Essay

Why consistent, clear, and uniform instructions for authors are required

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Introduction

More or less regularly, major science publishers circulate testimonials of authors' satisfaction with their group, a specific journal's editorial board, or editors/associate editors assigned to their manuscripts [1–4]. In contrast, quantitative surveys regarding author satisfaction are rather rare, but do exist [5–11].

Almost all testimonials are laudatory, and most surveys report very high rates of satisfaction with most questionnaire items [5,6,9,10]. This is not surprising, much less because of potential biases, but because authors do genuinely appreciate the complex and serious work performed by the editor handling each manuscript and the not less complex work of a whole journal's editorial team. Indeed, most editors are very frequently thanked in private correspondence with the authors, but seldom thanked publicly; may they find here a sincere expression of my and their esteem and gratitude.

One way of thanking editorial team members is to help them accelerate the processes of checking the correctness of a manuscript and the presentation of the manuscript itself. This requires abiding by the instructions contained in the several pages of the "guidelines for authors." Although most authors may be convinced of the necessity and virtues of a minimum uniformity of all manuscripts submitted to a given journal, and though they are willing to follow all instructions, they still face a number of difficulties during formatting and submission tasks; this was the case for nearly 70% of authors in an international survey by D'Souza et al. [8] and 89% to 96% of dentists according to an Indian survey by Gadde et al. [11].

First, the formatting process may be too long—much longer than any author might imagine before full immersion in it. Examples of long formatting tasks include adapting the title and running title; shortening the abstract, if not the whole manuscript; creating specific sections (highlights, research in context, clinical significance, visual abstract, etc.), or writing cover letters with mandatory sections (suitability for the journal, interest for the readers, etc.). According to relatively recent works, the median formatting time of a manuscript was 14 hours, with a median cost of 477 USD [12]. The lower bound estimate of time wasted on reformatting rejected articles was 1.55 million hours per year [13] and could rocket up to 23.8 million hours

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[14], while the global annual economic burden was estimated at 550 million USD for the first authors and at over 1.1 billion USD for the entire teams [14].

Even supposing that the time and cost of formatting a manuscript does not represent serious barriers if authors target a very specific journal, they might still face a number of puzzling situations stemming from the formatting instructions, the submission system, or both.

The Problems

Problems at the formatting stage

To begin with, in 2018, 68.8% of authors found journal guidelines unclear and/or incomplete [8]. In practice, one problem any author might have faced at least once is inconsistency between the instructions of a given journal. Inconsistencies might concern the place of a particular section within a manuscript, such as the acknowledgments or various statements and declarations. Typically, whereas on page "n" of the instructions, that section (say, the "Title page") is required *before* another one or *in a separate file*, on page "n+5" or "n+11," the same section is required *after* it or *in the same file*! For example, consider the following pairs of contradictory instructions: (1) *"[The] contributions should be [given in a] separate title page."* vs. *"In the submission system, please upload as one file only the Title page.docx and the Full text.docx.";* (2) *"You may [submit the] manuscript as a single file"* vs. *"A separate [page] should include the title, etc.";* (3) *"The manuscript should be organized as follows: Abstract (…), Discussion, Acknowledgments, References (…)"* vs. *"Acknowledgments (…) should be placed in a separate section on the title page."* Note also the following self-recognition of the existence of contradictions: *"(…) note that if any information in the Manuscript Preparation Guidelines is inconsistent with the Instructions for Authors, [the latter should prevail]."*

Inconsistency might also concern the reference format: the description of a typical reference might be in one format, the example given just below in another format, and the printed material in a third format! For example, consider the following inconsistencies between examples given and published formats (only shown as examples of formats; the titles are concealed): (1) *VanDecar J.C., Russo R.M., James D.E., Ambeh W.B., Franke M. (2003) (…) Journal of Geophysical Research, https://doi.org/10.1029/2001JB000884* vs. *A. Thorburn, J. Thorburn, A.E. Frankel (…) Apoptosis, 9 (2004), pp. 19-25*; (2) *Smith JJ (…) Am J Sci. 1999;36:234–5* vs. *Blanc AK, Wardlaw T (…) Bull World Health Organ. 2005;83(3):178–85 S0042-96862005000300010*; (3) *Hamburger, C.: (…) Ann. Mat. Pura Appl. 169, 321–354 (1995)* vs. *C. Weyer, C. Bogardus, D.M. Mott, R.E. Pratley, (…) J. Clin. Invest 104, 787–794 (1999).*

A last but not least inconsistency might exist between those instructions and the requirements of the submission system. For example, the instructions might state that the abstract or the letter to the editor is required as a separate file, but the submission system might require it in a specific box or before the main text within the manuscript file.

Problems at the submission stage

Other difficulties unmentioned by the instruction pages are hidden in the submission system and suddenly discovered at the time of submission: queries for potential reviewers, specific descriptors of the article, peculiar presentation of the authors' contributions, pieces of information on each author, and the like. Although these queries are often easy to handle, they are nevertheless likely to interrupt the submission session for hours or postpone it for days because of the need to search for reviewers' addresses, check and order the authors' contributions, or ask for the agreements of acknowledged collaborators.

