

A Suggestion for Improving the  
Information Content of Authors'  
Names.

February 11, 1970

In the compilation of a publication as large as the *Science Citation Index*® it is inevitable that one encounters problems of ambiguity in the names of authors. Since it is generally the custom of scientific journals to use initials rather than complete first and middle names when citing references, the possibility will occur that two different authors will appear to have the “same” name. In hopes of reducing the number of these ambiguous names, I recently wrote the following letter, which was published in *Nature*(<sup>1</sup>).

Sir,—American scientists cannot have failed to notice the prevalent British custom to use two or three initials along with surnames. Whether this is an intuitive quest for uniqueness in a country where common surnames are employed (for example, D.H.R. Barton) or whether it is deliberate, the value of this practice might well be emulated by American scientists. The more common American practice to drop or not have a middle (second) or a third name is a constant source of difficulty to librarians, indexers, editors, and all those who must use the literature. While A. Kantrowitz is “obviously” a heart specialist (to the cardiologist) and obviously a physicist to the physicists, it is not obvious to many others interested in their work which one is the author of a paper appearing in a multi-disciplinary journal.

Scientists who are just now embarking on their careers would be well advised to measure the information content of their names as they appear in indexes such as *Index Medicus*, *Physics Abstracts*, *Biological Abstracts* and *Science Citation Index*. They can easily prevent a lot of needless ambiguity and confusion.

Yours faithfully,  
Eugene Garfield

Contrary to general belief, this problem of ambiguity in authors' names does *not* affect the basic usefulness of the *SCI*® for the propose of determining who has cited a given scientific article. The reason for this is simple. Even though the name and initials may not be unique, the journal, volume and page reference for the article in question is quite unique. The combination of the latter with the author's name unambiguously identifies the cited article.

On the other hand, when using the *Source Index* of the *SCI* to locate articles written by a particular author it is not possible to differentiate between two different men with the same name and initials, unless one knows something about their fields of work. For example, in each annual *Source Index* one can find about 20 articles by J. Smith. Since they appeared in a variety of journals from the life and physical sciences, one assumes there is more than one J. Smith. These gentlemen would be well advised to follow the example of our British colleagues and adopt one or more middle initials (the letters I, O, Q, U, X, Y, Z would be the best choices). There would then be little opportunity for ambiguity. Will all the real J. Smiths please stand up!

- (1) Garfield, E. British quest for uniqueness versus American egocentrism. *Nature* 223 (5207), 763 (1969).
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