

## What Editors Look For in Submitted Manuscripts:

### Some Insights

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The purpose of this column is to offer some insights to authors on things they can do to enhance the likelihood that their manuscript is accepted for publication, here in LL&M or any journal in the field. Some of these tips may seem obvious or common sense, but based on what many editors and peer reviewers are seeing and talking about, the cliché that “common sense is not so common” seems to be a reality.

### Think About the Venue and Audience

The world of communication has changed dramatically over the past couple of decades. The introduction of listservs, blogs, wikis, chat, twitter, and other social networking environments have opened up opportunities to reach out to the professional community far beyond the journal article or book chapter. However, it is important to realize that different venues have different expectations of writing styles. In general, the world of direct-to-internet styles of communication is less formal than the typical journal article. Twitter and chat actually encourage (or even require) a choppy, highly abbreviated communication style. However, most journal articles are still expected to represent a more formal style of written communication because they create a long term discoverable record of an insight that is speaking to a future audience in addition to current readers. This means that thoughts and information need to be conveyed in complete sentences, rather than a sequence of phrases or sentence fragments. Similarly paragraphs need to consist of more than a single standalone sentence stating an idea. Paragraphs are meant to be written structures that bring together related ideas or provide support to a new idea. This does not mean that every paragraph must open with a topic sentence, be followed by a few supporting sentences, and end with a closing sentence that reiterates the topic sentence. But it does mean that writers need to bring related details together and when you are making a definitive statement or presenting a topic, there should be supporting documentation or context. An appropriate exception to the use of the paragraph is when one wants to use a list or executive summary approach to share information. Both are valid written constructions, but problems come when a manuscript is primarily a sequence of lists broken up by the occasional sentence or two. Often a numbered or bulleted list is most effective in bringing together data or making a series of points.

Along a similar line, it is important to think about the article topic and what journal might be a good fit for it. Does it need to go through scholarly peer review in a journal to give that extra measure of credibility to what it is saying? Too many authors go through peer review because their employer or another authority has said to only submit articles for peer review, particularly at faculty status institutions. However, if an article is stating a philosophical position or

attempting to bring awareness to an issue based on an individual's personal reasoning without drawing from the literature or data, then it is probably not appropriate for peer review. Peer reviewers tend to have expectations about the articles they receive and want to see a research methodology and something definitive and/or innovative come from a data gathering or analysis process. This does not mean one has to do a survey or conduct a focus group to gather data. Data can actually be gathered from the literature or experience, in which case it is the synthesis of the information and the new perspectives that can be drawn from the background information that separates a true research article from a literature review term paper.

One final related issue is the ongoing debate on the use of first person versus third person and active or passive voice in writing. In truth, this is a changing model. When I started writing several years ago, only publications perceived as less rigorous allowed or encouraged the use of first person, but this is no longer the case. You will now see some manuscripts in the leading journals of the field publish a first person manuscript because it is easier to incorporate active voice verbs when you have a clear action subject and it can create a stronger affinity between the author and the reader. The use of third person often requires the use of passive voice which some readers find frustrating and difficult as it may seem to disguise who has actually done what. My recommendation is to look at the journal you are wanting to publish in and see what model the majority of their recent publications use and follow that in your writing. The key is to be consistent within your article and not switch back and forth.

### **Blending New Ideas and Background Content**

The fact that authors are willing to stick their ideas out in writing requires a certain level of confidence in the ideas being worth publishing. As a profession, we can be a very creative group with innovative perspectives and radical ideas. However, one has to be careful about being seen as too disconnected from what has gone on before. There is a general rule of thumb that the difference between an opinion piece and a scholarly work is that the scholarly work will always recognize what has gone before it and reference other works as a foundation to build upon. As a mentor, one misunderstanding I have seen some authors have is a belief that in order to cite a work, you have to be totally in agreement with what the article says and it has to support the manuscript. If one thinks it through, there is a problem with this philosophy. If the cited article says exactly what one is intending to present, then what one is proposing to say is no longer innovative. The alternate perspective is that these writers do not find an exact match to what they were saying and then come back and say there is not anything else published on the topic. In either case, the author is missing the importance of recognizing that similar issues may have been investigated in a different context, or that one is building on or disagreeing with premises raised by others but it is important to recognize this work to give credibility to one's own scholarship.

