Letters

Commitment to Sound Nutrition

"We do not know the extent of malnutrition anywhere in the United States . . . it hasn't been anyone's job," the Surgeon General of the Public Health Service stated to the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower and Poverty in 1967. However, at that time, the federal government had already financed nutrition surveys in developing countries and had a clear idea of the extent and severity of malnutrition in many other countries.

We know that cardiovascular disease is the nation's number one health problem and that a direct causal link exists between heart conditions and a high saturated fat diet. Yet, despite this knowledge, little has been done to lower the high fat content of the average American's diet and the mortality from cardiovascular disease continues to climb. As a nation, we spend nearly a billion dollars per year for vitamin and mineral supplements and foods promoted by food faddists. Yet, sound nutrition is seldom taught in the primary and secondary schools and most Americans do not know what constitutes an adequate diet.

Today we are producing more food than ever before and vast surpluses of many foods exist. But despite this agricultural abundance, the majority of our elementary schools do not have a school lunch program, and many of our poor receive no food assistance. In the same light, human needs for calories, protein, vitamins, and minerals can be quantitatively described. We also know what constitutes a good diet, but we have been unable to translate these needs into the provision of food and an adequate diet for all Americans.

Why do these disparities exist? The explanation that America's national priorities have been for other matters—military prowess, space, the production of consumer goods for the middle and upper class—seems too facile for such tragic contrasts. Yet, I believe there is a large measure of truth in it.

On 2–4 December 1969, the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health will be held in Washington. For the first time in the history of this country, representatives from all segments of the population will come together and will be given the opportunity to map a reasoned strategy to solve this problem of hunger and malnutrition. Participants at the conference and the entire country must then commit themselves to the implementation of the recommendations of the conference.

Our last national commitment placed two men on the moon. As Colonel Aldrin said, "What this [the lunar landing] means is that many other problems perhaps can be solved in the same way, by making a commitment to solve them in a long-range fashion. I think we were timely in accepting this mission of going to the moon. It might be timely, now, to think in many other areas of other missions that could be accomplished." Let's make our next national priority the commitment to eliminate hunger and malnutrition in America.

JEAN MAYER

The White House,
Washington, D.C. 20500

Nature's Chief Masterpiece Is Writing Well

What occasioned Wilson's article: "Better written journal papers—Who wants them?" (5 Sept., p. 986)? He asks us: "Do researchers want to write clear literate papers, instantly crystal clear to all readers?" And he answers for all: "They do not." How does he know that? Did his computer tell him? This is scientific?

Whyn't he ask me? I want to write—and read—better-written journal papers.

What's bugging Wilson? Too bad if he's "a little tired of better technical writing being proclaimed the panacea for most scientific ills." Maybe it's on account of how he hisself cant write so good. So maybe he should try a pepquill.

MORRIS LEIDER

New York University School of Medicine, New York 10016

Poor Wilson! Thinking that nobody really cares, he got discouraged and wrote a tract. Wrong too. He seems to believe that all members of a fraternity of specialists can figure out the writing of the others. He's also wrong in seeming to believe that some protean force keeps writing from sinking below a decent lower limit of clarity. Then, on these erroneous premises he frames the indefensible theorem that slipshod writing really is good enough for the reader who imperatively needs the good news.

In rebuttal I'll tell a true story: During a discussion of the clarity of journal articles an eminent pioneer brain surgeon told of an article that seemed to promise an explanation and a cure for a certain disconcerting episode that marred a small fraction of his brain operations. All is going well when inexplicably the patient suddenly dies. The article, which was by another brain surgeon, gave the impression that he too had patients die in the same inexplicable way and that he had figured out the cause and the cure. But the teller of the story said that the article was so badly written that he never was certain of what it was getting at despite reading it many times. Asked why he didn't just write or phone the author instead of reading and rereading the article, he replied, "Oh I did. I did immediately. But he had died."

The lesson to be learned is in one of the "literate books" Wilson recommended to others. On page 39 of *The Reader Over Your Shoulder*, Graves and Hodge (not "Hodges" as cited in the article) wrote: "The writing of good English is thus a moral matter, as the Romans held that the writing of good Latin was."

DAVID M. KINSLER

Industrial Publishing Company,
614 Superior Avenue West,
Cleveland, Ohio 44113

I am afraid that Wilson misunderstands the nature of good scientific writing. In the field of technical exposition, good writing does *not* mean graceful prose. It *does* mean explanations which are as easy to follow as the intrinsic difficulty of the subject will permit.

It is not easy to describe the nature of clear exposition. However, in my editorial capacity I have had ample opportunity to observe the most common breaches. It may be useful to describe a few.

1) No common failure is more dis-

astrous than omitting an important part of the argument or some important piece of evidence.

2) Authors frequently mislead their readers by emphasizing matters of marginal importance, and touching only lightly on the central issues.

3) Papers are often badly arranged. Arguments get separated from the propositions they are designed to support, definitions come long after terms are used, and observations which belong in one section intrude irrelevantly in another.

