

THE (LOST) ART OF ENJOYING PAPER WRITING: OR HOW TO ENSURE THAT EVIL REVIEWERS WITH PERSONALITY DISORDERS DON'T GET THE BETTER OF YOU!

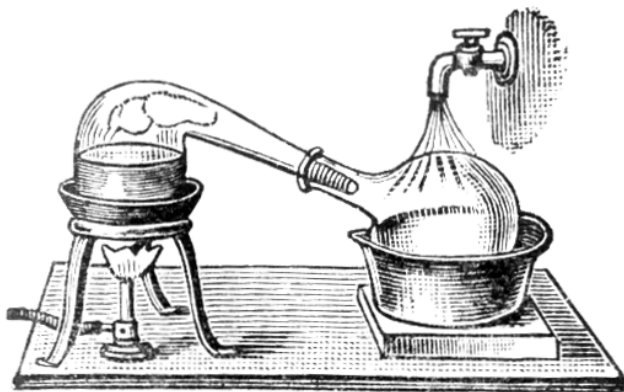
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This short and ephemeral research essay was inspired by a short conversation I had with one of our senior colleagues in IS, a person whom I very much respect and yet also a person who indicated that he no longer enjoys paper writing for the simple reason that is reflected in the sub-title of this essay, i.e. evil reviewers have personality disorders and are out to get you.

Each of us will approach paper writing independently and differently. Some will see it as a necessary and unpleasant chore, something that must be done – because we have to publish our research – yet something that is much less pleasant than the supposedly pure activity of actually doing the research. Others will see it as an opportunity to demonstrate the rigour of their scholarship, not to mention sharpness of their writing (if not wit) in a battle with reviewers and editors, “red in tooth and claw” (Tennyson, 1850). In contrast to these two positions, and recognising that there are certainly others, I would like to suggest something a little gentler: that paper writing is an Art, not a Science, and moreover it is one that can be enjoyable. There are, of course, some assumptions.

Firstly, that one sees writing as a creative and at least potentially enjoyable process. Ideally, it should also be a cathartic process through which one can release one’s creative energy in torrents of words (and perhaps diagrams or tables if you prefer).

Secondly, that one is determined that the “evil reviewers with personality disorders” either won’t get you down, or simply don’t exist! Although it is common to remark that one is writing for an audience, for a journal, for the reviewers; or, that it is time for the reviewers to take a look at the paper, it is important to remember that the paper is yours (and your co-authors’ if any), and not the reviewers’. It is your way of expressing your ideas that counts.



Like many writers, I suspect, I am occasionally afflicted by writer’s block, i.e. I simply don’t know what to write. This is not at all enjoyable! Sometimes I simply don’t even try to write – I read instead. At other times, I do try to write something that is at least tangentially related to the topic I am interested in. What I find is that writing is itself a necessary process. As I go through the conscious motions of writing, alembicating my thoughts (such as they are) into miniature nuggets of text, so semi- and un-conscious thoughts come to me. I see this as a self-inspiring process. One thing leads to another, and so, from a state of not knowing what to write, I go through a process of writing that leads me to a state where, even if I am still off track, at least I am making progress. To a large extent, this process has governed my writing

of this essay so far – I wasn't sure what I wanted to write, bar a couple of initial ideas, quickly exhausted. But by starting to write, so other ideas came flitting out of the ether, through my mind, fingers and to the keyboard.

You'll notice, perhaps, that I take a particular joy in how I express myself. This is a key part of the enjoyment. Whilst the "picture is worth a thousand words" school of thought is very popular, I venture to disagree. I am much more rooted in text than image. I almost never watch television, but I read voraciously, and across a wide range of subjects and authors. I won't list here my influences – there are far too many – other than two: Lawrence Durrell and Patrick Leigh Fermor. These are authors who, in my view, write effortlessly and beautifully; and yet, when I read them, I must keep a good dictionary close at hand, for each time I dip in, I encounter new words, new directions, new turns of phrase. My enjoyment of writing is thus also a reflection of my enjoyment of reading – and the two go very much hand in hand. This is not out of a desire to perpetrate literary allusions, nor to plagiarise writers far more skillful than myself, but simply a recognition that there are so many words, so many expressions, and so much deliberate neglect.

I can't speak for other languages, but I feel that the English language, or at least that part of it that we read in our professional context, is the victim of "plain English" campaigns, i.e. organised efforts to reduce "gobbledygook, jargon and misleading public information" and ensuring that everyone has "access to clear and concise information" (<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/>). Coupled with political correctness and a minimalist approach to expression in much of the mainstream media, the sad result is that English gets plainer and plainer. Information that is clear and concise is seldom metaphorical, for instance. Nor does it soar very high above the plainness of the plains. Closer to home, my own co-authors rigorously scan my writing and attempt to eliminate words that they perceive as archaic, obsolescent or rare. More pragmatically, perhaps they are simply anticipating the "evil reviewers'" reactions, and curbing the worst of my linguistic excesses now rather than later. But I hope that some of my neologisms (to them at least) do stick in their minds. Pegamoid reviewers and editors, alas, are not so easily convinced. But there is hope, for I too am a reviewer and editor, and therein lies the opportunity to work with authors to encourage a greater degree of linguistic and semantic dexterity and richness.



So, as we lucubrate along, metaphorically or not, try to enjoy the creative process of writing, the Art of Writing. Be creative, be different, and explore the natural richness of language. The world is your Oyster, metaphorically at least. We can't get rid of the reviewers nor change their evil minds, but we can change ourselves. Google's "Don't Be Evil" is a good starting point.

Version 1, March 1st, 2010

Later thoughts, inspired by an extension to the conversation mentioned above.

Those troublesome reviewers. What do they want? My interlocutor remarked: “I sense that the reviewers are reading the paper for openings they can use to spew out their own thoughts on the matter, to show off their own genius, or simply to exercise their personality disorders”. Well, yes, that’s almost a definition of some contemporary reviewers. What’s the alternative? I suggested a better way in an article I wrote a few years ago (see Davison, 2003). Broadly, a discussant needs to initiate a conversation with the authors of the paper and the audience. This intellectual conversation should be informative, entertaining (if possible) and involve the shedding of light. It should not be a simple exposition of the discussant’s own views. Similarly, reviewers of submitted articles need to try to engage with the author in an intellectual conversation. As my interlocutor wrote “A good conversationalist finds out what will interest the other person and then steers the conversation towards those interests. Two such conversationalists can together make for a good conversation. The review process should be a good conversation. Often it is not. Sigh”.

In the end, we can educate reviewers and show them good examples. We can hope that they will change. But we should not let them win – by getting us down. The more down we get, the more our own personality disorders will be developed – and then the risk is that our own behaviour will deteriorate – to their standards. The last sentence of version 1 “Google’s “Don’t Be Evil” is a good starting point” still applies, but I’d go further and simply say “Be Good”.

Version 2, March 3rd, 2010

References

Davison, R.M. (2003) Discussants and the Quality of Interaction at Conferences, *Communications of the AIS*, 11, 7, 128-136.

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