

# Notices

of the American Mathematical Society

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## Editorial

# Expository Mathematical Writing

*The truth is that the reader is always right.*  
—Patricia O’Conner

Six years’ experience for the new *Notices* has brought into focus a pair of basic guidelines for the kind of expository mathematics writing that appears in the *Notices*. These guidelines are clear in retrospect, but they are not so obvious ahead of time. They represent a distillation of the comments of the editorial board concerning submissions over the years.

The first guideline was already recognized by Hugo Rossi’s 1993 committee that recommended how the *Notices* should be changed: *Each article should be addressed to a particular audience*. This is not a new idea in mathematical exposition; many book publishers have for a long time tried to indicate just what the audience is for each of the books they publish. In the case of the *Notices*, the target audience need not be all AMS members; the editorial board insists only that the target audience be “large”. The sad fact is this: If an article does not have a target audience, then it may not have any audience at all.

The second guideline is easy to state, less easy to apply: *Eliminate ambiguity*. Ambiguity can occur for many reasons. Perhaps the author had something in mind that many readers will not. Perhaps the author needed to provide another example. Perhaps the author got carried away and wrote too complex a sentence. Perhaps the author used symbols in an explanation when words would have been much better. Perhaps the author could have repeated something just before it was to be used. Patricia O’Conner, in her book *Woe Is I*, which is used by the *Notices* as a guide to writing style, says:

A good writer is one you can read without breaking a sweat. If you want a workout, you don’t lift a book—you lift weights. Yet we’re brainwashed to believe that the more brilliant the writer, the tougher the going.

The truth is that the reader is always right. Chances are, if something you’re reading doesn’t make sense, it’s not your fault—it’s the writer’s....

The fundamental principle is to make things easy for the readers. Which readers? That is where the target audience comes into play. If the author has the target audience clearly in mind, the author should be in a good position to know what needs clarification.

Eliminating ambiguity has many aspects to it. One of these is good grammar. The primary purpose of good grammar is to resolve ambiguities. For example, careless use of “that” and “which” blurs the distinction between hypotheses and remarks, use of dangling participles often leads to quantifiers out of order, and sloppy use of negatives with quantifiers can leave the reader totally confused. Mathematicians who deny the importance of good grammar are not being true to their profession.

Another aspect of eliminating ambiguity is getting every word exactly right. Mark Twain said,

The difference between the *almost*-right word and the *right* word is really a large matter—it’s the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.

Getting one word right is but a single detail. Yet details like this add up. The result of careful attention to seemingly endless details is the kind of high-quality writing that *Notices* readers have come to expect. Let us all be guided by what the *Notices* authors have achieved.

—Anthony W. Knapp

Anthony W. Knapp has now finished his term as editor of the *Notices*. Harold P. Boas of Texas A&M University has been selected as the next editor. Boas will begin his term with the January 2001 issue, and a communication article in the present issue gives background information about him.