



# Pointers on Preparing Papers for Professional Publication: A Perspective from a Researcher, Reviewer, and Editor

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## ***OUR PRIMARY AIM:***

**Helping you develop publishable research papers**

### **How to achieve that aim:**

- **Choosing research problems**
- **Writing up your results**
- **Interacting with journals**
- **General tips for improving your writing**
- **Some common writing and style issues**

***My suggestions come from my  
experience as a reviewer, editor,  
and teacher.***

## What makes a research problem worth working on?

- Historical importance – viewed as important over many years, but still not completely settled
- Theoretical importance – tests some proposition derived from theory (Q: Is the theory itself important?), esp. if the test can falsify the theory
- Practical importance – helps solve/resolve some problem that has practical significance

## Trivial, unimportant, dead-end research problems...

- ...take just as much time, effort, and resources as good problems
- ...are harder to get published, especially in high visibility journals

***Choose problems wisely!  
Research is expensive.  
Your time can never be replaced.***

## A good general plan for an individual paper:

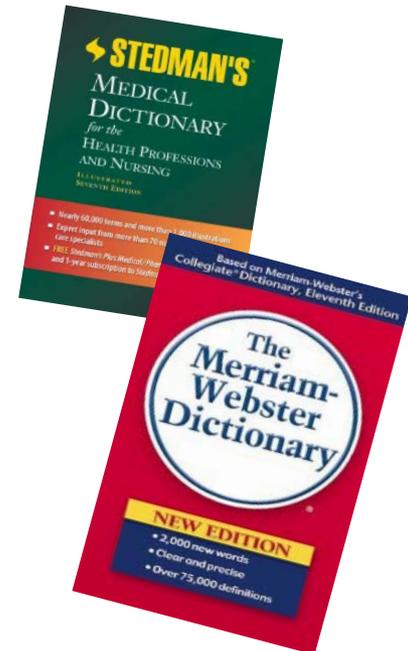
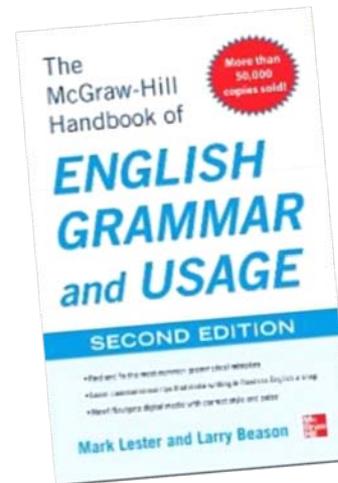
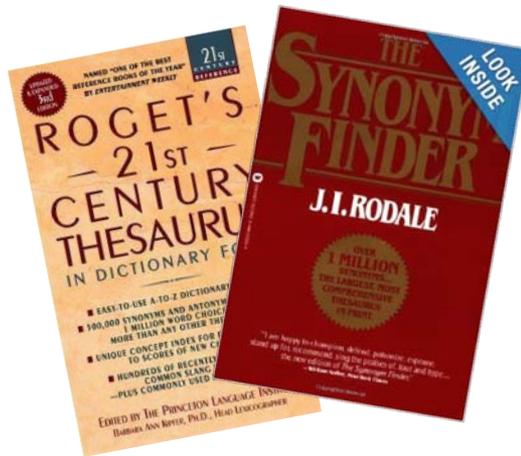
- Experiment 1: Demonstrate the effect
- Further experiments: (Partial) replications + extensions to...
  - ...test reliability, robustness of the effect
  - ...probe generalizability of the effect
  - ...resolve possible confounds
  - ...address alternative explanations

*The best papers, in the best journals,  
often report multiple related experiments*

- Chain such papers into a series of related papers

## Gather your writing tools

- Journal guidelines for your target journal
- Disciplinary style manual (e.g., APA, AMA, ICMJE)
- Dictionaries (standard, specialized)
- Thesaurus, synonym finder
- General grammar and usage guides



## Choosing a target journal: Questions to ask

- How important are your results?
- Which journals publish results similar to yours?
  - Your experience
  - Journals you cite
- Does the manuscript fit journal requirements?
  - Content specificity, journal scope
  - Single vs. multiple experiments
  - Length limits

