

FISHBYTE SECTION

Editorial

Editorial licence has struck again: instead of berating our readership on how to write contributions meant for *Fishbyte*, one of us (DP, see below) has contributed an article on how submissions to *Fishbyte* are edited, and especially how “monster papers” are cut down to size. We look forward to your response.

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On Editing a Newsletter (such as *Fishbyte*)

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Abstract

A brief account is presented of the task involved in editing the *Fishbyte* newsletter (and its successor, the *Fishbyte* section of *Naga, the ICLARM Quarterly*), with emphasis on the mechanics of turning excessively long submissions into publishable shorter items, especially through the production of text-saving exhibits (maps, graphs and tables).

Introduction

Eight years ago, John Munro, who had founded *Fishbyte* in 1982 (Munro and Pauly 1982), handed me the editorship of the newsletter of the Network of Tropical Fisheries Scientists (NTFS). Four years ago, *Fishbyte* ceased to be an independent publication, becoming instead a section of *Naga, the ICLARM Quarterly*. At about that time, a *Fishbyte* reader I had offended by publishing a much shortened version of the manuscript he had sub-

mitted, blasted me for my editorial incompetence, then offered his services as assistant editor. His sales pitch being what it was, nothing came out of it at first. But then again, on reflection, it may be appropriate to describe how *Fishbyte* is edited, as my long tenure as *Fishbyte* editor, due to end with the next (October 1996) issue of *Naga*, did teach me a few tricks. I would now like to share these with *Fishbyte* readers, both to provide, retroactively, a background for what they read, and perhaps to benefit those who may end up editing a similar professional or other newsletter.

Note that the text below, while emphasizing my personal idiosyncrasies (I do not dare to call it "style"), assumes that whatever ends up published by ICLARM will conform with ICLARM's latest publication guide (ICLARM 1996; see also Box 1).

Box 1. *Fishbyte* articles.

Fishbyte articles are brief, technical referenced papers that contain:

- the description of a developing-country fishery (biology of main species, catch trends, gear, management problems and proposed solutions);
- the development and/or application of new methods (including software) suitable for assessing tropical or sub-tropical resources; or
- routine estimates of vital statistics of tropical fish populations (growth parameters, length-weight relationships, natural mortality, etc.), subsequently entered into FishBase.

- From the Editorial, *Naga*, April 1996

Let's move step by step.

Soliciting or Acknowledging Receipt of Manuscripts

Published *Fishbyte* articles consist of either unsolicited articles sent to the *Fishbyte* Editor or to "ICLARM", or of articles that were explicitly solicited, often presenting newly developed methods that may be of use to members of NTFS. The latter articles generally do not require much editorial work, their authors having been informed beforehand of the required number of pages, graphs, etc. It is the unsolicited papers which generate most work, and which are thus the object of this contribution.

The first job here is obviously to assess whether a paper is suitable for *Fishbyte* in terms of its contents. Papers not meeting the criteria in Box 1, or otherwise perceived as not being relevant to the NTFS are returned to their author(s), generally with a letter suggesting an alternative outlet.

The above implies that I accept papers irrespective of their *form*, if I consider their *contents* appropriate. This leaves me with two classes of papers: (1) those that can be quickly put into shape, because their author(s) master English, and used earlier *Fishbyte* issues and general conventions to guide their style; and (2) the other papers, those that keep editors busy.

Breaking a Monster Manuscript into Editable Bits

The procedure I have gradually evolved to deal with monster manuscripts (too long, written in bad English, results unclear, discussion beside the point, acknowledgements missing,

references incomplete) is to apply the old reductionist trick of breaking the task into a series of subtasks, and to then work from the outside, i.e., dealing first with the exhibits (maps, tables, graphs, photos), and only then returning to the text.

The Map

If the paper has a geographic component (i.e., samples taken at fishing grounds X, Y and Z, analyses performed at another place, etc.), I work on the map at hand, or create one, making sure that it includes all sites mentioned in the text, plus important cities, rivers or other geographic features that may help the reader locate things, making sure that the water is differentiated from the land (e.g., by dotting the landward side of coastlines), and that the map has a scale, and axes showing the longitudes and latitudes, often forgotten by authors.

Usually, such a map allows reducing the length of a manuscript, as it allows deletion of all text references to locations, directions and distances. The legend of the map provides further opportunities for text reduction, by allowing very concise expression relevant, e.g., to where, when and how something was done. Also, the empty space of maps can be used to illustrate the fish or fishing gears discussed in the paper, following the proud tradition of ancient mapmakers, who put monsters whenever they lacked information.

Moreover, putting a fish on a map is justified, I believe, because scientists should develop in the course of their work what Keller (1983) calls "a feeling for the organism", i.e., to realize their studies deal with living things, and not with disembodied entities that manifest themselves only as numbers in tables, or dots in graphs.

