

The Stony Path to Publication, as reflected in annotated citations

Sami K. Solanki

Invention is 1% inspiration and 99% transpiration.
Thomas A. Edison, inventor

1. B.U.T. Human: in preparation

Only a vague idea of dubious quality exists so far and nothing has actually been done yet, but a prospective paper can be (self-)cited all the same.

2. B.U.T. Human and A.N. Angel: *N.A.Tu.Re.* to be submitted

A.N. Angel, an undergraduate, has now turned up and has toiled away day and night for the last six months to produce some reasonable results from that initial, dubious idea based on assumptions which are about as solid as fresh jelly. The first author has constructively spent the mean time at conferences at exotic and scenic locations, having developed a weakness for those with particularly lavish conference dinners. Oh yes, he has also done some hard thinking to decide on the journal to submit the paper to once it is written. Only the best will do, of course, so he has decided on the Journal for Nice And TrUe REsearch, abbreviated N.A.Tu.Re. His contribution is, therefore, quite sufficient for him to place his name first.

3. B.U.T. Human and A.N. Angel: *N.A.Tu.Re.* to be submitted

A.N. Angel has long since left the institute (and as a result is blissfully ignorant of what shall follow), but the first author has so far had no time to write up the results in the form of a short paper. He talks of being overworked, but could the real reason be too many conference dinners? Remember those exhausting after-dinner speeches and the after-effects of excessive food and drink.

4. B.U.T. Human and A.N. Angel: *N.A.Tu.Re.* submitted

With large helpings of fuzzy logic, a rigorous disregard of the laws of physics, a ruthless suppression of any nagging doubts, and a careful choice of words, the paper has finally been completed and the great day of submission has arrived. With an immense sigh of relief the manuscript has been sent off to the editor. A.N. Angel, who alone is well acquainted with the noisy and unreliable data, the inherent numerical instability of the analysis procedure, and the hopelessly muddled interpretation, was against publishing the “results”, but as the poet so rightly wrote: “Fools rush in where angels dare not tread.”

5. B.U.T. Human and A.N. Angel: *N.A.Tu.Re.* to be rejected

A rarely used citation. At this stage only the referee knows this current status and he is not likely to quote it in this form, since it would reveal his closely guarded identity.

6. B.U.T. Human and A.N. Angel: *N.A.Tu.Re.* rejected

Another rare citation. The rejection first plunged the first author into a state of deepest dejection, followed by manic outbursts of anger and a wild, but fruitless search for the identity of the referee.

7. B.U.T. Human and A.N. Angel: *N.A.Tu.Re.* resubmitted
 In his heart of hearts the first author knows that this paper is not really worth the pulp for the preprints, but, after all, he spent a whole week writing it. Sufficient reason for writing a scathing letter to the editor demanding another, more competent, referee. Most scientists prefer to stick to the tried and tested “submitted” at this stage.
8. B.U.T. Human and A.N. Angel: *N.A.Tu.Re.* to be re-rejected
 Here we go again. The second referee appears to be as heartless *and* as incompetent as the first (from the authors’ point of view).
9. B.U.T. Human and A.N. Angel: *N.A.Tu.Re.* rejected for the second time
 What comment can do justice to the feelings of the first author now? With a heavy heart he decides to forget about getting this paper published.
10. T.H.E. Devil, B.U.T. Human and A.N. Angel: *J.U.N.K.* submitted
 Enter T.H.E. Devil, professional name placer on other people’s papers, member of staff at an institute which prefers to remain unnamed, and a friend of the editor of that final refuge for the hopelessly incompetent scientist, the Journal of Utterly Needless Knowledge, abbreviated J.U.N.K. Devil spies a good opportunity for advancing the cause of the two unsuccessful authors (poor devils) and (what happy coincidence!) also of himself. The rest of the story is quite straightforward.
11. T.H.E. Devil, B.U.T. Human and A.N. Angel: *J.U.N.K.* accepted
 The acceptance message arrives within hours of submission. A miracle, if we keep in mind just how busy most scientists and editors are. We can only conclude that either this referee was made of Tachions, or, perish the thought, that this paper was never sent to a referee.
12. T.H.E. Devil, B.U.T. Human and A.N. Angel: *J.U.N.K.* in press
 The proofs have been hurriedly corrected and sent off again. As usual, most of the corrections are necessitated by faults in the submitted manuscript.
13. T.H.E. Devil, B.U.T. Human and A.N. Angel: *J.U.N.K.* **13**, 13
 The article has finally appeared and is already totally obsolete, but although it may fail to advance scientific knowledge, it does add one more entry to the steadily growing lists of publications of each of the authors.

And the moral of the story?

For publication inspiration is best completely replaced by transpiration.

Can there also be another ending?

Why yes, certainly. Just go back two steps and read on below for steps 12 and later:

12. T.H.E. Devil, B.U.T. Human and A.N. Angel: *J.U.N.K.* to be withdrawn
 Yet another of those rarely used citations, which is a pity, really. B.U.T. Human has been suffering sleepless nights. This is not just because of that last conference dinner, where he had unwisely taken a big second helping of the delicious but devilishly heavy pudding. Besides pangs in his belly he is also having pangs of remorse. Should he really destroy his good

scientific name and publish in J.U.N.K.? Could he do such a thing to that young hopeful, A.N. Angel, who has not even had a chance to establish himself yet? Finally he has persuaded himself that only a withdrawal of the article will give him peace of mind.

13. T.H.E. Devil, B.U.T. Human and A.N. Angel: *J.U.N.K.* withdrawn

B.U.T. Human has now sent off the fatal letter to the editor withdrawing the article. Being terrified of the reaction of T.H.E. Devil he has not mentioned this minor detail to that gentleman yet.

14. T.H.E. Devil: *J.U.N.K.* submitted

All for nought. T.H.E. Devil was asked by his old friend, the editor of J.U.N.K., why such an unthinkable step should be taken. T.H.E. Devil briefly and unsuccessfully tries to bring B.U.T. Human to reason. Not entirely disappointed by this result, T.H.E. Devil decides to resubmit it anyway, but only after substantial changes to the article; more precisely, only after substantial changes to the list of authors.

15. T.H.E. Devil: *J.U.N.K.* **13**, 13

After the usual painless passage through the editorial process the article finally graces the pages of J.U.N.K. Devil belies his name by duly acknowledging the two ex-authors for “helpful discussions”.

Postscript: Both B.U.T. Human and T.H.E. Devil apply for a permanent position at a well-known research lab. Surely it comes as no surprise that the one with the longer list of publications gets the job.

Of course, a story like this is totally out of the question these days and can only have happened a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.