## Develop a priority list of target journals, based on:

- Acceptance and rejection rates
- Impact factors (high impact factor = high rejection rate)
- Review and publication lags
- Electronic availability/open access
- Indexing
- Publication costs
- **Guidance from a professional editing service might be helpful**

*Consider “aiming high,” submitting to a journal better than you think will accept your paper.*

## General pointers: CONTROL THE THINGS YOU CAN CONTROL

- **ALWAYS** follow journal style requirements closely
- Papers can be rejected solely for manuscript preparation deficiencies
  - Content
  - Style
  - Language
  - **DON'T RELY ON YOUR SPELLING AND GRAMMAR CHECKER!**
- Remember – quality of your publication is ultimately YOUR responsibility
  - NOT the editor's
  - NOT the reviewer's
  - NOT the publisher's

*Mistakes in the published paper are YOUR mistakes...  
...and they are there forever!*

## ***Plagiarism, Duplicate publication, Piece-meal publication***

- ***Plagiarism:*** Presenting another author's writing as your own
  - Many journals routinely check – the internet makes that easy
  - Plagiarism can destroy a reputation and career
  - The ONLY solution is to use appropriate direct quotation or paraphrasing
- ***Duplicate publication:*** Publishing the same data in more than one paper
  - Unethical, irresponsible, and a disservice to your discipline and profession
  - Journals may bar authors who are caught
- ***Piece-meal publication ('salami slicing')***: Publishing parts of a larger research project in several smaller papers
  - It is unethical and wastes journal resources
  - It is a disservice to the discipline
  - Combine related studies into a single, more comprehensive report

***BOTTOM LINE: PRACTICE ETHICAL BEHAVIOR***

## Title

- Aim for
  - Clarity
  - Informativeness
  - Brevity
- A big issue is electronic retrieval – that depends on title words

Human Sensitivity to Acoustic Information From Vessel Filling  
John B. Pittenger  
University of Arkansas at Little Rock

Patrick A. Cabe  
University of North Carolina at Pembroke

Sufficiency of Longitudinal Moment of Inertia for Haptic  
Cylinder Length Judgments  
Patrick A. Cabe  
University of North Carolina at Pembroke

Descartes's blind man revisited:  
Bimanual triangulation of distance  
using static hand-held rods  
PATRICK A. CABE, CHERYL D. WRIGHT, and MARK A. WRIGHT  
University of North Carolina at Pembroke

*The title is the first filter readers use  
to decide if your article is worth reading*

## Title

Less effective title...	More effective title...
On the generality of the laws of learning	Evolutionary biases on stimuli, rewards, and conditions for learning
P'	Structure of the Earth's inner core from seismic P' wave reflections
The effect of A in patients with stable plaques	Effects of A on serum lipids, serum inflammation, and plaque morphology in patients with stable atherosclerotic plaques

- A generic model for titles:

*The effect of variable X on variable Y, under conditions  $C_1...C_n$ , for population P*

## Abstract

- Objective: Amplify title
- Common problems
  - Length:
    - ✓ Stay within journal word limits
    - ✓ Subheads often are wasted words (unless required)
  - References: Generally omit them
  - Too much detail (e.g., statistical information)
  - Undefined abbreviations or acronyms
  - Editorializing

*The abstract is the second filter readers use to decide if your article is worth reading*

## Introduction

- State a clear research question
- Use the funnel plan – broad to specific issues
  - Connections to theory
  - Connections to existing literature
  - Clear definition of an empirical gap your results fill
- Clearly state your hypothesis(es)
  - In terms of constructs
  - In terms of specific operationalizations
  - Use “if...then” statements
- Emphasize novelty and surprisingness of results

***Don't hide the punch line!***

***You are writing history, not mystery!***

## Methods

- **Participants**
  - **Identify participant population and sample adequately**
  - **Describe**
    - ✓ **Recruitment (inclusion, exclusion criteria)**
    - ✓ **Assignment to test conditions**
    - ✓ **Any motivational considerations**
  - **Always acknowledge compliance with ethical standards**
- **Apparatus, materials, instruments: Provide adequate detail, background**
- **Procedure: Clearly describe all steps**

