

Coming Aboard II: Discourse

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New editors have a certain obligation to define their purposes and their intentions to their constituents. If they aren't already aware of that obligation, it is soon made plain to them by others: I have frequently been asked in recent weeks, for example, whether I have an "agenda" for *Science*. Upon replying in the negative, I usually then have one recommended to me. Some of these suggestions simply arrive on their own, without invitation. Their format is suggested by the following hypothetical letter:

"Dear Dr. Kennedy: Congratulations on your appointment; I am sure it will be a good thing for our enterprise." (That's the slow curve; the fastball follows.) "Having said that, however, I feel I should make you aware of certain deficiencies in *Science's* coverage. Regrettably, only two papers in the field of paleozoic biogeochemistry have been published during the past year, both of them from deservedly obscure research groups. We expect more." Such communications are sometimes vague with respect to what they want more OF—more papers, or more quality control?

I guess I want more too: more papers, and even better papers. But as to a more specific agenda, I really don't have one, at least not yet. But I have some beliefs that readers and contributors might like to know about, and I have been learning (as if drinking from a firehose) about *Science* policies for treating submissions and comments on the submissions of others. This is probably a good time to get several of these on the table.

Science is, first of all, a venue for the communication of scientific work that is both excellent and important and of science news that is both relevant and interesting. But I also believe that it should be a venue for discourse. Pursuing that purpose, my predecessors established a whole suite of outlets in addition to Research Articles and Reports. Our work speaks in many different modes: retrospective, summarizing, synthesizing, applying, and speculating. Perspectives, Reviews, Pathways of Discovery, and Policy Forums are outlets for these various voices of science, and we hope they will induce more of our readers to find their own.

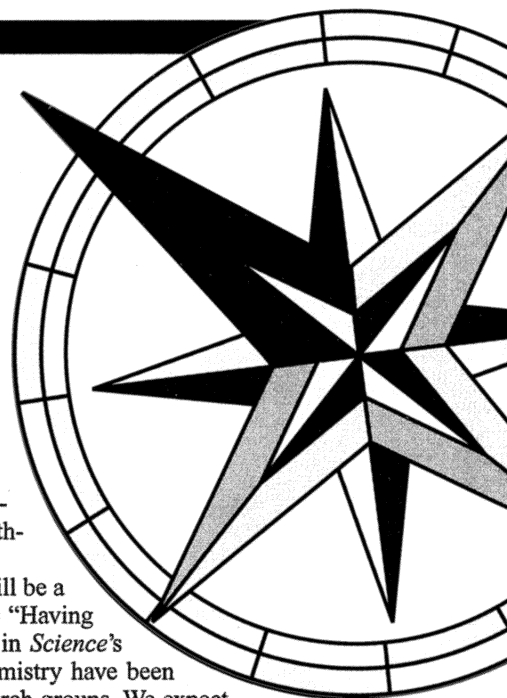
We also welcome criticism, so we expect that although most letters and Technical Comments will amplify or clarify published material, some will be critical. We welcome these, editing them only for space and clarity. We may reject some, applying the three-pronged test of quality, relevance, and civility. The last entry is not on the list because we mistrust controversy. On the contrary, we invite it, while firmly believing that disagreement without alienation is possible even where it appears difficult to achieve. We give authors an opportunity to respond to letters or Technical Comments; when letters take issue with a News report, the News writer may respond briefly when clarification is in order. Finally, we occasionally receive, and welcome, letters that arrive out of the blue, untethered to a previous

piece in *Science*. The survival guide to Gordon Conferences in the 2 June issue is a lively example.

That brings us to the primary material itself: the Articles and Reports of original research. How much controversy they create plainly depends on what we decide to publish! There is probably a safe path, though I confess I wouldn't know how to find it. It would involve publishing only papers that present complete findings, leading to clear and unarguable conclusions. We like clarity, and we will certainly publish lots of those reports. But science usually doesn't flourish in a bland, dispute-free environment. So we will accept some high-risk papers if the results they present are interesting and well supported, and if their conclusions are, well, let's say reasonable, if audacious.

Of course that may invite letters. We hope so; that's how things get worked out in this business. Science without discourse and controversy is static science. It can be motivated and enlivened by well-managed disagreement, and providing the venue and the management is part of *Science's* mission. We cannot fulfill it unless our readers are prepared to participate; I hope this description of what we do in our various departments will encourage that.

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