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AUTHOR Ryan, Michael
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ABSTRACT

The 29 editorial board members of three communications journals were asked to indicate what criteria they used to evaluate and select the manuscripts submitted to their journals for publication. The 16 people who responded indicated six things that they require in manuscripts: a strong introduction that clearly and concisely states the conceptual framework guiding the study; a detailed description of the research method, including its appropriateness for the particular research and the precise ways in which the variables were measured and analyzed; an accurate presentation of results, including information about where raw data and other materials might be obtained; an honest section on the study's conclusions, with explanations of any inconsistencies; a writing style that is clear, concise, accurate, tailored to the publication's style, and free from typographical errors; and a review of research that objectively states research questions, hypotheses, methodology, and results. (Author/RL)

WHAT SOME JOURNAL REFEREES LOOK FOR IN EVALUATING MANUSCRIPTS

By

Michael Ryan
Professor of Journalism
Director of Graduate Studies

School of Journalism
West Virginia University

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WHAT SOME JOURNAL REFEREES LOOK FOR IN EVALUATING MANUSCRIPTS

It's a struggle for some writers to prepare a manuscript for submission to a scholarly journal in journalism and communication. Particularly since there isn't much concrete guidance available to those who want to write.

This paper represents an effort to establish some guidelines for scholars who want to publish.

The guidelines were developed through a survey of 29 randomly selected members of the editorial boards of the Journal of Broadcasting, the Journal of Communication and Journalism Quarterly.[1] Sixteen persons responded, for a return rate of 55.2%.

The sample included seven of the Journal of Broadcasting's editorial consultants, eight of Journalism Quarterly's editorial advisory board members and 14 of the Journal of Communication's consulting and contributing editors.[2] Four of the Journal of Broadcasting's editorial consultants, five of Journalism Quarterly's editorial advisory board members and seven of the Journal of Communication's consulting and contributing editors responded.

Respondents were asked to state in their own words "...the specific things you look for as you evaluate manuscripts in your role as an editorial consultant/advisor." They also were asked:

> ...to mention not only the major things you look for (such as the strength of the research design, the completeness of the overall report, etc.) but also the small things that, when added up, can make a difference between acceptance and rejection (for example, writing style, typos, etc.).

Results clearly indicate that different reviewers use somewhat different criteria as they evaluate manuscripts. And it may be that acceptance or rejection

of a manuscript depends in part on "the luck of the draw." Get one reviewer and the manuscript is accepted; get another and it is rejected.[3]

Introductory Material

At the same time, however, there is some consistency among reviewers. For one thing, most respondents seemed to agree with Phillip J. Tichenor, a member of Journalism Quarterly's editorial advisory board, who said:

> The first element that most reviewers look for, in my experience, is a statement of the problem and of the perspective, or theoretical framework, which is to be employed in studying that problem. Statements of hypotheses should be clear and supported by the theoretical perspective being used and, if appropriate, by previous relevant work.

And most agreed also that the questions addressed should be of some significance. A comment by Nathan Maccoby, one of the Journal of Communication's consulting and contributing editors, is typical:

> I suppose, first of all, I am looking for something which is a contribution to knowledge, even if it is a little one. Even if it is a replication of something that has been previously done, if it is well done and if it is something that obviously needs replication, that I would regard as an addition to knowledge. I hope it has some theoretical interest and importance because that would make it somehow more generally interesting and applicable and useful.

It is important for authors to avoid trivial questions in their research. But authors must do more than simply pick worthwhile topics; they must know how to convince others that the topic is worthwhile. This can be done through a solid literature review. As Ivan Preston, a member of Journalism Quarterly's editorial advisory board, said:

> One more thing I'd add as advice to authors: always go quickly, after a proper introduction, into an explanation of what your article contributes--what it covers that has not been covered before. Quickly summarize the existing literature to show that knowledge has been carried so far and no further, and then show how your contribution extends knowledge further in such-and-such precise way. This is where readers assess the worth of research, and authors should assist readers in doing so, and in fact do it for them.

A good literature review will not only help a scholar justify the research question he or she is studying, it also will help put his or her study in context. It will help the writer meet a criterion for historical studies specified by Christopher H. Sterling, one of the Journal of Broadcasting's editorial consultants, who said: "I look for some connection to a current audience--why should we care about this event, or trend, or person today? What does this event tell us about present day policy or events?"

A well-done literature review must be based on the best available source material, according to Richard A. Schwarzlose, a member of Journalism Quarterly's editorial advisory board:

> Students are often confined to library collections and the inevitable reliance on secondary sources. But Journalism Quarterly is the big time in our discipline and the contributors have a special obligation to present the most detailed, accurate, and penetrating source material available. I read a manuscript with the footnotes at my elbow; I want to know at every step where the material comes from.

A thorough literature review also will help an author insure that he or she doesn't do research that already has been published elsewhere.

For Judith Beinstein, a consulting editor for the Journal of Communication, accuracy is as important as thoroughness. "I also note [an author's] interpretation or use of previous literature," she said. "If, for example, much of his argument depends on several past studies, I want to be sure his explanation of those studies is accurate."

