What do we mean by the directions “cranial” and “caudal” on a vertebra?: response to reviews and editorial comments

Mike Taylor

First, I would like to apologise that it has taken so long — almost a full year — to handle these reviews, which were sent on 3rd January 2020. I am sure everyone involved understands that this has been a strange and difficult year. Nevertheless, the delay is entirely my own fault, and I apologise.

# Comments on review 1 (Ryan D. Marek)

XXX Marek’s multiple comments on the structure of the manuscript are noted, and taken into account (along with those of the other reviewer and editor) in the radical restructuring of the new version of the manuscript.

XXX We also accept his point that the tone of the original submission is not to everyone’s taste. While we do not necessarily agree that more formality is always better, we recognise that there is a balance to be struck, and that the first version of this manuscript erred too far in the direction of informality. We have accordingly reworded the prose extensively.

XXX As recommended, we have greatly reduced the role in the new manuscript of the account of how the question of orientation came to our attention, agreeing that “making it the focal point of the submission is detrimental to the paper” and that the more substantial questions of anatomical meaning are a stronger focus for the introduction. However, the disagreement with Mannion in the reviews of the *Xenoposeidon* revision remain of interest as a concrete example of how the ideas in the present manuscript are significant, so the account is retained in a reduced form in the discussion — as also advocated by Reviewer 2 (see below).

XXX We have regretfully removed the Saegusa and Ikeda's (2014: figure 8) illustration, even though it provides a perfect single-figure example of the inconsistency we seek to illustrate, for fear of seeming confrontational. We have substituted less helpful but more inoffensive references to illustrations in our own work.

XXX We have reworked and combined some of the illustrations along the lines that Marek suggests. We have also followed his suggestion to expand Figure 4 to show additional long cervical vertebrae as well as the *Giraffatitan* C5 that is our principal example.

XXX We note the comments on colour-blindness, and have checked that where colour is used to distinguish lines with different meanings, those lines are also distinguishable by other criteria.

In general, we have followed the specific comments attached to Marek’s review, but with some exceptions. In particular, we do not agree with the suggestion that expunging the pronoun “we” throughout and substituting passive voice would improve the manuscript. We have changed some instances, but in other clarity is best served by the simpler active phrasing.

We have retained the section on open peer-review, contrary to Marek’s recommendation, as it is important to us and relevant to the origin of the present paper’s core question.

We note that that in the Rating Scale Questions, Marek ticks the “disagree” column for the statements “This article adequately engages with the relevant scholarly literature” and “The literature review was thorough given the objectives and content of the article”. The reason this paper was written is that there *is* no relevant scholarly literature, so we are at a loss as to what Marek intends us to do in response to this scoring. Since Tschopp’s scoring of these questions is neutral, and since Marek does not mention any specific papers that he thinks we should have cited or discussed, we have not been able to identify any changes to make in this respect.

We take Marek’s point that “comparing multiple quantitative measures of vertebral anatomy across a range of organisms/vertebral regions” would be of interest, but we consider this work beyond the scope of the present paper, in which we aim simply to establish definitions.

# Comments on review 2 (Emanuel Tschopp)

XXX Tschopp asks why, in Method 4, we use two copies of the same vertebra, and not two articulated vertebrae. We have expanded the discussion in this section to explain more explicitly why the method is defined as it is.

XXX The point that Method 2 doesn’t necessarily lead to a kinked or jagged neural canal is important, as we now address it in the manuscript.

Measurement of the neural canal cross-section cannot be “corrected using sectioned vertebrae” in general — the point of the present paper is how we can get consistent results using the vertebrae we have, in the condition they are in. “Just section the vertebra” is not always a practical option.

XXX As noted in response to the comments of Reviewer 1, we have revised the structure of the new manuscript along the lines that Tschopp recommends.

XXX We have added a note that Tschopp et al. (2015)’s definition of Character 94 includes a note that a horizontal orientation of the neural canal is used when scoring, though without discussion.

We note that Tschopp would prefer a shorter abstract, but we do not feel it can be significantly trimmed from the present version without losing too much information for it to remain an adequate proxy for the paper. We will therefore not remove the four candidate definition unless coerced to do so by the handling editor.

As suggested, we have modified Figure 4, to include reconstruction lines for the missing ventral portion of the cotyle, drawn from Janensch’s (1950: figures 23, 25) illustrations.

We thank Tschopp for supplying the annotated manuscript with many small errors (typos, etc.) highlighted. We have fixed all of these.

# Comments on handling editor’s summary (Peter Falkingham)

We thank Falkingham for his constructive comments, and agree with most of his criticisms — which we will not address individually here as they largely duplicate and amplify those of the reviewers.

XXX We have removed some of the references to blog-posts as requested. Other are retained, as they properly acknowledge the source of previously published ideas and images. As we note in our in-press chapter in the forthcoming 3rd edition of *The Complete Dinosaur* (Taylor and Wedel in press):

The better blogs have become the online equivalent of conferences: venues for the rapid and relatively informal communication of science, encompassing both review material and novel research. Many science blogs are now recognised as carrying scientifically significant material, often long before it sees formal publication, and this recognition is increasingly conveyed through citation in more formal publications. For example, our own blog, *Sauropod Vertebra Picture of the Week* or *SV-POW!* for short (<https://svpow.com/>) has been widely cited in the formal literature on subjects as diverse as open access, publication costs, study design, the moral dilemma presented by Sci-Hub, media distortions of dinosaur science, zoological nomenclature and the evolution of palaeo-art (e.g., Notton et al. 2011, Anderson 2014, Cross 2014, Heller et al. 2014, Rinaldi 2014, Witton et al. 2014, Bhatia 2015, Pennington 2016, Hoy 2017, Köklü 2017, Curry 2018, Pagnac 2018).

The point about using a consistent left-right orientation for the vertebrae in the illustrations is well taken. We have reworked all the figures accordingly, using mirror-imaging where necessary, and modifying the captions accordingly.

XXX We agree that adding another vertebra to Figure 5, as a second example of how different methods yield different orientations, would be helpful. We have added XXX what?

We have removed the background from the toothpick-method photos, as suggested.

Finally, we note with dismay the growing prevalence of “revise and resubmit” as a verdict on submissions. A paper requiring so much revision that it must be resubmitted as a new offering really has no particular reason to be considered tied to the journal that gave this verdict. In practice, we suspect that this resubmission will be re-reviewed by the original reviewers, showing that the original verdict was in truth Major Revisions. We would prefer that the distinction between these verdicts be preserved.