One sudden major problem is a red warning that a given author's affiliation does not match the (potentially erroneous) affiliation entered months ago by another submitting author of another manuscript. Meanwhile, no solution is immediately available to correct the error, make two different affiliations coexist, correct the erroneous affiliation at a later step or, even worse, unblock a stubborn submission system.

Problems after the submission stage

When all the above-cited difficulties have been successfully dealt with, a comforting acknowledgment of manuscript receipt and correct submission is issued. Unfortunately, this does not always happen. Instead, an email mentions one or several submission flaws. Here are a few true-life examples: the conversion of the abstract added extra spaces and made the word count exceed the prespecified limit; the file names were too long or not in line with the journal's preferences; the title page (required first as a separate file) was not at the head of the main manuscript in the same file; and section "x" was not in the correct place relative to section "y" (especially, various declarations). Needless to say, each of these flaws required checks, amendments, the creation of new files, and, inevitably, a new submission.

Breaches of blind review

This is probably the most astonishing, the most concerning, and the most irreparable rift in the relationship between authors and editors. Indeed, the authors cannot explain, cannot complain, and cannot repair seeing their names at the start of a review report, whereas they were expecting a strict double-blind examination of their manuscript: "This work of Pr

Smith is certainly interesting…" or "I have read with interest the article by Jones, Brown, and Taylor." What went wrong and when? One personal experience was seeing a separately loaded title page added to the main manuscript in a single PDF document given to the reviewers. Another was a journal's request to place the authors' contributions (with the full names) before the references! Furthermore, while some journals recommend anonymizing the manuscript, others forget to do so, and still others even announce breaches of anonymity: (1) *"On manuscript page (…), type the abstract (…) headed by the title of the article and name(s) of the author(s)."*; (2) *"Authors' contributions (mandatory) (…) Full name and surname should be [given]."*

The Solutions

All the above-mentioned problems have known sources: a steep increase in the number of journals [15,16] (e.g., 30,000 medical journals worldwide [17]), fully electronic (potentially unsupervised) manuscript processing (85% of life science journals) [18], and, above all, the intrusion of for-profit publishing into science. Regarding the latter fact, staff reductions resulted not only in transfer of formatting tasks to the authors, but also in a lack of regular meticulous guideline revisions [19] intended to avoid instruction stacking and duplication, remove inconsistencies, and ensure a perfect match between journal website and submission-site requirements. Whereas it seems nearly impossible or undesirable to step back to fewer journals, less digital processing, and complimentary publishing, other sources of problems may be easily dealt with. Among the solutions, one would like to see the following:

- Regular and accurate revisions of journals' instructions to ensure consistency, conciseness, and specificity (first vs. last submission) [19].
- Comprehensive revisions and simplifications of submission systems' too rigid requirements, especially regarding first submissions [12]. This is essential to save research time and perfectly feasible because some submissions require minutes while others require hours!
- Matching essential instructions from journals with simple requirements from submission systems.
- Adopting, anew, clear and uniform requirements (e.g., those of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors [ICMJE] that prevailed for decades). The idea of uniform guidelines for manuscript preparation and submission was supported by 89.5% of authors and that of a standardized template by 86.7% [11]. According to the latter authors, harmonization would save time (92%) and help focus on content (89.3%). If the idea of a template seems sound and viable, ideally, at least a universal concise

checklist limited to 20 or 30 essential items would be very welcome [20].

Conclusion

Given the ever-increasing number of journals, snubbing such improvements and refusing to build up a reasonable, more or less uniform, and single-page checklist will make authors continue to waste precious time and spend too much money on form rather than on substance [13,14]. Given the current trends in science publishing, seeing a uniform checklist might be a dream, that of 91% of authors [14]; however, if the major journals or publishers move, the others will hopefully follow.

I believe that rigorous and English-fluent authors do read and abide by most instructions, but that a non-negligible number of authors still suppose that "anything goes" after they have drafted a manuscript of any quality or format and imagine they can rely on the reviewers and editors to create a clean and correct version. Obviously, the latter authors should not be encouraged to ignore the instructions but, ideally, they should be given a reasonable and coherent amount of instructions.

Inconsistent guidelines are undoubtedly harmful to science and finances. Most of the sources of inconsistency can be easily identified and removed. Otherwise, the quasi-final and hopefully rewarding steps of knowledge production (drafting, formatting, and submitting) will look like a thick jungle to cross before facing severe comments from reviewers and the difficult task of manuscript revision.

Lastly, the authors "who are both creators and consumers of the scientific literature" and "form the core of the publishing system" need to be heard and offered "an author-friendly system" [8]. They deserve journal guidelines that are as concise and clear as their manuscripts are expected to be.

Conflict of Interest

Funding

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