Random Thoughts . . .

TRUTH IN ADVERTISING

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Most of us in this business are periodically called on to evaluate award nominations and applications for faculty positions. It's not an easy job if you take it seriously. You have to make intelligent judgments about somebody's qualifications based on lists of articles in journals you never heard of on subjects you're unfamiliar with written by multiple authors whose roles in the work are undefined. You also have to deal with collections of reference letters unanimously assuring you that the applicant is currently or potentially the finest researcher, teacher, and all-around human being the world has ever known. Interpreting all that unfiltered verbiage to figure out just how good someone actually is takes considerable experience and skill.

As a service to the profession, I've prepared a glossary of classifications that will make interpretation of award and application dossiers a snap once everyone agrees to adopt it. Here, for example, is how a hypothetical citation might appear in a dossier submitted by one Alvin Tsimmes, followed by the glossary.

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23. B.A. Mensch,[b] A. Tsimmes,[d] and O.Y. Gevalt,[a] "The Environmental Impact of Biochemical Superconductors,"[j] *Journal of the Environmental Impact of Biochemical Superconductors,*[p] 27(3), 357–375 (1996).

Categories of authors: (**a**) did most of the research; (**b**) contributed significantly to the research; (**c**) occasionally attended meetings and had a vague idea what the research was about; (**d**) clueless about the research but part of a faculty group that automatically shared authorship of all papers on the subject; (**e**) owned some equipment needed for the research; (**f**) had nothing to do with the research but famous enough to guarantee the paper's acceptance; (**g**) department head

Categories of papers: (**h**) classic in its field—hundreds of citations; (**i**) many citations by non-authors; (**j**) mainly or entirely self-citations; (**k**) no citations; (**l**) named in a reader's poll as the paper least likely to be cited by anyone ever

Categories of journals: (**m**) top of the line: non-National Academy members can forget it; (**n**) prestigious and hard to get into: referees are those people whose hobby is asking sarcastic questions at conferences to prove they know more than the presenters; (**o**) refereed; (**p**) sort of refereed: condition for acceptance is lack of obvious gross errors; (**q**) non-refereed: condition for acceptance is submission; (**r**) last resort: authors who submit papers get a free lifetime subscription, two large pizzas with toppings of their choice, and a shoeshine; (**s**) accepts papers rejected by (r)

Next, here is the list of authors of Tsimmes's reference letters: 1. Dr. R.U. Sirius;[u] 2. Mr. I.C. Dimmly;[v] 3. Prof. U.R. Toest[w]

Categories of reference letters: (**t**) completely sincere; (**u**) exaggerated but more or less accurate; (**v**) politely camouflaged negative opinion; (**w**) form letter—respondent never heard of the applicant and didn't look at the dossier; (**x**) blatant lying

The creativity required to write good Category (v) letters has led to such gems as

- ❏ *"I cannot recommend him too highly,"*
- ❏ *"With her on your staff, there's no telling what you might accomplish,"*
- ❏ *"I am pleased to say that this candidate is a former colleague of mine,"*
- ❏ *"I can assure you that no person would be better for this job,"*
- ❏ *"I would waste no time in making this candidate an offer of employment,"*

and the ever-popular

- ❏ *"I've known Mr. Jones for many years, and you'll be lucky if you get him to work for you!"*

Dossier evaluators could get a serious headache trying to interpret these remarks and possibly make a serious mistake if they guess wrong, but a "v" by the authors' names would make life easy for everyone (except perhaps Mr. Jones).

Okay, now that we've got all that worked out, let's discuss applying the same technique to TV commercials, political speeches, marriage proposals, and perhaps even journal columns.[z]

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[z] *This column is a facetious and excessively cynical adaptation of a clever idea suggested by Kay C. Dee of Tulane in a casual conversation. The author should be ashamed of himself.*