

## Critiquing Scholarship as Formal Review: The Role and Responsibilities of Readers for Academic Journals

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Central to the success of any academic journal is the quality of reviews submitted by those who serve as readers. The peer review process is a traditional function for almost all academic research-based publications. In turn, academic journals regularly seek out skilled and knowledgeable readers who can perform critical analyses of scholarly manuscripts in ways that contribute to increased readership and highly sought-after rankings. In many respects, reviewers are perhaps the most important element in academic journal publication success. It is on their watch that the primary and most critical manuscript reviews occur.

Thanks to the growing number of online journals today there are more available venues for scholars than ever before. Subsequently, there is a need for more reviewers than ever before. The challenge for editors and authors lies in producing high quality publications that are viewed by peers as having fresh and insightful perspectives on educational problems and that offer readers an entryway into participating in these essentially collaborative professional processes. The role of readers may ultimately represent the most singular and essential component in the success of an academic journal. However, what remains somewhat blurred in the “publish or perish” world of academia

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are the ways in which readers engage in scholarly critique through the submission of useful and productive reviews. How does this occur? How does the process work? What kinds of skills and knowledge are required of readers interested in contributing to the development of published academic work? What do readers need to know about their role, their perspectives and biases, and the expectations of editors relative to their charge?

In my experience serving as editor of *Teacher Education Quarterly* for the past 12 years it has been consistently clear that there is a direct relationship between the quality of the peer review process and the quality of the accepted articles that appear in print in the publication of any given issue of the journal. Over the years I have recruited dozens of professors and doctoral students and contributing authors of *Teacher Education Quarterly* to serve as members of the journal's Panel of Readers. In a similar vein, I reach out to readers of this article to either acquire and/or hone the skills necessary to offer valuable and useful manuscript reviews, or to provide a refresher course, if you will, for those who have served as reviewers over the years. What makes a good review? And, how does a good review contribute to the overall success of an academic publication?

The purpose of this article is, therefore, to describe the various components of a successful review from the standpoint of a veteran journal editor and to encourage, in particular, young scholars to consider, if they have not already done so, becoming active participants not only in the authoring of scholarly work, but also as reviewers in the peer review process that is part of the publication of scholarly journals.

I intend to help clarify the processes associated with the reviewing of scholarly papers for consideration for publication in academic journals. Specifically, I will focus on the role and responsibilities of reviewers of scholarship in the field of theory, research, and practice in teacher education. I will aim to offer present and future readers a thoughtful approach to becoming engaged in the critique of scholarly work at the pre-publication level. I will present a set of guidelines that offer supportive and constructive feedback to authors who have submitted their manuscripts to academic journals.

Recently, at the Fall 2010 California Council on Teacher Education (CCTE) conference in San Diego, Gerri McNenny of Chapman University and I conducted a workshop focused on the role of reviewers as an integral component of the academic publication process. The audience was comprised of both seasoned and junior faculty and doctoral students, including prospective reviewers as well as veteran reviewers. We engaged in identifying and sharpening the skills required in offering useful and

valuable critique of scholarship. Most scholarly journals in the field of teacher education regularly seek out professional colleagues who have a strong interest in participating in this kind of collaborative work. In my role as editor of *Teacher Education Quarterly* I constantly recruited fellow colleagues, doctoral students, and authors who were interested in giving back to the profession their experience and expertise in helping advance others' academic work to the publication stage.

I found that those who offered the most valuable and useful reviews were those who were likely to embrace relational associations with ideas, language, modes of inquiry, and ways of expressing new knowledge. I discovered that those readers who are most successful in terms of advancing others' scholarly work through peer feedback served as models themselves. They are driven by curiosity and inspiration. They are adept at applying new knowledge and making connections between theory and practice. They are engaged in their own reflective practice model rooted in self-analysis and self-assessment. And they have the keen ability to synthesize ideas and knowledge within an appropriately situated literature. I have found that doctoral candidates often make excellent readers. They have a fresh relationship with the existing literature, a hunger for academic success, and are eager to prove they are ready for the rigors and expectations of the professional activities they will be asked to perform both while students and upon graduation. Invariably doctoral candidates and young scholars make excellent and valuable partners in the manuscript review process. This is not to discount the contributions of veteran scholars as readers, for their wisdom from experience as both authors and critical analysts offers editors a wide range of possibilities when trying to match a particular manuscript with a set of readers.

### Developing Relationships

The act of participation in scholarly review is predicated upon a keen sense of interest in social and cultural dynamics and a willingness to engage personally in those myriad possible relationships. There is the relationship a reader has with an editor. How is it that they come to know each other? How do their commonalities and differences intersect around areas of expertise? What are their shared inclinations toward particular styles of writing, affinities toward relevant topics, and familiarity with methodologies? There is the relationship a reader has with the author whose manuscript they are assigned to review. Even though reviews are conducted blind, in that the reader does not know the identities of authors or their institutional affiliations, the dynamics associated with reading another's piece of work and commenting on its

value to the professional audience requires an internal examination of the relationships inherent between scholar and scholarship. A useful and valuable review represents a deep engagement in the relationship the reader makes with the manuscript, and ultimately reflects an extension of the beliefs, perspectives, and practices of the author. In this sense the review is inherently collegial, a shared process of examination and analysis of scholarly work. Good reviews are a sign of readers understanding this complex set of relationships.

