3. CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD JOURNAL ARTICLE

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INTRODUCTION

To formulate the characteristics of a good journal article is difficult. There is no absolute standard or universally accepted formula by which one can be guided. Personal opinion enters so largely into the consideration that positive assertions by anyone may very properly be questioned. So much depends upon the subject, the author, the reader, the journal, the period of publication, and the available space and funds, all of which are subject to wide variation, that what would be rightly regarded as desirable characteristics of a journal article under certain conditions might not be so regarded under other conditions. This is particularly true if the article is judged by different persons.

The personal element of the problem may therefore be given first consideration. Who is to judge a finished journal paper and say whether it is good, poor, or indifferent? The first, and unquestionably the severest, critic should be the writer himself. Human nature being as it is, however, and the limitations of time playing such an important rôle, it can not be expected that the busy writer will always subject his work to cold-blooded critical scrutiny. The second critic is the journal editor or editorial committee who aim to pass impartially upon the manuscript from the triple standpoint of the author and his problems, the journal and its financial difficulties and space limitations, and the subscriber, who has a right to expect that reasonably rigid standards will be maintained in the articles published in the journal for which he is paying. The third critic is the reader. He is commonly the most severe of all. If the writer will bear in mind that every reader of his paper is a potential critic and if he will accordingly take pains to avoid loopholes for attack, his paper will undoubtedly be much stronger.

The process of preparing a journal article is similar in some respects to the building of a house, the author being comparable to the builder who is also to be the owner. There is this important difference, however, between the two finished products—the house and the printed paper. The one may be torn down in the course of time or...