Assigning Manuscripts

As editor of this journal I have great sympathy for newspaper cartoonists. They must deal with a good deal of pressure because they must come up with a new comic strip every day without a break. Not only must they produce the strip, but they are supposed to be funny or interesting every day. I don't have it nearly as hard. Still, there is an urgency in keeping up with the flow of papers that arrive at SPIE. Over the past few years, the number of submissions to *Optical Engineering* during a year averages about 900 manuscripts. So, almost every day, when I open my web browser, there are three to four new papers on my digital doorstep. It should come as no surprise, but I do not read (cannot read) every word of every paper. Instead, I rely on a series of steps to make the following decisions:

1. Is this paper appropriate for *Optical Engineering*?
2. Does the paper tell me why it is significant, so that I or other nonspecialists can understand its importance?
3. Is it written so that, first, the reviewers and then the readers can understand it?
4. Based on its contents, which Associate Editor would best understand the paper, assign appropriate reviewers, and render a decision?

The title gives me the first clue as to the area and content of the paper. It also lets me evaluate its authors. As I noted in an editorial some years ago ("How To Make Yourself Invisible," July 2003), many authors apparently have no idea how to describe their own work and make it interesting to others. (If you are reading this editorial as part of the current issue and the table of contents is easily accessible, scan the titles and note the titles that make you want to look at the abstract or dismiss the paper out of hand.)

Having assessed the title, I read the abstract. Although some authors are careless about their abstracts, it has been my experience that, on the whole, most do a reasonably good job of summarizing their research. There are, of course, those who fill this important section with acronyms and technical details unfamiliar to most readers. Considering that the ultimate objective of an author is to get his or her paper read and cited, it is sad to see an abstract that is so detailed that the reader cannot grasp the purpose and point of the paper.

If I still have no idea if the paper is important, I read the introduction to the paper. There, if no other place, an author should have stated the problem that he or she is trying to solve and why their approach is important. If an author cannot tell the reader why this work is important, why should anyone read any further?

If I am convinced that the paper may be relevant, I skip to the conclusion to see if the results are significant enough to merit publication. If I cannot tell, I will send it on to an Associate Editor, who has considerably more expertise in the field. Also, I take a look at the figures to verify that they are neither too complicated nor too poorly drawn to be understood. Finally, I check the list of references to see if they cover a range of sources. I become concerned when I see that the only papers cited were written by the author and his or her collaborators. Armed with an understanding of the paper and some idea of its significance, I can choose the appropriate Associate Editor from the Board of Editors.

So, based on my regular scrutiny of what seems to be a neverending flow of manuscripts to my doorstep, may I suggest that authors can help themselves by carefully constructing the title of the paper and choosing the keywords, by writing the abstract for most optical engineers instead of your colleagues, and by telling us all, editors, reviewers, and readers, why we should take the time to read your paper.

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Editor