***Criterion for the Methods section:  
Readers could replicate the experiment, given the  
Methods section and reasonable common knowledge***

## Results

- Clearly separate chunks of the results (subheads help)
- General flow: global to more specific statistical tests
- Focus on how statistics address hypotheses
- Draw conclusions
- “Marginally significant differences” = ZERO differences
- Follow journal style for statistical reporting
- Figures, tables stand alone -- don't repeat text material

***Statistics are work-horses, not window dressing***

## Discussion

- Use the inverted funnel plan – more specific to broader issues
  - Summarize the findings
  - Re-emphasize novelty, surprisingness
  - Connect results to literature (how results fill an empirical gap)
  - Connect results to theory
- Interpret results (but minimize speculation)

*The Discussion section is (often) the third filter readers use to decide how useful your paper is*

- **Anticipate reviewer objections**

<b>Don't point out...</b>	<b>Instead, talk about...</b>
Limitations on results	Boundary conditions of effects
Limitations due to confounds, artifacts	Alternative explanations
Limitations of methods	Constraints of methodology
Limitations on generalizability	Parameters of generalizability

- **Suggest possible practical applications**
- **Suggest future research directions, next steps: Some possibilities...**
  - **Change the IV (including parametric changes)**
  - **Change the DV**
  - **Change conditions**
  - **Change the population (cross-cultural studies are immediate possibilities)**

## Some general points:

- Journals want to ACCEPT papers, not reject them. WHY?
  - Demand
    - ✓ Around 25,000 peer-reviewed journals
    - ✓ Publishing 1 - 2 million articles a year
  - Many publishers are in business to make a profit
    - ✓ Manuscripts are free raw materials (but expensive to you!)
    - ✓ Much labor is donated (editors, reviewers)
    - ✓ Institutions may subsidize editor efforts

## KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER:

- Follow journal guidelines for submission EXACTLY
- Practice good language skills
- Make your paper as near perfect as you can (but expect to make revisions)

*Make it easy for the reviewers and editors  
to like your paper*

## Reviewer Context

- **Volunteer labor**
- **Try to be fair**
- **Competition for their time**
- **Likely to look for shortcuts**
  - **What looks good is good**
  - **Known is better than unknown**
  - **News is better – surprise, novelty**
- **Using this perspective**
  - **Recommend reviewers**
  - **Highlight importance relative to theory, existing knowledge, practical problems**
  - **Highlight novelty, surprisingness**
  - **Perfect language, perfect style, perfect mechanically**

## Questions reviewers want to see answered

- Is there a clear research question? Why is it important?
- Does the work fill a gap in the existing literature?
- Is the logic of the research adequate to answer the research question?
- Is the methodology appropriate for the research question?
- Do the results adequately address the hypotheses?
- Are interpretations consistent with the design, the data, and the literature?
- Is the research explained clearly and understandably (language, readability)?
- Are the results novel, surprising?
- Does the paper conform to journal style guidelines?

***The confused mind says “No!”  
Don’t confuse reviewers or editors.***

## Submission cover letters

- **Some guidelines (electronic submission portals often ask about these issues)**
  - **Use the editor's name and the title of the journal**
  - **Include manuscript details (title, word count, numbers of figures and tables)**
  - **BRIEFLY, tell why the paper is worth publishing (importance, novelty, surprisingness, robustness)**
  - **Recommend preferred, non-preferred reviewers: Tap your network**
  - **Affirm the paper is not under consideration elsewhere**
  - **Affirm conformity with ethical requirements (use available protocols)**
  - **Acknowledge potential conflicts of interest**
  - **Include contact information for corresponding author**

