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Letters to the Editor

Nearly everyone has at some time considered writing a letter to the editor, but few actually do so. The effort involved in assembling and then conveying thoughts on paper is a barrier which few surmount, and it introduces an important screening determinant on the nature of letters which an editor ultimately receives. Most contributors do not overcome their inertia unless they are strongly motivated. A common and effective goad is anger, which produces activity but not high-quality thought. Most letters written under the stimulus of adrenalin are rich in invective, nit-picking, and flat disagreement, but often they have limited substantive content. A dash of controversy spices a journal, but an overdose only leaves the impression that a man was angry. In some instances the principal consequence is to render disservice to the author.

With many, sending a letter to the editor seems to involve much more than writing and posting a communication. Two instances have impressed us. In early 1963 we published a controversial article by M. K. Hubbert (8 March, p. 884). Hubbert received more than a hundred notes commending him on his stand and only a few disagreeing with him. The editor received 11 letters—8 pro and 3 con. An editorial in *Science* (13 Sept., p. 999) entitled "Responsible scientific choice," which mentioned a paper appearing elsewhere, elicited a thousand requests for reprints. The editor received only three letters, two concurring and one dissenting.

Another measure of the behavior of writers of letters to the editor is the time delay of response. Most communications can be correlated with a specific item. Thus, we can note the time lapse between receipt of the journal and the date of the letter. Rarely is there a rapid reaction. The median response time is about 2½ weeks. Only part of this delay is accounted for in the time required to read the journal. The remainder of the period is often devoted to cogitation and consultation with colleagues. There are, however, frequent instances of greatly delayed comments. We have had letters referring to items which appeared many months and even more than a year previously. Apparently the readers had been browsing through old issues.

We receive at least three types of letters, and the different types are handled in different ways. First, there is the comment on scientific papers. This discussion usually is technical and critical of the authors. If it appears to have merit, it may be edited to remove excessive invective and is then referred to the original author for rebuttal.

A second type of letter is in response to material appearing as an editorial or as "News and Comment." Often the letters make the same points. To print them in their entirety would make boring reading. Accordingly, we accumulate the comments on a particular item and publish excerpts, trying to give the main points. In general we print the adverse rather than the favorable material, since the latter usually only reiterates what has already been said.

A third type of letter is the spontaneous, creative contribution not obviously related to an item which has appeared in the journal. This is likely to be printed with least delay. In the current issue are two letters of this type—one a contribution by Ralph Lapp calling for action by scientists in advance of the political conventions, the other a lampoon of the word-coining propensities of some molecular biologists. These are but two examples of the fine communications we hope to publish in 1964.—P.H.A.