Reading, writing—and rewriting

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Eugene Garfield is a great man. His *Current Contents* and *Science Citation Index* are among the truly imaginative and original inventions of our time. The leading exponent of citation analysis,¹ he is not solely concerned, however, with the rear ends of scientific publications. His weekly *Current Contents* essays and his recently launched fortnightly "newspaper for the science professional," *The Scientist*, show his passionate interest in making the most of scientists and their efforts to understand and use the world's gifts for everyone's benefit. He has built the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) in Philadelphia into an independent power base from which to project his ideas most forcefully on to the worlds of science and scientific politics in the bastions of research and education, finance and government.

ISI Press is perhaps a rather conventional part of this empire. Of its three new books, Barnes's is the eleventh in a series called *Professional Writing* ("designed to improve the communication skills of professionals"), while Morgan's and O'Connor's are the fourth and fifth in the *Professional Editing and Publishing* series ("timely, practical information to help publishers and editors of professional, scholarly, and scientific publications"). Surprisingly, the reader is not told who or what these authors are, though he may know that Maeve O'Connor works for the Ciba Foundation in London and may deduce from the inside that Peter Morgan MD is the editor of the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*.

Blocks and tackles

Barnes is a good read for writers at any stage, although those who do not suffer from "writer's block" will be entertained rather than helped by the case histories of those who are. He is very earnest about the commitment a writer must have to his task but relaxed about how to get into word processing, which he illustrates by showing how Dickens would have used it to unblock his launch of *A Tale of Two Cities*. Similarly H G Wells's *Outline of History* illuminates the building of paragraphs. Then Barnes leaves writing and turns neatly to editing, analytical and critical, and includes the pains of rewriting (without, however, considering the value of a colleague's help at this stage) and some useful comments on his approach to grammar, usage, and punctuation, with some nice examples. His advice on getting the article published is not epoch making, but there are some good points on publishing books, which often avoid the editorial rigour that is routinely applied to journal writing.

O'Connor covers different ground. This is a vade mecum for the editor and his slaves, who with little training often work in splendid isolation. Everything from receiving articles, substantive editing ("rewriting, reorganising, or suggesting other ways to present material"), language editing, technical editing (mechanical style and format, references, tables, and illustrations), and marking up for the printer to proof reading is here. There is also a note of the extra tasks in copy editing books (see above). The problems of how copy editors deal with statistics could have received more attention.

Morgan starts from the proposition that editing is the least understood medical specialty at a time when the nature of medical editing is changing. This is arguable, but he endeavours to support it and to rectify it with material based on "letters from the editors" previously published (though not retrievable here) in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. The results are, as he puts it, "replete rather than complete, thematic rather than systematic, argumentative rather than dogmatic," in fact rather flip, as in the ambiguous title to chapter 5: "How the editor works!" Some readers may enjoy the "word rounds" in which Dr Nojarg jousts with Dr Relso, part time editor of *The Cerebral Internist*.

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Stopping the balls

One wonders who, apart from apprentice copy editors, will buy these books, let alone read them. Success in publishing articles can lead to many altruistic and less altruistic goals (the rewards of science), most of which editors (the gate keepers of science) separately and collectively (in the Vancouver group) devote themselves to detecting and blocking—by guidelines, on dual publication and authorship, for example, and peer reviewing. But experience suggests that talks or workshops on how to write articles and get them accepted by "peer reviewed journals" are most popular among those most keen for the rewards but least enthusiastic about writing, or improving what they have written, or, one may predict, reading about how to do it.

Is the time not ripe for a review of the rewards of publishing medical articles—particularly with regard to promotion, which should depend at least as much on the qualities of professional skill and teaching ability as on the quantity, or even quality, of an author's publications? Has the time not also come to ask the author(s) with ostensibly valid results simply to provide the busy working reader, the official beneficiary of this mammoth effort, with (a) the message and (b) the proof that the message is true, and do away with all the flannel?

¹ Garfield E. *Citation indexing: its theory and application in science, technology, and humanities*. Philadelphia: ISI Press, 1979.

The Professional Writing Series. "Write for Success. A Guide for Business and the Professions." G A Barnes. (Pp 164; figs; \$21.95 hardback, \$13.95 paperback.) Philadelphia: ISI Press, 1986. ISBN hardback 0-89495-059-2, paperback 0-89495-060-6.

The Professional Editing and Publishing Series. "How to Copyedit Scientific Books and Journals." M O'Connor. (Pp 160; \$14.95 paperback.) Philadelphia: ISI Press, 1986. ISBN 0-89495-064-9.

The Professional Editing and Publishing Series. "An Insider's Guide for Medical Authors and Editors." P Morgan. (Pp 120; \$23.95 hardback, \$14.95 paperback.) Philadelphia: ISI Press, 1986. ISBN hardback 0-89495-071-1, paperback 0-89495-076-2.