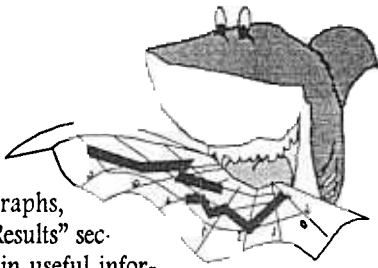
The Table

Next, I look for (or create) a table in the "Materials and Methods" section, to succinctly summarize how things were done or sampled, in how many specimens, and what units were used. Often, *Fishbyte* articles contain length-frequency data: the table presenting these can replace, through a few footnotes (e.g., one defining the length measured as either total, fork or standard length), items that need not be part of the main narrative.

Sometimes the row and columns must be inverted for a table to make sense, and/or to allow cutting off wasted space devoted to empty cells. Also, all columns and rows with the same entries are deleted, and the single entry replaced by a footnote.

Here again, a long legend can replace an even longer part of the "Materials and Methods" section (note that at least one reputed scientific journal (*Nature*) publishes papers with no "Materials and Methods" sections, *all* relevant information being part of table and/or figure legends).

The Graph



Then I look at the graphs, usually presented in the "Results" section. Do the graphs contain useful information, or do they resemble the "ducks" that Tufte (1983) warns about? A 3-D pie chart showing e.g., that sharks consume 18% of fish A, and 82% of fish B is a duck, as it shows only one number ("18%"), the other being implicit (100-82). Such and even more "complex" pie charts can be replaced by numbers as part of a text, without loss of information.

Similarly, graphs showing one single wiggly line usually waste ink, and should be combined, given our eyes' information-gathering ability, with another graph if available, either in the form of a combined graph with two or three wiggly lines, or a panel with several, much reduced single-line graphs (Tufte 1990).

Here, the fight is against the intellectual laziness induced by the graphing routines of various spreadsheet software, most of which tend to produce ugly graphs, with silly 3-D scales and *moiré* shading that makes one's head feel dizzy (see Tufte 1983). But it is a worthy fight.

Cleaning up the graphs involves checking that the axis labels have units (often forgotten), and ensuring that the readers can understand the graph without reading the text or even the graph's legend. Thus, one must avoid codes (e.g., dots = "O.M.", triangles "O.N.", wherein it is the legend that informs us that "O.M. = *Oreochromis mossambicus*" and "O.N. = *Oreochromis niloticus*").

There are cases where a small table is more telling than a graph, and thus, I often create such table to summarize the results of monster papers, especially when this allows for comparisons between the new results and earlier published results.

Returning to the Text

Once the exhibits are completed, I then return to the text and lo and behold, it can usually be shortened by half or more, given that much of the information it contains is now re-expressed in much more concise form in the legends and footnotes and entries of the various graphs and tables.

This is often also the time when one realizes that the monster paper did not really provide good reasons for distinct "Results and Discussion" sections, but only used the "Discussion" section to repeat the results and to present a few numbers forgotten earlier.

Thus, a combined "Results and Discussion" section is created, while text which vaguely mentioned the help of this or that person is consolidated into the "Acknowledgement" section that most authors should have.

The References

References require lots of work; I often use ICLARM's Aquatic Science and Fisheries Abstracts CD-ROM to check them, and increasingly FishBase, which I also use to check the fish

names - and to update them if need be (see Froese and Pauly 1996).

Also, I sometimes add references that I think are relevant to the papers (no, I do not add references to my own work), e.g., a recent review on the species discussed in the paper in question.

Back to the Text

The last loop is to "sizzle" the text, to use an expression coined by Microsoft's Bill Gates, and referring to the process wherein program code is improved by successive rounds of reading by experienced programmers.

Thus, I try to remove 5-10% of the text in each of 2-3 successive passes, the result invariably being that the text becomes tighter and increasingly readable. This is also the time when the last "fishermen" is replaced by "fishers", the nonsexist friends of farmers and workers and where I check that fish prices in exotic currencies are re-expressed at least once in their US\$ equivalent. Interestingly, even titles can be shortened - by removing "Notes on ...", or "Some aspects of ...", and by removing authors' names after scientific names (e.g., Linnaeus or Cuvier and Valenciennes), not required in the titles of nontaxonomic publications.

The End

Astute readers will have noted that by inverting the contents of this article, they'll get the detailed "Guide for *Fishbyte* Authors" that had not been written so far.

Acknowledgements

The work described above could not have been done without the professionalism of successive Network Secretaries, notably Beth Eleccion and Sandra Gayosa. Also, I could not write about better maps and graphs, were it not for the skills of successive ICLARM artists, lately Ms. Aque Atanacio and Mr. Albert Contemprate.

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