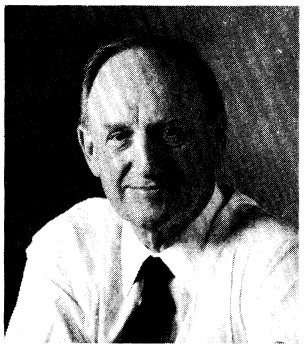

What Is a Reference?

A list of references is a standard part of any scholarly paper, no matter what the field. In some disciplines, it is traditional to have extensive footnotes as well as specific references and a bibliography. In your journal, *Optical Engineering,* we expect the traditional form of references typical of scientific and engineering refereed journals.

The issue of what to reference is not quite so simple as it might seem. It is driven in part by tradition and protocol. In some fields it is viewed as important to list *all* sources in the literature that the author has consulted in the course of the work being reported. In these fields, a significant fraction of the text is taken up with citations, footnotes, references, and bibliographic entries. This particular practice seems to be the norm in the humanities.

In the scientific and engineering disciplines, references serve two purposes. The first purpose is to recognize the important ideas in the literature that relate to the current work being reported—to give credit where credit is due and to recognize the workers in the field for their contributions. It is very important to expose your ideas and the results of your work to others and place the work in its proper context. That should be why we publish. This then, in turn, helps move the field along in a spirit of co-operative inquiry.

The second purpose is to aid the reader of the paper in understanding your work and put it in its proper context. It is the author's responsibility to state clearly what is new in the work being reported and how it relates to and differs from other published work in the field. A good question for an author to ask is what other papers in the field would you like the reader to know about and read in order to understand and appreciate your contributions.

There are several forms of references that cause a significant rise in blood pressure in most editors—and I am no exception! There are two obvious extremes that illustrate the problems. The first is a reference list that has entries only of other papers by the authors and their colleagues. It is very rare that a piece of work has no forerunners or influence from other workers' results. The other extreme is the overzealous and indiscriminate use of references that include everything that could possibly have some relevance. We have all seen and been frustrated by items such as "related work on the technique has been carried out by numerous researchers.[1-101]" These authors may believe that they have given everyone their due, but the readers are left in an impossible situation of not knowing what to read to enhance their understanding of the author's work.

A final requirement for a reference is that it should be available to the reader. Thus, references should be to the open literature and not be closed as classified literature. Keeping the reader in mind, it is incumbent upon the author to provide accurate references with sufficient information so that the reader will be able to find the referred paper. I cannot stress the importance of the author's responsibility enough, since it is very difficult for editors and copy editors to detect errors. I urge all authors to check their references in the original to make sure that they are correct and complete in all their details: a complete list of all authors in the correct order; the current title of the paper; the correct journal; the correct volume and issue number; the first and last page numbers; and the year of publication.

Authors who follow the advice offered here will at least keep the editor and the readers reasonably happy!

Editor's Anecdote

I mentioned last month that I get addressed in a variety of ways. Here is another actual example:

Dear Mr. Thompson (Dr. Thompson?, Brian?, Grand Poo-bah...?):

Enclosed please find our manuscript _____ for review for *Optical Engineering*. Photographs of the authors will be provided upon acceptance.

Sincerely,

_____ , PhD

(Bob?... Humble Supplicant?....)

Associate Professor of _____

Brian J. Thompson
Editor

Optical Engineering Editorial Schedule

August 1995

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