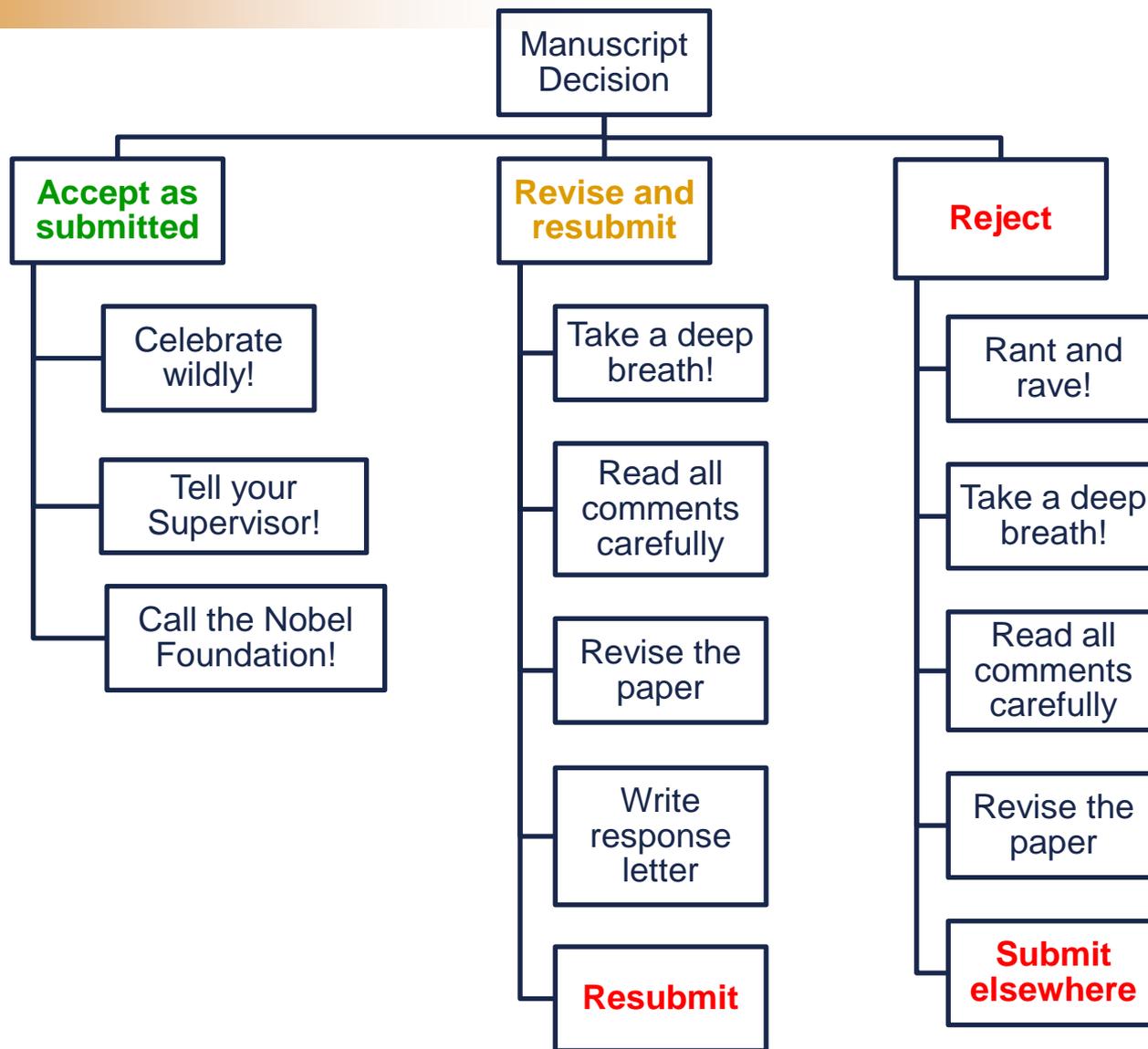
## Submission cover letters

- Potential problem areas to avoid
  - Using a form letter
    - ✓ “Dear editor” (**editors have names!**)
    - ✓ “Your honored journal” (**it has a title!**)
  - Including too much information about the content of the paper (**don't copy-and-paste the abstract!**)
  - Leaving out administrative and mechanical details (**help the editor manage the manuscript!**)
  - Using an obsequious, pleading tone (**respect yourself and your work!**)

## Dealing with the review process

- Initial contacts
  - It's okay to contact editors, especially about paper appropriateness
  - DO recommend reviewers in your cover letter
    - ✓ People who know you and your past work
    - ✓ People whose work is related to your own
    - ✓ Mention people who you would prefer not to be reviewers
- Waiting...the hard part!
  - Give the reviewers and editor time to do their work
  - If the time seems excessive, inquire politely