### Understanding Parameters

Readers, upon becoming members of the journal review panel, are required to quickly become familiar with the norms and processes generally guided by the editor and the editorial board. Upon selecting someone to serve as a reader, most editors will provide a detailed set of guidelines that offer parameters for participation in this role. Readers must be knowledgeable about submission criteria and acceptance rates. While journals and editors may differ in their expectations of readers and what constitutes an appropriate review, it is critical that readers follow the guidelines set by the editor and editorial board.

Readers and editors will together negotiate terms of service related to the annual number of manuscripts for review. In my experience, I have found that no more than two to three manuscripts per year per reader is optimum. Too many manuscripts for review impinge upon readers' other professional obligations. Too few result in perceptions of a distant and disconnected relationship with the journal. In my experience I have found that cultivating relationships through regular communication with readers only enhances the quality of reviews that will be submitted. We are in the business of education, an inherently normative and ethical profession in which developing and nurturing relationships is at the heart of our mission.

### Guidelines for Reviewers

There are numerous resources available to those interested in learning more about the role and practices associated with conducting peer reviews of scholarly manuscripts. However, I am going to focus primarily on what I have learned over my years working with authors and readers and offer a set of guidelines that I have determined most fundamental to the success of the journal. The following guidelines are not necessarily a recipe requiring a linear approach, moving from step to step, but rather are a set of interconnected questions and tasks, each

requiring intellectual, and sometimes emotional, attention. There are two primary phases associated with completing a manuscript review for any given academic journal: First, an in-depth assessment of organization and overall scholarly quality of the manuscript; and, second, the actual writing of the review to be submitted to the editor.

### **Organization and Quality of Scholarship**

*Topic alignment with journal.* In what ways is the topic of the manuscript aligned with the mission and purpose of the journal? Typically the editor will screen out those manuscripts that are clearly outside the mission of the journal and/or are easily determined to be of insufficient quality as to render them rejection-worthy at the outset. I am always amazed at how often authors submit manuscripts that are clearly outside the parameters of the mission of the journal or that do not follow submission guidelines. All too often the biggest reason for initial rejection is an author's unfamiliarity with the publication to which they are submitting work for consideration. As these kinds of problems with authors are mostly addressed prior to peer review, readers may not have a sense of the initial rejection rate. However, as they serve as the second and most carefully scrutinized level of manuscript review, readers should first ask in what ways does the work address the interests and themes most often represented within the journal. This requires readers to be highly familiar with the publication, the kinds of topics and methodologies most often included in each issue, and a keen sense of attention to the quality of research and writing exhibited. In other words, readers should be regularly reading and using articles in the journal as part of their routine professional practice.

*Clarity of writing and organizational structure.* I encourage reviewers to not necessarily automatically read a manuscript from beginning to end, but rather to examine closely key parts of the piece in order to determine the quality and clarity of writing and whether or not the main ideas make sense. I suggest first reading the beginning page or two and then the last page or two and ask whether or not the quality of writing has publication potential and if the logic of the introduction and conclusion are solid. Readers should be committed to recognizing and appreciating good writing skills. Having the ability to articulate to the editor the level of quality of writing is an essential skill. Pay attention to the overuse of jargon or language specific to the lexicon of a particular field that may contribute to a narrowing of reader audience. Sometimes writers write to impress others with their command of particular terminology. This often results in a manuscript that is inaccessible and/or unappealing to

many members of the publication's audience, hence limiting its value and overall contribution to the journal.

Editors may be dealing with dozens of manuscripts at any given time and therefore do not have the luxury of making the in-depth analysis and assessment that readers are afforded. Hence, readers often become far more familiar with a manuscript than does the editor, and the ability to communicate a strong professional judgment based on the analysis of scholarly merit is crucial to the overall publication process. Good reviews are indicative of the time and energy and thoughtfulness given to the manuscript by the reader. Having definitive perspectives about quality of writing is crucial to readers' success in providing the editor with a useful and valuable review.

In addition to assessing writing quality, the reader should pay close attention to the structural nature of the manuscript. How is the work organized? Are the use of headings and subheadings clear and consistent? In what ways does the organization of the manuscript itself render it compelling to the reader? Oftentimes, I have reviewed manuscripts that have no headings and subheadings. This is highly distracting and results in losing focus of the flow and development of the study or the ideas embedded within the content of the manuscript.

Finally, it is useful for both authors and the editor for readers to carefully assess the use of proper formatting. Most journals in education require adherence to the American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines for publication. Readers should identify specific examples in the manuscript and offer suggestions for clarifying any obvious errors in formatting. Notations of errors in APA formatting should be included in the narrative review.

