

An occasional column, in which Caveman and other troglodytes involved in cell science emerge to share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Messages for Caveman and other contributors can be left at [caveman@biologists.com](mailto:caveman@biologists.com). Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.



## Does the candidate walk on water, or did they sink without trace?

I groan when I get one of these letters. The address on the envelope is a dead give-away – your official titles (all of them), full address and the words in capitals at the bottom: PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL. There is always the outside chance that you've been fired, or given a raise or been promoted, but it is unlikely, because that sort of personal news is usually anticipated and doesn't come from another institution! No, the letter contains a request for an evaluation of someone else for promotion and a raise, if positive, or else for firing if negative. However, as we will see, there are several gradations of 'positive', only the highest of which is considered to be truly positive, and all the rest are tantamount to negative.

I am always very apprehensive when I open these letters. Who is the candidate? Is it someone I know, or is it someone who I have only met once and whose area I do not know well? Is it a friend who is doing well or one who has been struggling? Is it a competitor, or someone whose science I do not like much? Everyone one of these categories will require the same type of letter, but I must steal myself to be fair, impartial and scholarly, regardless of the candidate's identity.

I answer all of these letters. I consider it an implied 'negative' not to do so. Even if you simply do not have time, a non-reply may be construed as "Oh, he probably didn't think that the candidate should be promoted and, therefore, would have had to write something negative – chicken." Answering these letters is a form of duty. It is part of being a member of the scientific community. Your evaluation helps to define and maintain a standard for science in the field.

Honesty is very important. If I think that a candidate is truly exceptional, I state it. If, on the other hand, I believe (and can support) an opinion that the candidate is not up to standard, I state it. If one writes the same letter for everyone, regardless of his or her merit, that will become your standard as perceived by others. Then, when the time comes really to support a candidate for promotion, your letter will be viewed with less credit – "Oh, he always writes this kind of letter for everyone, positive or negative. Discount it."

The evaluation usually has several categories.

*How well do you know the candidate?* This is an easy one, requiring a short recitation of your interactions with the candidate (same area of research, joint service on review panels, scientific meetings, etc.). If I only know the candidate through our overlapping scientific interests, I state so. However, it is best to leave out events such as the

time you spent in jail together for being 'drunk and disorderly' or for 'vagrancy' whilst hitch-hiking on vacation together. Often, it is good to refer to how your own research interests at this point to give context to your interactions with the candidate.

*What is your opinion of their teaching?* I regard this section as as important as the next one. However, it is always a difficult one to respond to in detail, as almost all of these letters are for a colleague in another institution. Therefore, you will probably not have direct evidence of their teaching skills. However, I find that some reference to their lecturing style at meetings can be an indication of whether the candidate has potential in front of a class of students: did the candidate organize the seminar well, were the data presented in a logical and clear manner, were the conclusions reasonable and supported by the data, did the candidate answer the questions well? Also, it can be useful to mention whether you know any of the graduate students or postdoctoral fellows from the candidate's laboratory and whether they appear to have been well trained.

*What is your opinion of their research?* This is the most important section when the candidate is a colleague in another institution. There are several sources of information about the candidate's research, including the CV and the candidate's description of their research. However, the one that I find very informative is the list of 3–5 publications that the candidate has chosen to highlight as their most

significant publications since their last review. Here is where the 'wheat is separated from the chaff', regardless of how big the candidate's laboratory is or how many grants they have. It is also how it is possible to compare people from different styles of institution and laboratory – a way of equating the 'bang' for the 'buck' (see JCS 113, p. 751). When such a list is not provided, I look though the candidate's CV and pick 3–5 publications that I think are more significant than the others (sometimes this number may be quite low!). I discuss the merits of these papers, identifying why they are, in my opinion, important and significant in the field. I also take this as an opportunity to discuss the quality of the experiments, and how they were described and interpreted by the authors. I do so regardless of the journal in which they were published – because it was published in Cell or Journal of Cell Science does not mean that the work is above reproach or re-evaluation.

*How do you compare the candidate with others in their field?* I hate this question! When a list of individuals is given, the implied request is that you order the candidate in the context of the individuals in that list. When a list is not provided, you are being asked to come up with your own list of the top five individuals in the given field and to rank the candidate accordingly (if they even make the list) – sorry dear colleague, there are three Nobel Laureates and two others ahead of you! When a list is provided, one does not have the luxury of comparing the CV's of each person with that of the candidate (which are

their 3–5 most significant publications?) – not really fair when you need to justify your ranking of the candidate above or below someone else.

*Would the candidate be promoted in your Department/Institution?* I hate this question! How is it possible to respond? If your department or institution is better (yes, I acknowledge there are [big] differences in the quality of departments and institutions), of course the candidate may not measure up. But, in the context of what you know about the candidate's department/institution, he/she should be promoted. This decision depends on the department's senior faculty and the Appointments and Promotion Committee.

I return to the point raised at the beginning about gradations of 'positive'. There is an old adage: "There are two, and only two, types of letter of recommendation: one that says the candidate walks on water, and all the rest." Take this into account when writing. Do not kill the candidate's promotion with faint praise when you want to support it. Words such as 'good' and 'interesting', which you might think are significant descriptors of the candidate's work, are assumed to have less significance than 'outstanding' and 'novel'.

And how long does this letter take to write? It takes me 3–4 hours – yes, 3–4 hours! That is why I groan when one of these letters hits my desk.

**Caveman**

## Cell Science at a Glance

Our new section – Cell Science at a Glance – is included as a poster in the paper copy of the journal and available in several downloadable formats in the online version, which we encourage readers to download and use as slides. Future contributions to this section will include signalling pathways, phylogenetic trees, multiprotein complexes, useful reagents . . . and much more.

We would like to encourage readers to submit ideas for future contributions to this section. Potential Cell Science at a Glance articles should be addressed to the Staff Editor and sent to Journal of Cell Science, 140 Cowley Rd, Cambridge, UK CB4 0DL