

## EDITORIAL

## Comment–Reply Exchanges: Trends and Suggestions

The goal of this editorial is to 1) encourage authors to write American Meteorological Society (AMS) journal “comment” and “reply” (hereinafter Comment and Reply) article types and 2) provide guidance for the Comment and Reply process for AMS journals. A decline in Comment–Reply exchanges for *Monthly Weather Review* (*MWR*) and the *Journal of the Atmospheric Sciences* (*JAS*) was noted by Errico (2000), and Schultz (2008) reported only seven Comments on *MWR* papers from 2003 to 2008 (despite >1000 AMS scientific papers being published during that time). A similar declining trend is noted herein for *Weather and Forecasting* (*WAF*).

Comments—in some form—have been published in AMS journals since the late 1800s (Monchamp 1899), but not all Comments have been associated with a Reply. As far as we know, the first Comment–Reply exchange was published in 1946 (Maynard 1945, 1946; Wexler and Swingle 1946). An AMS journal search (<https://journals.ametsoc.org/>) on 8 February 2023 indicated 1179 results for “Comment” (without “Reply”) while only 904 results appeared for “Reply” (without “Comment”), yielding 1.3 times as many Comments as Replies.<sup>1</sup>

The journals averaging at least one published Comment per year are the *Journal of Applied Meteorology and Climatology*, *JAS*, the *Journal of Physical Oceanography*, the *Journal of Climate*, *MWR*, and *WAF* (Fig. 1). Moreover, some authors have authored or coauthored numerous Comments (e.g., B. Glahn authored 15 between 1969 and 2019 and C. Doswell authored 13 between 1980 and 2016). The rest of this editorial focuses on trends and suggestions for *WAF* Comments.

Specifically, for *WAF*, there has been a downward trend in Comment–Reply exchanges since *WAF*'s inception in 1986, with no Comments published from 2017 to the present (Fig. 2)—six consecutive years without a Comment. This is consistent with the findings of Errico (2000) and Schultz (2008), and with a similar analysis of other AMS journals (not shown). Prior to 2017–22, the longest period without a Comment was two years (1986/87 and 1995/96). This recent decline in Comments occurred in spite of page charges being dropped, starting with Comments submitted after 15 June 2015 (G. Whitaker 2023, personal communication); page charges for Replies were dropped in April 2012. Clearly, removing page charges had no apparent effect on increasing the Comments written for *WAF*.

There are at least four possible reasons for the recent, dramatic decline in *WAF* Comments. First, it might be that a Comment does not count for some authors as much as an AMS “article” type (hereinafter Article) does in terms of credit toward productivity in academic or research career advancement. In these situations, time would be more fruitfully spent working on original research and publishing of traditional Articles. A second possible reason for the decline in Comments is that people might have become hesitant to get involved in contentious exchanges that are published in a professional journal and, thus, become available for all to see. Along these lines, some junior authors may be hesitant to submit a Comment because of the career implications of arguing a scientific difference of opinion against a more established colleague. Ultimately, it is the chief editor's role to adjudicate these exchanges and ensure that divisive discourse is minimized. Third, given an increasingly busy society (e.g., with constant demands for our attention), potential authors of Comments might be reluctant to carve out time in their busy schedules to write a Comment. Indeed, some of the *WAF* editors have heard phrases similar to the following: “I'd really like to write a Comment on that Article, but I just don't have the time.” And fourth, some of the would-be commenters possibly are posting their comments online in social media (e.g., Twitter) because it is quick and easy—therefore bypassing the formal Comment–Reply process. Although this is one way of sharing opinions, these comments fall short of being published as part of a peer-reviewed journal and are not included in the permanent record (i.e., online comments can be changed, deleted, or lost).

