” Make sure any criticism is mild, wistful, full of understanding of the subject's predicament, and unanswerable.

Peck, Peck, Peck

1. Point out as many unaddressed technical details as possible. And don't forget to mention a more appropriate statistical analysis. Declare confidence that all the issues can probably be addressed satisfactorily in the revision or resubmission that will be needed before a meaningful decision can be made. The list should be long, detailed, and mind numbing. The subject's exasperated response will only help.

2. Point out unconsidered alternatives that should be addressed. They needn't be very likely. Again, it is their number that counts and the exasperated response they elicit. Be sure to suggest critical additional experiments, unrelated to the goals of the paper, the grant, or the investigator, preferably some that require equipment and techniques from another discipline (e.g., remind a geneticist how important it is to determine membrane conductance).

3. Gently suggest lapses of scholarship, either general, “should take the extensive literature on . . . more fully into account,” or specific, “the important recent (or classic) paper of so-and-so (give reference) should be cited and discussed.” Never bring up your own papers here; use one of the subject's actual or potential allies.

Overall, write in such a way that the subject, reading your review, would thank you for going to bat for him even though the paper is rejected, the grant is not funded, the job goes to someone else, or the promotion is postponed. Always sheath your self-interest in good will and let no one see the blade. Keep these principles in mind as you perform the selfless duty of review and evaluation. They will serve you well.

Nikolai Ivanovich Lobachevsky

The Chelm Institute

436 Alternate Route

Orange County, CA 94708, USA

Editor's response:

Thank you for your comments. I'm surprised you signed your name to them, instead of using a pseudonym. I'm sorry about your feet, but you won't be getting any more *JBR* papers to review.