

## **A near miss**

I am a long way from even basic competence as a proof-reader, my brain being far too inclined to 'read' what it expects to see rather than what is actually there. I am particularly bad at noticing letter reversals inside words (like this exmample). But, for once, I have managed to spot something that could have been very awkward, and only just in time.

When scientists apply for research grants, their proposals are sent to external expert reviewers for evaluation. The more sensible funding bodies send the anonymized reviews to the applicants so that they have a right to reply, usually in no more than one side of A4 paper per review. This is useful if the reviewer wants to see, for example, a particular piece of evidence they think is missing but that the applicant has as a photo or something, or even if the reviewer plain misunderstood something. The reply to reviewers is normally called a 'rebuttal' (too strong a word, really – often the gist of the reply is 'that's a good question: and here are data to answer it').

There are two main problems with the review system. The first is that the group of expert peers consists, almost by definition, of the people an applicant might regard as their competitors – competitors for the funding who know that the grant body will not be making multiple awards in one small area of science. That can lead less ethical reviewers to savage anything anywhere near their own field, whatever its real merits. The other problem is that some reviewers, especially less experienced ones, think that their job is to find only fault, not merit: more experienced people tend to report on strengths as well as weaknesses (or maybe it's a generational thing, people growing up in the age of Internet trolls not having a very balanced idea of what critical appraisal is).

When consortia of different scientists have applied for a grant, they naturally work together on the rebuttal, which has to be sent in as one document from the whole team. I was part of this process not long ago, and was amused to see how the lead applicant had identified, for internal use only, which review was which so that we would not get confused by the formal long alphanumeric strings that identify them formally. We wrestled with the rebuttal for a few days, and soon had what we hoped was a well-constructed answer to questions raised, and an indication of where one reviewer seemed to have raised objections that were unreasonable, given the data we had already presented in the application.

It was only while I was reading the draft for the last time before giving my 'OK' to the lead

applicant that I noticed the headings on the pages. They still identified the reviewers not by alphanumeric strings, but by the short names we had used within our team: *Sweetie 1*, *Sweetie 2* and *The Bastard*.

We corrected this of course. Though had we left these headings in, I wonder if we might at least have raised a smile from a weary evaluation committee as they chose which 15% of the grants rated ‘excellent’ and ‘outstanding’ they would actually fund. (No kidding – this is a typical success rate even of top-rated grants, which is why scientists spend such a ridiculous proportion of their time applying for money rather than actually doing the science).

Jamie Davies, Edinburgh, April 2023