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<sup>1</sup> The searches for Comment (without Reply; [https://journals.ametsoc.org/search?access=all&f\\_0=title&f\\_1=title&o\\_1=NOT&q\\_0=Comment&q\\_1=Reply](https://journals.ametsoc.org/search?access=all&f_0=title&f_1=title&o_1=NOT&q_0=Comment&q_1=Reply)) and Reply (without Comment; [https://journals.ametsoc.org/search?access=all&f\\_0=title&q\\_0=Reply](https://journals.ametsoc.org/search?access=all&f_0=title&q_0=Reply)) are given here for ease of reproducibility.

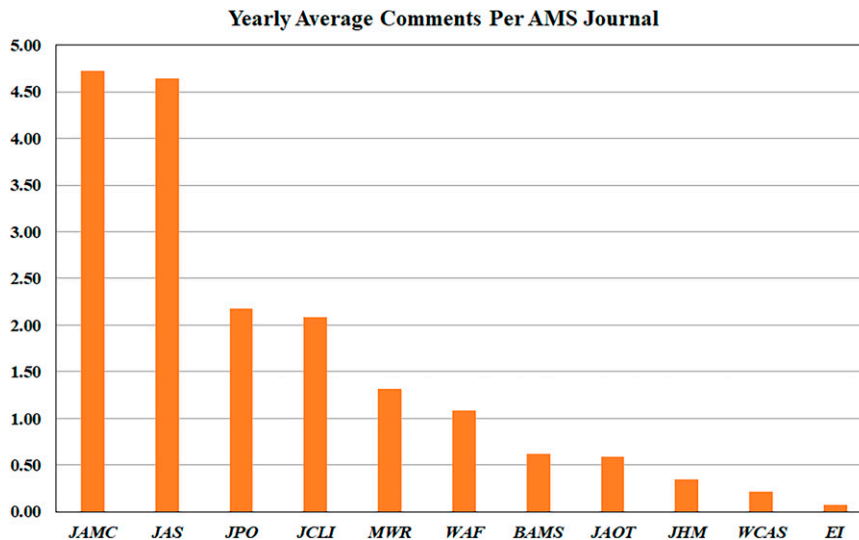


FIG. 1. Number of Comments per AMS journal normalized by years of journal existence (not including 2023) based on a search from 8 Feb 2023. The full journal names are listed at <https://www.ametsoc.org/ams/index.cfm/publications/journals/>.

Yet a fifth reason for the decline in Comments might be related to the mystery of the process of initiating a Comment for a particular Article (Schultz 2009, p. 9). Schultz provided a succinct summary of what happens after a Comment is submitted to a journal, but perhaps some additional background is needed for what happens prior to that. Here are the steps we suggest when considering a Comment:

- 1) Determine if the Article in question has some points that need to be clarified, expanded upon, or corrected.
- 2) Consult the AMS *WAF* guidelines (<https://www.ametsoc.org/ams/index.cfm/publications/journals/weather-and-forecasting/>) and Schultz (2009, p. 9) for details about the Comment–Reply process. This will prepare you should you decide to write a Comment. Although the AMS states Comments “should be submitted within 2 years of the publication date of the original article,” the