***Eventually, you get...***  
***THE BIG DECISION!***



## Response letters with re-submissions

[Google search: "how to respond to manuscript reviewers" yielded > 2 million hits]

- DON'T WRITE IN ANGER! DON'T ATTACK THE EDITOR OR REVIEWERS!
- Common elements of response letters
  - Express appreciation for the reviewer's time and effort
  - Answer every point every reviewer makes
  - Indicate where revisions have been made and their nature
- Organize your responses (possibly parallel columns)
- Categories of response to reviewer comments
  - "I see the reviewer's point and have revised the ms. in the following way..."
  - "I do not agree with the reviewer, for the following reason(s), and have left the original wording...."
  - "I don't understand the reviewer's point and therefore don't know what changes to make..."

***The response letter is as important  
as the revised manuscript!***

## Mostly language (grammar, syntax, and spelling) problems

- Long sentences, long paragraphs, big words
  - Check average sentence length – aim for about 15 – 20 words/sentence
  - Check readability: AS A ROUGH GUIDE, aim for...
    - ✓ Flesch score ca. 30 (lower is harder to read)
    - ✓ Flesch-Kincaid > 16 (higher is harder to read)
    - ✓ Use good judgement about these numbers
  - Alternate short, simple sentences with longer, more complex ones

Most

- Lo



## Readability Statistics

### Counts

Words	687
Characters	3544
Paragraphs	11
Sentences	20

### Averages

Sentences per Paragraph	2.5
Words per Sentence	33.4
Characters per Word	5.0

### Readability

Passive Sentences	10%
Flesch Reading Ease	39.1
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	15.0

OK

Words/sentence

ex ones

## Mostly language (grammar, syntax, and spelling) problems

- **Passive voice sentence construction**
  - **Example: “It has been established that...” (by whom??)**
  - **Passive voice...**
    - ✓ often leaves agent ambiguous
    - ✓ often uses more words
  - **Prefer active voice: “Past researchers have established...”**
  - **Okay to use personal pronouns (I, we) to achieve active voice**

## Mostly language (grammar, syntax, and spelling) problems

- **Unclear pronoun antecedents**
  - **Example: “Participants completed three tests. They indicated...”**
  - **Generally, pronoun refers to the most recently occurring noun**
  - **When in doubt, repeat the noun**
- **Articles (a, an, the)**
  - **“a” and “an” are used to indicate one of many possible instances**
    - ✓ **“a” where the noun begins with a consonant sound**
    - ✓ **“an” when the noun begins with a vowel sound**
  - **“the” is used to indicate a particular instance**

## Mostly language (grammar, syntax, and spelling) problems

- **Number disagreement (subject-verb, noun-pronoun)**
  - **Subject-verb: singular subject, plural verb; plural subject, singular verb**
  - **Examples:**
    - ✓ “The set of responses include...” (subject is “set,” not “responses”)
    - ✓ “The colors of the rainbow is...” (subject is “colors,” not “rainbow”)
    - ✓ The verb must agree with the subject, not just the closest noun
  - **Noun-pronoun: singular noun, plural pronoun; plural noun, singular pronoun**
  - **Examples:**
    - ✓ “Everyone forgot their notebook” (“everyone” is singular; “their” is plural)
    - ✓ “Neurons are polar units and it fires in only one direction...” (“neurons” is plural; “it” is singular)
    - ✓ The pronoun must agree with the actual referent, not just the closest noun

## Mostly language (grammar, syntax, and spelling) problems

- Punctuation, especially commas
  - Commas can completely change the sense of a sentence
    - ✓ Example:
      - > “The panda eats, shoots, and leaves”: Now, remove the commas!
      - > “The panda eats shoots and leaves”
      - > Removing the commas turns VERBS (“shoots,” “leaves”) into NOUNS
      - > English has many words that can be both nouns and verbs!
    - ✓ Example:
      - > “Woman, without her man is nothing.” (Put in a second comma!)
      - > “Woman, without her man, is nothing.” OR...
      - > “Woman, without her, man is nothing.”

