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Why don't more of us write scholarly papers?

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Abstract

Letter from the Editor-in-Chief

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Letter from the Editor



Paul B. Freeman, OD
Editor-in-Chief

Why don't more of us write scholarly papers?

Depending on your source, COVID-19 has been spreading since the end of 2019 or early 2020; its impact continues to be felt the world over. Until we have conquered this pathogen, I will continue to recognize and thank, in each issue of our journal, the frontline professionals and those workers who keep our lives moving forward while putting themselves in harm's way. My hope is that each time I begin with this, it will be the last time.

That being said, *Optometric Clinical Practice*, as other journals, continues to offer peer-reviewed articles, which for some authors is a blessing and for others a curse. One of the biggest challenges in writing for a peer-reviewed journal is that submissions are reviewed by peers knowledgeable in the subject matter. The process might intimidate potential authors, but that needn't be so.

As clinicians, we are usually good, and not normally reticent about communicating by letter to other health care professionals with whom we co-manage patients. However, this type of writing is typically closed to overt scrutiny by others, as the recipient of the correspondence assumes (hopefully) that the information is accurate, evidence-based, and will be of value in the management of the patient. Given this, each one of us already has the basic framework for writing an article which could be submitted to a peer-reviewed journal. This is especially true regarding those patients for whom we do some research to better understand the pathology itself or the functional impact of a condition to better differentially diagnose the condition. So why don't more of us write scholarly papers which peers will review, adding yet another source of information to better help manage future

patients, or to point out things that helped, or might have helped the patient presented? One could imagine a conversation that begins like this, “did you think of this?” or “did you try this?” It seems that dialogue is easier because it is more dynamic than an article which is like a “monologue,” and queries can be answered in real time. However, when I talk to *potential* authors, because that conversational dynamic is not there to bolster their case presentation, they are concerned about what reviewers might think of them professionally or personally, as if the manuscript submitted defines them. I would like to allay that fear.

Anyone who has ever written has experienced gaffes... and we have all lived to talk about it. Occasionally mistakes can be as innocent as a misspelling. In 1981, I wrote an article about yoked prisms, but when the article appeared in print it was “yolked” (sic) prism.¹ You can imagine the letters to the editor about that!! More often, we have to respond in “Letters to the Editor” about content or a question about what was or was not done. However, when peer reviewed, although there are still “Letters to the Editor,” many potential queries or comments and responses are preempted and typically kept in- house. Working through those activities behind-the- scenes strengthens the manuscript before it “hits the street.” And so, peer reviews are not done in the public eye, but rather within the general journal structure so that only the reviewers, editors, and the author(s) have access to the comments and responses. Importantly, most journal editors request that reviewers do not share their comments outside of the publication for which they review. One could compare this with an anecdote about Thomas Jefferson’s writing of the Declaration of Independence. After having written that document, and after the rest of the committee of five made their comments and edits amongst themselves, it was presented to the Continental Congress for their comments and edits, while Jefferson himself was in attendance. “It was nine years before Jefferson first publicly admitted to being the Declaration’s author. He earlier felt that his initial version was much better than the ‘mutilated’ version the second Continental Congress actually adopted.”² Fortunately, most of us have never had that extreme of a peer review experience.

Having made my share of writing errors and not having spontaneously burst into flames, the more I read the more I appreciate that even successful writers err, yet they continue to write. When asked, I will encourage potential authors sitting on the fence to look to our (or other) publications to share their experiences. And for those who are afraid of making mistakes I would remind them of a Japanese proverb: 猿も木から落ちる.*

This month we are adding a new classification for writers who wish to stretch their approaches to eye care entitled “Expanding the Box.” My rationale (rather than “thinking outside the box”) is that topics under this classification will be written by clinicians or educators who will expand our knowledge base in ways we might not have given thought. However, just as with other articles, it will be peer-reviewed.

Finally, I am pleased to announce that through the efforts of Andrew S. Morgenstern, OD, Director, Clinical Resources Group (CRG) of the American Optometric Association, we are publishing the AOA evidence-based clinical practice guideline, “Comprehensive Pediatric Eye and Vision Examination.” I would also like to thank those who helped write this guideline. And going forward, as the updated versions of other guidelines become available, we will publish them as well.

*Even monkeys fall from trees.

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2. Meacham J, on Thomas Jefferson. In: Rubenstein DM, editor, *The American Story*. New York: Simon & Schuster; 2019:45-66.