

An open letter to L.Bass.

Dear Sir,

I have a problem. Last June I read an article in the Comm.ACM, and the more I read it, the more disgusted I became, because it was so poorly written that it was impossible to understand it. Eventually I wrote four pages of comments. After reading them, I decided that they were too grim for further distribution, and I kept my comments in my strictly personal file.

In this letter I shall only analyse the title of the article: "Analysis and Performance of Inverted Data Base Structures".

a) The title is ambiguous, because in "Inverted Data Base Structures" it is unclear whether the Data Base or the Structures are Inverted; the ambiguity is far from resolved in the article itself.

b) The title is nonsensical, because Inverted Data Base Structures don't "perform".

c) The title is wrong, because it does not express that the main object of the "Analysis" is the "Performance", and not the "Inverted Data Base Structures" themselves. If I have understood the author's intention well --of course I doubt!-- "The Influence of file Inversion upon Retrieval Costs" would have been a much better title.

The linguistic quality of the title is, alas, fairly representative for the linguistic quality of the paper itself.

The problems of data base management are frighteningly difficult: the purely technical problems --which no one but an unknowledgeable fool underestimates-- are compounded by the constraints of continuity: the show must go on! It is also patently obvious to me that we shall never concoct in time an acceptable --I don't say: ideal-- solution to these problems, unless we recognize and admit their difficulty and stop approaching them with tools that are hopelessly inadequate. By now I know that sloppy use of language is, in view of the size and complexity of the problems, an unmistakable symptom of inadequacy. To be as precise as we possibly can is not a luxurious mannerism that the academic prig can afford himself in his (supposedly!) sheltered environment; for people facing the problems of "the real world" it is a Must. In view of the complexity of their problems it is ridiculous to hope that they can come away with anything less than an exceptional mastery of their native tongue, and it saddens me to see people vainly trying to sharpen a pencil with a blunt axe.

My problem is how you could open your review CR 28,995 (Computing Reviews, October 1975, 442-443) with the words "This well-written paper...". How could you?

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