Methodology

A scholar who has a question worth asking must select an appropriate methodology to answer the question. Most respondents seemed to agree with Vivian M. Horner, an editorial consultant for the Journal of Broadcasting, who "...would like to see a research design which allows the maximum rigor permitted by the question (and I confess to a suspicion that there is an inverse relationship between the importance of the question asked and the degree of rigor possible)."

But what exactly should an author say about a research design? Some reviewers look for answers to some specific questions as they read articles submitted for possible publication. Questions asked by Roger Wimmer, an editorial consultant for the Journal of Broadcasting, include:

> Is the research method used correctly, and is it accurately described? (This is a major problem in many research studies intended for publication.) Would another statistical procedure be better suited for the research question? Has the author violated any assumptions or procedures of a statistical method?
>
> Is the sample explained in detail? Could another author duplicate the sample? Is the random selection explained well?

And Hugh M. Culbertson, a member of Journalism Quarterly's editorial advisory board, seeks answers to these questions:

> Is it clear just how variables are measured? I like to see at least a couple of sample items from a large index, with clear

explication of how scoring is done. I find this to be a common problem area....

Do the operational definitions measure what they are presented as measuring? Predictive and/or construct validity is seldom established for independent variables in our field. Also, some kind of convergent validity with companion measures is seldom established for dependent variables. In light of these points, assessment of operational definitions tends to boil down to an intuitive or common-sense look at "face" validity. (I would suggest that statistical-inference procedures tend to be overemphasized, measurement procedures underemphasized, in mass communication research. The first part of this sentence might be challenged. I don't think the second part could be.)

Results

The main thing these reviewers seem to look for in an adequate results section is accuracy. "I check for accuracy of tables, figures, data," said Rita Wicks Poulos, one of the Journal of Broadcasting's editorial consultants. "They must be accurate. Obviously, an inconsistency in data would require at least a clarification and correction--and reevaluation of the paper."

Authors definitely should check the results section for internal accuracy. Most reviewers surveyed here said they always compare the numbers reported in the tables with those reported in the text and they always total numbers in tables (where appropriate) to make certain the results are what they should be. Substantial inaccuracies in the results section can result in rejection of an otherwise acceptable manuscript:

Authors should be careful to insure their tables are not only accurate, but also necessary. Tables that do not contain important or relevant material

should be eliminated; and authors should insure that tables are presented in the best, most logical and most efficient manner. As Roger Wimmer said: "Editors do not enjoy complex tables and graphs because they cost a lot to produce. Authors should decide whether a table is absolutely necessary; if not, they can include a footnote indicating where the information is available."

Hugh Culbertson maintains that results generally should be reported in such a manner that one can:

(a) Identify what data are pertinent to a priori hypotheses.

(b) Identify what conclusions are supported unequivocally, and what conclusions require some qualification. If qualification is needed, it should be made explicit.

(c) Assess the generalizability of findings. I do not believe a study has to have extremely high generalizability (for example, applicability to the entire nation or world) to be of value. But I do believe that, where generalizability...is limited, the author should discuss the issue. I think it appropriate in survey research, by the way, to present some demographic comparisons between sample data and Census-based population data to establish the adequacy of sampling.

Roger Wimmer mentioned one other matter regarding the presentation of results that authors might consider as they prepare articles for submission:

Is there a footnote indicating where RAW data and other relevant information may be obtained?[4] THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT. Any published research study should contain enough information to allow an independent check of results by another researcher. To date, this has not been followed by many editors, but is gaining in acceptance. This means that authors should include addresses, data archives, or any place where people can get their hands on the data.

> This also has been a problem. I would guess that 99 out of 100 authors would not have their raw data available for other researchers to use. This can only mean one of two things: The research was never completed, or the researcher involved has not followed strict guidelines and is paranoid about others seeing what he or she did....

Conclusions

Reviewers--at least the ones surveyed here--seem to put a high premium on honesty and accuracy in research reports. And honesty and accuracy are as important in conclusions sections as in other parts of a research report. As Vivian Horner said:

> Sometimes even good research designs don't allow you to answer the questions you asked. I like to see an honest admission of that when it happens and a straightforward statement of what may have turned up anyway. Serendipitous findings are often the most interesting. And I find fewer things more tedious than wading through statistical pyrotechnics performed on irrelevant data.

Roger Wimmer seconded Ms. Horner's comments, saying:

> It seems that many authors try to make their study be something that it really isn't. Some authors try to make their article, which may be good, to be something earth shattering. They don't stick with the data they have and often times miss an important small point in an effort to discuss a major point which really doesn't exist.

Two recommendations were made by Hugh Culbertson for improving the conclusions sections written for scholarly journals in communications. For one thing, he said, an author should try to show how results of his or her study dovetail with or relate to results reported in other studies. "Does it fill an existing gap or represent an extension of prior work?" he asks as he evaluates manuscripts.

Furthermore, he asks: "Are practical applications made clear, even if they seem tentative? I think this is more important for Journalism Quarterly, in light of its broad and basically 'applied' readership, than for some other journals."

Finally, Richard Schwarzlose cited as a weakness in some conclusions sections "...the problem too many authors have of overgeneralizing their data, making assumptions about people's motives, expressing or implying a bias which is a more personal than research approach."

