Letter

A Journal by Any Other Name

Dear Editor,

I’ve been to all the SRBR business meetings, and have heard one editor after another tell us how great the Journal of Biological Rhythms is doing and then complain about not getting enough submissions. Want to know why you’re not getting more submissions? It’s because of your name. Real cachet requires a name comprising a single broad word, like Science or Nature, or, better still, a single syllable like Cell or Gut or Blood (or Frogs, Lice, Boils, etc.). Use a compound word—Polysyllabology—or add the word Journal, and you’ve started to slip. Add an adjective—the Journal of Adjective Gnosis or the Journal of Disciplinary Whatever—and you’re definitely looking at a second-rate journal. It could be worse, of course. More points are lost by adding the name of a country, a continent, or, even worse, International. Now you’re somewhere near the International Journal of Mediocre Science. Compound nouns further diminish your standing, as do designations other than Journal, such as Letters, or Reports, or Communications. By this point, you’re what people mean in reviews of manuscripts when they say “belongs in a more specialized journal.” But there’s still room to fall. Add an extraneous word, like Research, and still more syllables, and you’ve just about hit bottom: The International Journal of Arcane Polysyllabic Research Letters.

What to do? Besides finding a name and a niche that isn’t already taken, a major source of difficulty is the bureaucratic desire to actually specify what the journal is about. A mistake. Not only is it unnecessary, it’s counterproductive. People don’t have to be able to tell immediately what the journal is about, as long as there’s some connection. Wouldn’t you like to edit a journal called Truth? Could be anything. Or Justice (a law journal, I suppose)? Or The American Way (could be economics, sociology, history . . .)? Truth, Justice, and the American Way, however, would be a specialized journal about superheroes. For you, then, the way to go would be to change the name of the Journal of Biological Rhythms to Light, or Cycle, or Tau, or any of the kinds of names being grabbed up by gene namers. They know what they’re about! Try suggesting that at the next SRBR meeting.

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Editor’s response:

Thank you for your suggestions. It is difficult, however, to find a better way to generate fruitless, albeit heated and time-consuming, debate than to suggest a name change to a large group of people. It should only be done to forestall the adoption of some proposal even more fatuous.