- **Comma splices**
  - **Joining two complete sentences with only a comma to separate them**
  - **Use a semi-colon, or a period and start a new sentence**
- **Incomplete sentences**
  - **Lack a subject or predicate**
  - **Often dependent clauses that should be attached to preceding sentence**
    - ✓ **Example: “The data showed an effect of the IV. Which supported the hypothesis.”**
    - ✓ **Reword to add a subject or predicate, or connect the clause to the preceding sentence**
- **Verb tenses**
  - **Present tense to describe current states of affairs, circumstances**
  - **Past tense to describe completed actions, past circumstances**

## Mostly language (grammar, syntax, and spelling) problems

- **Spelling problems**

- **Homographs: words spelled the same, sound different, different meaning**  
Examples: lead (guide, metal); bass (voice, fish); does (performs, deer)
- **Homophones: spelled differently, sound the same, different meaning**  
Ex: read/reed; by/buy; sight/site/cite; rain/rein/reign; there/their/they're
- **Confusable words**  
Ex: affect/effect, advice/advise, adapt/adopt, and many more!
- **Words with multiple meanings**  
Ex: knot, bank, fine
- **Irregular verbs (is, was, were; go, went)**
- **Irregular noun plurals: mouse, mice (but not house, hice)**
- **Phonemic spelling (“meens” for “means;” “fotograph” for “photograph”)**
- **Typos: missing letters, letters in the wrong order, added letters**
  - ✓ A word may be correct in one context and misspelled in another
  - ✓ Spell checkers will not catch those!

## Mostly language (grammar, syntax, and spelling) problems

- **Figures of speech, slang, allusions, idioms, neologisms**
  - **Figures of speech: metaphors, similes – intrinsically ambiguous**
    - ✓ **Example: “Replication is the lifeblood of science”**
    - ✓ **In what ways might this be true or false?**
  - **Slang: ambiguous, because it depends on time and place**
  - **Allusions: ambiguous, because they assume relevant knowledge**
  - **Idioms: ambiguous, because they are often culturally-dependent**
  - **Neologisms: invented words not easily understood**
- **Undefined abbreviations, acronyms**

## Mostly style problems

- Reference citation placement – often unclear connections to content
- Reference formats – in the text, in the reference list
- Paragraph indentation – usually at least a centimeter
- Hedged words (in quotation marks) – lead to ambiguous readings
- Inclusive, non-sexist language – becoming the common usage
- Text justification – prefer flush-left
- Nested, back-to-back parentheses – generally, don't use this format
- Numbers to begin sentences -- use number words

## Mostly logical problems

- Problem words: cause, prove
- Anthropomorphizing nouns (e.g., “the results found that...”)
- Pilot study vs. pre-test
- Ambiguous synonyms – use the same word for the same concept

## Writers write

**It isn't easy for anyone!**

...even native speakers

...even professional writers

**YOU ARE IN GOOD COMPANY!**

**Build regular, specific writing time into your schedule**

**Outlines help keep your writing projects on track**

**If it's important to you, you'll do it**

**Writers revise...and revise...and revise**

***NEVER, EVER SUBMIT A FIRST DRAFT!***

**Even for skillful writers, "good enough" ISN'T!**

**I rewrote the ending of *Farewell to Arms*, the last page of it, 39 times before I was satisfied.**

*Ernest Hemingway*

**Don't depend on the journal editor to polish your writing – submit your BEST**

**BUT DO GET HELP AS YOU NEED IT**

**...from sympathetic colleagues**

**...from professional editing services**

## Writers study writing

Study grammar, spelling, sentence structure, organization, etc., etc.

Build your vocabulary

Study great writing – beyond reading it, ask what makes it great as writing

## Writers share their writing

Be willing to take constructive criticism

Ask colleagues to read and discuss your writing with you

Volunteer to read their work in return

Use editorial services for special assistance

## Writers talk to readers

Here, I have in mind potential editors and reviewers

Become known to your research community – NETWORK!

## Writers think like readers

Take the perspective of your intended reader when you write

Particularly important for multi-disciplinary journals



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