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Letters to the Editor

Dear Sir,

From time to time, like many others, I get requests form the United States National Science Foundation (NSF) to review grant applications. The latest, a request for 2 years' funding from a single individual, is over 50 pages long and about 10 mm thick. I don't blame the applicant, but NSF, who permit or even encourage such unnecessary paper abuse. What can be done about it? Well, I've written to NSF telling them that until they introduce a length limit on applications (as does NSERC), I will not do reviews for them.

It is obvious that NSF will take little or no notice of a single letter like mine. However, if several people write to them from Canada with the same suggestion, perhaps they will get the message. This would save a lot of people a lot of effort (applicants, reviewers, committees) and a large number of trees at the same time.

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ANNOUNCEMENT

Discussions of GAC Special Papers in *Geoscience Canada*

Articles in Geological Association of Canada Special Papers have the same status as articles in any scientific journal and should be subject to the same critical response from their readers. However, because the format of the Special Paper series makes it an unsuitable vehicle for discussions of articles in previously published papers, we have not had a forum for this purpose. With this announcement, *Geoscience Canada* makes its pages available for discussions and replies relating to any article which has appeared in a Special Paper. The usual rules of gentlemanly/gentlewomanly conduct apply.

Dear Sir,

The Pyroclasts article by John Shaw in *Geoscience Canada* (v. 15, p. 291-292) may be viewed by some as carping, but he has raised some troubling points. While a zero for four record must certainly be dismaying, one must further realize that what may have merely bruised T.H. Huxley's ego may, in the present era, be damaging to the research funding and even the career of a scientist, particularly one in the early phases of a career. Thus, the role of a referee is of great importance, and this enhanced role places great responsibilities not only on referees but on the editors or associate editors who interpret their reports.

In this vein of thinking, I should like to discuss some aspects of refereeing that should be considered by both referees and editors.

I am in full agreement with Shaw that gratuitous insults are never appropriate in reviews. I note that *The Canadian Mineralogist* specifically admonishes referees against this sort of thing, in its referee report forms, and it would seem that other journals would be well advised to do so, as well. I would further suggest the receipt of a review containing insults should send up a warning flag for an editor regarding the suitability of the referee.

The previous problem may also be alleviated by abandonment of the use of anonymous referees. While this practice may once have had a purpose, I can no longer see what it might be. In agreement with Shaw, I feel that a referee should not only stand behind the substance of his review but write it in language with which he would be willing to be associated, as well.

A point not addressed by Shaw is the nature of a negative review. It is a relatively simple task to produce a report of six, eight or ten pages when one is in disagreement with a number of facets of a paper. It is rather more difficult to produce a lengthy report when one finds little to criticize, yet it is certainly my impression that the negative report will carry more weight with an editor. I recently had the experience of refereeing a paper that not only contained some very significant results but described a well-executed study in a very readable fashion. While I said as much in my report, I was concerned about the impact of such a brief statement. I therefore added about a page and a half of niggling criticisms, which I hope carried the day.

Another disturbing practice that I have encountered recently is the use of what I would call apochryphal tales in reviews. In the category I include hunches, guesses, superficial examinations and explanations, and even casual experiments or observations. The use of more formal unpublished data (work in preparation or submitted) to provide ammunition for a negative review is inappropriate, even if unpublished data, whether obtained by the referee or known from other sources, to refute the data and/or conclusions of a submission. The point is one of simple fairness; the author of the submission could not know about this unpublished material. If the unpublished data of a referee are used in a negative report resulting in a delay or rejection of a submission, the subsequent publication of a similar paper by the referee has created a serious conflict of interest.

Finally, there seems to be an unfortunate tendency for some referees to believe that disagreement with the data and/or conclusions contained in a submission is grounds for a negative review or even rejection of a paper. The purpose of peer refereeing is not to judge the extent of agreement or disagreement with the ideas contained in a submission, but to assess the scientific methodology and thought involved. Natural science is not exact and operates on multiple hypotheses. Thus, in the absence of certainty of ultimate answers, conflicting views may be equally legitimate so long as they are the result of proper methodology and reasoning. Rejection of a point of view merely for lack of agreement is not only unscientific but impedes the progress of science.

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