



## Things we all forget (sometimes)

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**Abstract:** Nobody is perfect. We all make mistakes, sometimes in print, yet it is by publication that our observations and ideas reach the widest audience. The possibility that you might have made an error is of little consequence. If it occurs in a journal paper, publish a correction in a subsequent issue. If an error occurs in a book, your mistake can be corrected online. Whatever, publish and move on. The important thing is for you to report your data for the widest readership possible, not to worry about some minor mistake in writing.

“... was dismissed for \*\*\*, Dexter maintained the run-rate with a quick fire \*\*\* before ...”

(Hignell, 2005, p.100).

“Brunch and Pringle (1987) to follow”

(Bromley, 1996, p.305, reference list).

I am concerned with the potential author who is always close to submission, but who doesn't publish. Why? There can be multiple reasons for having such cold feet, such as a dread of the peer review process (Donovan, 2005). Herein, I look at the author who lacks self-belief and shies away from publication because they have a dread of making even a small error in print. The important thing to me is to publish my papers and make a contribution, but there are those who don't publish, for whatever reason, and thus fail to contribute. My purpose here is to dispel one aspect of the fears of non-publishers; that is, do not let the possibility of making an error scare you. We all make mistakes; it is what we get right that is important.

Always take care. Any academic author, even the most revered, can make unfortunate errors or accidental omissions. The danger of co-authored papers is that you might expect your collaborators to identify your mistakes, which is likely, but not invariable, so be extra vigilant, not less so. It was only after publication that Fearnhead and Donovan (2007a) realised that the paper included incorrect stratigraphical information. We corrected ourselves in the same year (Fearnhead and Donovan, 2007b). Fiona collected the fossil, her name was first on the paper, it later became part of her PhD thesis, but she blamed me for the error; what else are husbands for?

We all make mistakes. The more we publish, the more we are likely to make errors in print. The shorter a paper, the less likely we are to make mistakes, which is what made that in Fearnhead and Donovan (2007a) particularly exasperating. Yet, it is the report of a new species of fossil that was important; we corrected an error as soon as we were aware of it.

There are also (alleged) factual errors that may be spotted by readers, who might publish a comment. Sometimes such errors are real, sometimes they are only in the eye of the beholder. I have had comments on my papers that fit both categories (Donovan, 2017, pp.31–34). Published comments can be constructive or critical; replies can vary from the apologetic to the brusque. And my favourite reply sums up it all – “Oh, well, nobody is perfect” (Rosholt *et al.*, 1963).

But what happens if you make a boo-boo in, say, a book, where a correction is not easily published? Once upon a time books might have had a slip bound in for an erratum (Fig.1).

## ERRATA.

Page 18, line 17, for river on the road ..... read river or the road.

„ 52, „ 9, „ Argnes ..... „ Arques.

„ 60, „ 2, „ Mamfold..... „ Manifold.

„ 61, „ 24, „ Cessbury ..... „ Cissbury.

„ 69, (note), „ of the thirty-three cases ... „ of thirty cases.

Appendix III, *ad l* Pole-cat (*mustela putorius*), Cresswell.

**Figure 1:** A short erratum bound into Pennington (1877) before the first page of text [author's personal copy]. This methodology is outmoded in 2025.

Even in these days of print on demand, I doubt if we could return to such a method. Perhaps now such errors could be published online. Deal with it by the easiest method. This is scientific publication, not religious self-flagellation.

I sympathise with both Hignell (2005) and my late colleague Richard Bromley (1996) for the minor glitches in their books that appear at the top of this note. That is what they are, just minor (albeit galling for the authors), and I highlight them here to illustrate what can sneak past even the most attentive of proof-reading authors. They happened, they are obvious, and they might easily have been corrected if spotted. For example, the numbers omitted by Hignell were 29 and 25, respectively, gleaned from p.102 of the same book. Whether the subject is sport, science or whatever, we are all capable of omitting the obvious.

So, what is my take-home message? Be careful when writing, obviously, but stay on an even keel. If a mistake is made in print, it can be corrected. This is true of all hiccups in the publication process. Do not be scared off by such possibilities. They are not an excuse for self-flagellation. Instead, publish any corrections – there will likely be none – and move on. The important point is to publish your paper or book, not keep it hidden. To repeat my view from an earlier publication:

“Communicate your own fascination and excitement in your special interest in your papers ... Have fun.”

(Donovan, 2005, p.100):

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