### **Experiential Case Study vs “How We Did It Good”**

Librarianship is an applied discipline. We enjoy reading about ideas that have been tried in other libraries. In mentoring authors, I have seen first time authors confused over what sets a manuscript apart as a publishable case study model and one that is rejected as simply relating one library's experiences. The difference comes in what one shares as a learning experience

from the process and the author's ability to explore the idea from the context of a different library. This means stepping back from how one did it locally to explore how it might be done somewhere else with different issues and include these considerations, options, and variables. Another aspect of this type of manuscript is the tone and whether one is coming across in a way that brags about how perfectly everything went or actually sharing where things went awry or adjustments that had to be made based on particular unexpected inputs. Another key piece in the acceptable case study model is the followup assessment that shows one did not just write the manuscript the day the new service was launched but actually waited to include data on its effectiveness and sustainability and relate that as part of the results. In many ways, what did not work or go as expected can be more valuable to a reader than what went smoothly. That said, there is a tendency to shy away from writing about failed efforts and we do not often read, "we did this and the library users hated it." This differs from many disciplines that actually expect one to start with a null or negative hypothesis that has to be proven false.

### **Value of Structure**

Without a doubt, the use of word processing software has had a major impact on the publication process. It has made the editing process more transparent with features that track changes and significantly reduced the time to print. But it has also changed the way in which individuals compose words together. The most common complaints received from peer reviewers and the most frequent revision requests revolve around a lack of organization and structure in submitted manuscripts. Too often, the manuscript will read like a stream-of-consciousness, with pieces of information presented in a disconnected manner and often repeated throughout the essay.

In the old paper and pen days the first step to a successful article was to create an outline of the article. Though this approach was not without its own controversy it is a technique that one can still use to lend organization to a manuscript. Submitting an unstructured, rambling, or repetitive manuscript hurts authors. In the best case scenario, it means that reviewers are going to ask for more extensive reviews that will delay the article to getting published. In the worst case, it means that the reviewer cannot understand the key points that are being made and will recommend against publication. Outlining serves a useful purpose in that it forces organization upon the content and brings related concepts together and clearly identifies transitions. It can also help one avoid the trap of forgetting to include something important in the manuscript. Even if one does not want to write to an outline at the start of the writing process, it can be used as an editing, cleanup tool to "check" the organization of the manuscript before submitting it. If one cannot create an outline of the points as one is reading a manuscript, then it will likely be confusing for peer reviewers and editors to read.

Some writers seem to take the approach that an increased use of headings and subheadings in a manuscript sufficiently replaces outlining process. In my opinion, this is only partly true. A heading will help make a clear transition from one topic in the manuscript to another, but if the sentences within a section are disorganized or one repeats content information elsewhere in the manuscript under a different heading, then it still confuses readers. Similarly, if one is more experienced in writing for the humanities and finds it difficult to add headings or subheadings as

many editors request, looking at the outline of the manuscript can help identify appropriate breaks for a heading or subheading; this is another way that outlining can be used as a tool.

### **Finding the “Ready to Submit” Point**

Very few manuscripts are accepted as originally submitted. It is common to go through one or two revisions with editors before getting to the final work. So it is something of a balance to find when one has put enough work into the manuscript that it is ready to send off versus constantly working to the “perfect” manuscript. That said, it is important that a submittal read more cleanly than a first draft and be finished to a degree that the editor or peer reviewer is not distracted away from the content by poor grammar or misspellings. An editor colleague from another journal was recently lamenting about submissions where the author had clearly not run spell check. Current word processing software offers embedded tools to help in this area. One may not always agree with the software recommendations on grammar, particularly for scholarly writing, but at least it will highlight an area as something that needs to be looked at more closely. Along the same line, it can be difficult to distance oneself from a manuscript because one puts so much of oneself and one’s experiences in it. But having someone read the manuscript to get pre-submittal feedback is a good idea. However, it is important to choose someone who has your best interests in mind in that the colleague will give you a frank assessment of strengths and weaknesses of the manuscript. This can be difficult if the reader is a spouse or good friend who may be hesitant to provide constructive criticism.

One last tip in getting the manuscript ready for submittal, make sure to follow the style instructions for the journal. If you cannot find instructions clearly posted, look at recent issues for examples. Most often this translates to citation and references style, such as the Chicago Manual of Style, Turabian or APA. But it can also apply to what information one includes on a title page or in using page numbers or headers/footers. If one is submitting a manuscript for the blind peer review process, it important to have one’s authors and contact information in a way it can be easily separated from the text of the manuscript to support the integrity of the review process. Online submittal systems, which allow for direct peer review of the manuscript, may prefer to receive actual manuscripts without any author information on them, preferring to keep that information as separate metadata in the system. While these latter factors will usually not be cause for a manuscript to be rejected outright, it saves the time of the editors and reviewers and sends a perceptual message that one has submitted the manuscript in a considered and thoughtful way.

In conclusion, there is no magic formula that guarantees a publication being accepted. However, the likelihood that your ideas will get better consideration will be increased by following the tips here. I believe I speak for many editors and reviewers when I say that we welcome your creative, innovative, and inspiring ideas.

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