Writing

A major problem with some manuscripts is that the authors haven't taken time to read the journal carefully to determine whether that journal is the article's best market and to learn the journal's style.

Failure to tailor a manuscript to the journal suggests, according to Hugh Culbertson, "...that (a) a person hasn't read the journal carefully, (b) he or she has sent the manuscript elsewhere and is sending to the current journal as a second or third choice--clearly not a wise thing to 'telegraph," or (c) both a and b." There is no evidence in this study that failure to tailor an article to the journal will necessarily result in rejection, but a marginal piece that isn't tailored to the journal may not stand a chance.

Almost all of the editorial board members surveyed said they were disturbed about the writing problems evident in many manuscripts, but they apparently would not often reject a manuscript for poor writing alone. "I have not found that writing style is a significant contributor to my recommendation," Charles Winick, consulting editor for the Journal of Communication, said, for instance. But he added: "Very few articles have typos, although I suspect that I would be negatively influenced by any such sign of carelessness on the part of an author."

Ivan Preston made a similar point when he said:

> Of course [article presentation] problems can be solved by rewrite, so I never recommend rejection on such grounds alone. But I also believe that an obscure style may keep me from assessing the quality of a piece's content, so that I am more likely to reject the piece on other grounds.

The message? Take the time to submit a well-written manuscript. That means avoiding what Richard Schwarzlose called a general lack of thoughtfulness:

> A piece must say what it will do, how it will do it, do it, and then say something about what was (or wasn't) done. All too often a piece promises more than it delivers (or perhaps can deliver). Pieces sometimes mysteriously change subject or focus in midstream. Such problems reflect a lack of proper focussing and conceptualizing before and during the writing.

A strong introduction can help a writer keep an article carefully focussed and can help a reader follow a writer through even complex material. But some respondents said strong introductions are rather rare. Ivan Preston's comment is typical:

> I can distinctly observe that the first thing I look for in many manuscripts--or more accurately, the first thing I see--because it jumps off the page at me before there's any conscious effort to look--is that a writer often does a terrible job of introducing his article. It's incredible how many people start out with background comments, which usually play a useful role, and then get around to telling you what their study will encompass only on page three or four. In about two-thirds of the papers I review I generally locate some sentence on one of those later pages which ought to be the very first sentence in the article....

Finally, a writer needs to avoid flimsy footnoting; excessive or unnecessary direct quotation; spelling, grammatical and typographical errors; and torturous and verbose writing. "One can be accurate and detailed in technical writing without being terribly wordy and unreadable," Hugh Culbertson said. "Unfortunately, this takes work which all too many authors seem unwilling to put forth."

Advocacy Research

Some reviewers see the relatively recent rise of "advocacy research" as a major problem with a few manuscripts. Researchers occasionally are quite close to the problems or issues they are studying and they allow their own opinions to enter their articles.

The authors of an article about media coverage of the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in Roe vs. Wade, for instance, described the court's decision as a critical event. And they said:

> It [the decision] followed years, even decades of debate on a significant topic of surpassing moral, legal and political controversy and it dealt directly with one of the most central questions affecting the movement for female equality, namely: to what extent do women have the right to control their own bodies?[5]

The authors failed to point out the question also is central to the pro-life movement, and that the question to those who oppose abortion might be stated as: how long will genocide continue to be practiced against unborn persons?

The point is not that the authors were biased in their research (they may or may not have been) or that they should have explained the abortion controversy in detail. The point is that the one-sided way in which the question was stated indicated a possibility of bias on the part of the researchers.

An indication of bias in a manuscript apparently causes some reviewers to be skeptical of the article. If bias creeps into a report of a study, a reviewer might suspect that bias creeped into the research methods. And few journal referees are likely to recommend publication of an article that indicates the use of biased methods.

Scholars who want their articles published probably should follow the advice journalism teachers often give their students: be as objective and as fair as you can in collecting and reporting information. Try as hard as you can to control your own biases. If you can't control your biases, don't write the story.

Footnotes

[1] The 29 persons were selected from modified lists of editorial board members for each journal. Persons associated with colleges, universities or other agencies outside the United States were excluded because of the difficulties involved in getting materials to and responses from such persons. One member of the Journal of Broadcasting's board of editorial consultants and 56 of the Journal of Communication's consulting and contributing editors were eliminated from the population.

[2] Approximately 25% of each journal's editorial board members (excluding those affiliated with institutions outside the United States) were contacted for this research.

[3] This problem is mitigated to some extent by the fact that most journal editors send manuscripts to at least two different reviewers.

[4] This, of course, doesn't mean that completed questionnaires should be made available to other researchers. As Roger Wimmer pointed out, one would need the permission of each person who filled out a questionnaire before questionnaires could be made available to other researchers. However, summary material and punched cards (without names) could be made available.

[5] John Crothers Pollock, James Lee Robinson, Jr. and Mary Carmel Murray, "Media Agendas and Human Rights: The Supreme Court Decision on Abortion," Journalism Quarterly, 55:544-48, 561 (Autumn 1978), p. 544.