Refereeing

What's different about the Monthly?

Articles in the Monthly are supposed to be mathematically correct. We ask “expert” referees to read the articles partly to reduce the chance that we’ll publish nonsense. On the other hand, the author—not the referee—is responsible for the content of the articles. Referees do not serve as boards of certification or as ghost writers for careless authors, but their constructive suggestions are always welcome.

Articles in the Monthly are supposed to be grammatically and stylistically correct. We ask referees to comment on general problems that might be apparent in an article. Again, however, it is the author’s responsibility to write correct English; it is the editor’s responsibility to reject papers that are seriously flawed. The referee can provide help and advice to both, but this is not a primary responsibility.

These are comments that might be made about referees for all mathematical journals. What’s different about the Monthly? The main difference is that we ask expert referees to place themselves in the position of nonexperts and to judge papers as exposition rather than research. Here are some guidelines for making that judgement.

Our goal is that all articles should be inviting to most readers. That doesn’t mean the level of the material is necessarily elementary (even advanced articles can be inviting). Making articles inviting usually means aiming them at the right audience, which ought to be mathematicians who are novices in the subject. For example, authors writing about analysis should think what they would say (on the way to lunch) to the algebraist down the hall, the one who knows complicated things about noncommutative rings but only remembers measure theory from graduate school and colloquia. This is someone who knows mathematics but needs to be reminded about the subject. Doing that reminding (and motivating) is both necessary and worthwhile for articles in the Monthly, even when they have things to say to the experts as well. Of course, that’s hard work.

What else is different about the Monthly?

- Articles in the Monthly don’t have to include complete proofs of results, and proofs may be informal rather than in Satz-Beweis format. Omitting all the details of a proof can be a good sign, not a bad one. Exposition does not mean explaining research; it means illuminating ideas.

- Articles in the Monthly don’t have to present the most general version of a result. Indeed, in most cases they should do just the opposite: find the right special cases or the right simplifying assumptions to make the material accessible. Clarity is the goal, not generality.

- Articles in the Monthly don’t have to be new material in any sense. Monthly articles often contain no original research (although there’s no rule against it). And well-known results presented in a clever way can be great exposition. The Monthly shouldn’t publish material that most readers find familiar and trite; on the other hand, publishing a short note on a new way to look at bifurcated wangles, even though there was a paper on the subject in the 1937 Monthly, is good journalism. It serves both our readers and the mathematical community.

- Giving reasonable credit to other people is a matter of good scholarship, but the idea of credit can get out of hand. (There are letters to the editor complaining about Notes that discuss the mean value theorem without giving credit to Snord, who also discussed it fifteen years ago in a Monthly article.) Inordinate concerns about credit, and long lists of references, should be avoided.

- There aren’t any articles submitted to the Monthly that are “too elementary” or “too advanced.” An article may be too elementary or too advanced to be interesting to some Monthly readers, but the primary reason an article isn’t suitable is that it’s not interesting. There’s a difference. The key question is, “If I curled up in the evening with the Monthly, would I be tempted to read at least part of this article?” If the answer is yes, then chances are that we want to publish it.