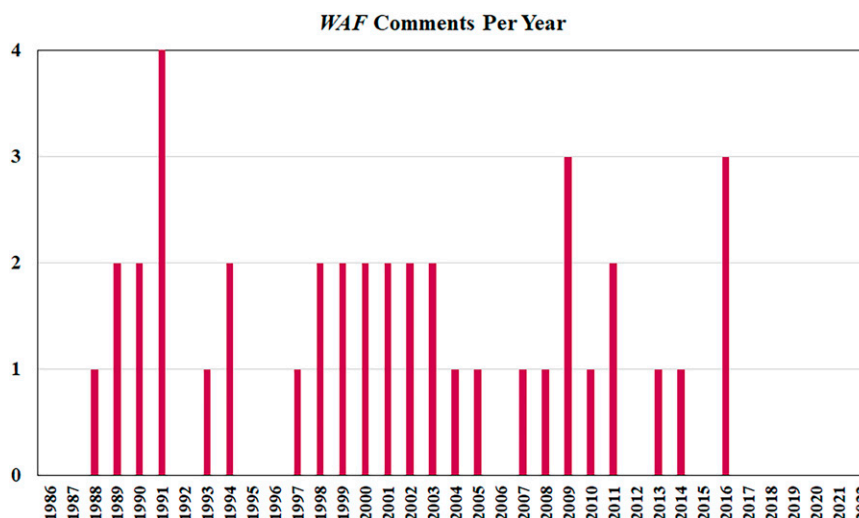


FIG. 2. Number of *WAF* Comments published per year since inception based on a search from 8 Feb 2023. The correlation between year (time) and Comments per year is 0.26, and the slope of the linear fit to the data represents a decrease of  $\sim 1$  Comment over the period.

- chief editor has the authority to waive this limit (e.g., [Emanuel 1985](#); [Benjamin and Moninger 2016](#)).
- 3) Consider contacting the corresponding author of the Article in question and start a conversation with her/him. This is a best practice, but not required. Performing this step likely will lead to one of the following outcomes:
    - (i) The author discovers a mistake and decides to write a corrigendum (used to address errors in an already published Article). There is no need for a Comment in this case.
    - (ii) You determine that your concerns are not as substantial as you initially thought, and you are satisfied with the clarification provided to you by the author. Again, there is no need for a Comment in this case.
    - (iii) You and the author have fundamentally different perspectives about your concerns. This rises to the level of the need for a Comment. You might inform the author of your intent, but that is not required.
    - (iv) You and the author have fundamentally different perspectives about your concerns, but instead of you writing a Comment, you both agree to write a collaborative Article to address these differences. This option is discussed in more detail below.
  - 4) If needed, proceed to write a Comment and submit that to the AMS using the Editorial Manager just as you would when submitting an Article. As a courtesy, you may inform the chief editor of your intentions prior to writing your Comment (required if it has been >2 years since the Article was published). The chief editor will guide you through the process according to the information in step 2.
  - 5) Keep in mind when writing Comments that they should elaborate on—and extend—the science, rather than just addressing trivial items; this can minimize the perceived contentiousness between the authors.

The most likely outcome of steps 4–5 is that your Comment and the author's Reply will be published jointly. However, the author might choose not to reply, in which case your Comment will be published on its own. Indeed, some Comments are straightforward and not contentious and, thus, do not necessitate a Reply (e.g., [Bunkers and Smith 2013](#)). Finally, in some situations, the Comment and Reply could be withdrawn before publication based on mutual agreement of the authors.

Step 3(iv), discussed by [Kahneman \(2011\)](#), is what he calls the “adversarial collaboration.” Kahneman believes the traditional Comment–Reply exchanges are a waste of time, often involving sharply worded critiques and sarcasm. The so-called adversarial collaboration, on the other hand, brings the disagreeing authors together who write a single, jointly authored paper to address their differences. Conceivably, the two disagreeing authors could simply write an AMS Article together that addresses their differences in a collaborative way.


Is investing time in writing Comments a worthwhile use of an author's time? The *WAF* editors think so, in part because it is healthy to have debates about science, and also because some published papers might still need further scrutiny. These three sentences from [Schultz \(2008\)](#) provide further motivation for writing Comments:

Editors know that some manuscripts are published without complete agreement between reviewers and authors, a situation that may be common with regard to new paradigms or controversial topics. The Editorial Board encourages those who have disagreements, amplifications, or additions to previously published literature in *MWR* to submit their comments and engage in public discussion of these topics. Vigorous scientific exchange is a sign of an active discipline.

In conclusion, we hope to have provided motivation for writing more Comments, along with demystifying the process of initiating a Comment and providing a roadmap for a more satisfying experience. Comments offer the benefits of (i) clarifying/correcting statements in the peer-reviewed literature and (ii) encouraging healthy debate for the larger scientific community in a way that is preserved beyond that in the various social media platforms.

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