I freely confess to a love of beautiful English prose. (Wilson's listing skips my favorite passage: the first two pages of *The Sotweed Factor.*) Even in scientific exposition one occasionally encounters beautiful writing, and I enjoy it there as much as in John Barth's writings. However, graceful prose contributes only slightly to clarity of exposition, as any reader of *Finnegans Wake* will testify.

Wilson suggests that authors are more interested in impressing than enlightening their readers. This is often the case. But while writing one paper a man may read 100, and as a reader he *is* interested in clarity. That is why clear exposition is stressed by editors and referees, second only to value and correctness of the work reported.

JOSEPH B. KRUSKAL
Bell Telephone Laboratories,
Murray Hill, New Jersey 07974

My basic disagreement is with what Wilson calls "good writing." Judging from what he says and how he says it, I take his definition to be a false one that is commonly accepted when quality of technical writing is discussed. It becomes a straw man that is often demolished (quite rightly) while technical writing as a class progresses from bad to worse.

This false definition requires "good" writing to be prose that reads smoothly and falls trippingly from the tongue. It is concerned largely with sentence and paragraph structure, choice of words, active and passive voice. But it misses more fundamental issues.

A better definition of good writing—scientific or nonscientific—would start much deeper. It would be concerned with content, order of presentation, accuracy, clarity—matters like these. The questions it would answer are: "What material is to be presented?" "What is essential and what is extraneous?" "What order of presentation makes it easiest to understand?" "What order is most logical?" "What will confuse the reader?" "How shall the writer remove the confusion?" Of course prose quality is included, but it has the relation to good writing that building materials have to good architecture.

Wilson makes a good point when he says that the way to produce good writing is to find some and imitate it. But the examples he chooses illustrate my view as well as his. Churchill's writing is good not because its prose flows but because his facts are accurate, his ideas are significant, and his presentation is forceful. Barzun's *Science the Glorious Entertainment* is bad because although the prose is adequate, the author's understanding of his subject is shallow.

Surely there is need for good technical writing. One of the greatest reasons is to relieve library shelves of unread trivia and to give readers the science they want in the time they have to get it. But the way to get good writing is to establish valid criteria and not to exchange the faults of the writing scientist for those of the technical writer.

R. HOBART ELLIS, JR.
Physics Today,
335 East 45th Street, New York 10017

Wilson advises: ". . . in writing up the paper: let the best writer in the group draft it, then take it to an editor in your organization." My point concerns the qualifications of that editor. He mustn't know too much! If he knows as much as the writers do about the (usually) narrow field involved, he is too likely to accept the jargon and gobbledegook used within that field. With special knowledge of the field, he can understand the writer's intentions in jargon vocabulary and in muddy sentences (both unintelligible to the nonspecialist reader), and will naively let them pass as written.

The effective editor must be one who has respect for clear prose, and the ability to write it. . . . Only through the intervention of such an editor will the reader get a clear report.

ALAN F. RANDOLPH
2113 Valley Road,
Wilmington, Delaware 19803

Wesleyan's Science

A letter from Arthur H. Westing (18 July), which presents statistics on the size of science faculties at liberal arts colleges, credits Wesleyan University with a faculty of whom 20 percent are in science. Apparently we have leaked out some misinformation. In fact, 57 of 225 full-time faculty members, or 25 percent, are in the scientific fields specified by Westing. In a burst of chauvinism let me add that we have nearly completed a $13 million science center and have new Ph.D. programs in chemistry, biology, physics, and mathematics. We believe that the inauguration of small, high quality programs is helping to improve our already excellent undergraduate instruction in science at this liberal arts college.

RICHARD M. OHMANN
Office of the Provost,
Wesleyan University,
Middletown, Connecticut 06457

Spectrometry Service

I wish to clarify a "News in Brief" item (3 Oct., p. 89) regarding a high-resolution mass spectrometry program supported by the National Institutes of Health. NIH has contracted with Battelle Memorial Institute, 505 King Avenue, Columbus, Ohio 43201 and Arthur D. Little, Inc., Cambridge, Massachusetts 02140 to provide mass spectral service to the biomedical research community. This service is available at no cost to these scientists with primary consideration given to projects supported under NIH funds. Inquiries should be addressed directly to the contractors. Interested scientists who are engaged in non-NIH-supported biomedical research programs will require prior approval from NIH and should send their inquiries to: Special Research Resources Branch, Division of Research Resources, Building 31, Room 5B13, NIH, Bethesda, Maryland 20014.

MICHAEL A. OXMAN
Division of Research Resources,
National Institutes of Health,
Bethesda, Maryland 20014

Complete Creature

John Platt, in his editorial entitled "The university as a five-legged animal" (15 Aug., p. 649), forgot the tail. The tail is the bureaucracy which wags the rest of the animal.

JOHN R. DIXON
Department of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering, University of Massachusetts, Amherst 01002