

The Language Moment

There are two things that a journal editor examines when reading a submitted manuscript for the very first time: Does the manuscript deal with a subject that is appropriate for the journal at hand? Is the manuscript sufficiently well written? I would like to comment a bit about the second question, as I find myself increasingly rejecting papers without review because they are not sufficiently well written.

Clearly, “sufficiently well written” is a subjective judgment. Most engineers tend to accept—some stoically, some conveniently—the stereotype attributed to them, namely, that they are deficient in communication skills (if not also in feelings) and partial to numbers, symbols, etc. While I reject this stereotype, I do not seek “pretty language,” nor desire it for that matter. Indeed, JMD reviewers using the standard ASME Journal review form must explicitly evaluate a manuscript on “clarity.” So, “sufficiently well written” means, at least, use of clear, correct language. In our case, this means the English language.

One may expect that native English speakers will write always sufficiently well. This is not the case, because clarity goes beyond correct use of language. Here is what the ASME guidelines to authors have to say on language style (http://journaltool.asme.org/Help/AuthorHelp/WebHelp/JournalsHelp.htm#Guidelines/Getting_Started.htm):

Style. The chief purpose of the work is to convey information to others, many of whom may be less familiar with the general subject than the author. Care should be taken, therefore, to use simple terms and expressions and to make statements as concise as possible. If highly technical terms or phraseology are necessary, they should be adequately explained and defined. ... All papers should be concise regardless of length. ... Papers that fail to conform to these requirements may be returned for revision and/or condensation.

An author who is a non-native English speaker faces additional difficulties, because clarity may be additionally impeded by poor English language use or structure. As an editor, such lack of clarity is much easier to ascertain in a preliminary review than intellectual clarity, and so the majority of manuscripts with early rejection due to language problems tend to be from non-native English speaking authors.

Any rejection obviously is not done lightly, but there is a certain economy I must take into account. Allowing a paper that

faces certain rejection to go through the review process will consume significant resources from associate editors and reviewers with little added value; and the author’s feelings will not be spared eventually anyway. Therefore, it is much better if all authors strive to submit a well-written paper, no matter what their native language might be. Authors should not use the review process as an aid to proofreading and editorial help. Getting necessary editorial help, including professional help if necessary, prior to submission for review has significant benefits, beyond avoiding early rejection. Reviewers will understand the ideas better, will not be annoyed by poor language usage, and will likely return a more favorable review than otherwise. We should also remember that ASME does not provide editorial assistance after I approve manuscripts for production. What we print is what you send. Forever.

Beyond the basics, I would argue that even engineers are entitled to a prettier language. Indeed, our very own ASME has this to say:

Style is truly an aesthetic, sensory feature of your speech...

Color of Language: This aspect (of style) indicates descriptiveness: your choice of adjectives, adverbs, verbs, and nouns. It shows the extent to which your words are evocative and explicit. There is also a poetic dimension involved, since your choice of words may have rhythm, rhyme, or a musical quality in the way you change your tone.

I should confess that I have taken this out of the excellent ASME website on professional practice (<http://professionalpractice.asme.org/home.cfm>), and the actual context is in instructions to engineers talking to non-technical audiences. Yet, the message should not be lost to all authors for all media and audiences. There are many guides to style one can find, but there is one produced again by ASME that is particularly well suited for our JMD authors: The ASME Council on Member Affairs Regional Operating Committee Style Guide, March 2001 (<http://files.asme.org/Volunteer/Unit/12496.pdf>), which I highly recommend.

Thus, language is a matter of great moment in propelling a manuscript toward eventual publication.

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