*Research questions and methodology.* It is crucial for readers to be able to locate and connect the research questions with the specific methods used in the study. An early sign of weakness or strength in any given study is inextricably linked to compatibility between research questions and methodology. Oftentimes authors, particularly junior faculty, reveal a weak understanding of the essential relationship between stated research questions and the description of methods used in the study. Readers should ask to what degree are the research questions and methods connected? I have reviewed numerous research-based studies that did not include guiding research questions at all. Then there are those studies where the research questions suggest the use of quantitative methods, but the author states that it is a qualitative study. Unfortunately, this happens all too often and suggests weak preparation at the doctoral level in determining the most appropriate

methods relative to the stated research questions or a simple lack of attention to detail.

I encourage readers to make note of any inconsistencies that may be evidence of a poorly guided study. Typically readers will identify what they see as their strengths and weaknesses in the selection and use of various research methods. This allows for the editor to more carefully match a manuscript with methodological strengths of the reader. Readers are then expected to provide a critical assessment of the ways in which the methods are used to collect and analyze data and then to determine the degree to which these factors impact the overall quality of the study being presented.

*Conceptual and theoretical frameworks.* Critical to determining the value of any given manuscript, I would urge reviewers to seek out and identify the embedded philosophical, conceptual, and/or theoretical framework(s) and assess the degree to which these factors are fundamentally appropriate to the study in question. Too often authors fail to couch their study in either a conceptual or theoretical framework, or simply ignore the philosophical orientation undergirding the work. Readers should learn how to identify these essential characteristics and develop the ability to offer a critical analysis of these specific contributions to the study, and if lacking, offer the author a particular viewpoint that might be useful in the revision stage.

*Contribution to the literature.* In what ways is the manuscript situated within the larger field or discipline? In what ways does the manuscript offer new insights and fresh perspectives? In what ways is the manuscript compelling, of value, or adds to the field or discipline in which it is situated? Ideally, readers will receive manuscripts that are within the disciplines with which they are inherently familiar. It is highly appropriate for readers to offer suggestions to authors and editors for references and resources that should be consulted and may contribute to a stronger piece of work. The research profession, whether in the natural sciences, humanities, or social sciences, is determined by a shared knowledge base that is continually being internally assessed, re-organized, and added to as new knowledge is formed. This collaborative aspect of a research community is what establishes its knowledge production as credible and applicable to new contexts. It is imperative for readers to offer additional resources where and when appropriate.

*What is missing?* A most useful strategy I have found in working with both journal submissions and graduate student papers is engaging in the mental exercise of determining what may be missing from the

manuscript? A key resource or reference? An overlooked question? Possible findings that are not included? Areas left unconsidered within the discussion and conclusion section? Are there known viewpoints and/or arguments supported in the literature that are not apparent and that might help strengthen the work? Read for not only assessing the value of the content provided but also for what may be missing.

### Writing the Review

*The role of mentor.* In the broader professional arena, it is important to acknowledge the collegial nature of scholarship. Journal articles are the result of the interactive dynamics associated with the sharing of ideas, questions, methods, data collection, data analysis, subsequent findings, and integration within the extant research-based literature. In this light, it can be imagined that all scholarship is the direct result of the interrelationships between colleagues. This systems approach in which scholarship is produced is manifested in mentor/mentee relationships.

Some readers are obviously more experienced and accomplished than others. Typically we look to those who are more experienced to help guide us through the contours of the academic landscape. However, in conducting manuscript reviews it is not uncommon for junior faculty and/or doctoral candidates to be assessing the quality and appropriateness of manuscripts authored by veteran scholars. This may appear to be at odds with how we view the mentor/mentee relationship. Again, one of the valuable attributes of peer review is that the reader is unaware of the name and affiliation of the author, and vice versa. Readers need to try to avoid feeling less than prepared to offer constructive criticism. Readers should rely on the confidence of their knowledge and the skills instilled in them over time through the development of areas of inquiry and academic expertise.

Readers, when constructing their review, should speak directly to the author. Provide explicit constructive commentary associated with specific areas of the manuscript. Identify specific passages as examples of areas that are either in need of revision, or in need of highlighting. This indicates to the author and editor how carefully the review was conducted and serves to legitimize the integrity of the process while providing well-deserved mentorship.

*Content vs. copyediting.* I learned early in my experience as an editor that everyone has particular ways of performing copyediting. It soon became apparent that this aspect of the publication process was not well served in the hands of peer reviewers. Guidelines were revised, requesting readers not to perform copyediting duties, other than noting



obvious errors that might be present within a manuscript. Readers were encouraged *not* to use track changes. Eventually, I began sending readers only PDF versions, which cannot be edited. Rather than thinking about editing, emphasis should be placed on reviewing for content, especially, as previously stated, as well as for research questions, methodology, frameworks, clarity of writing, organization, and connection and contribution to the existing literature.

In the case of *Teacher Education Quarterly*, manuscripts passing successfully through the initial two stages of review, by the editor as well as by members of the panel of readers, typically were returned to authors with a request for revisions, either minor or major. When authors resubmitted their revised manuscript it then was sent to one of the journal's associate editors, whose function it was to complete an independent review, along with providing detailed copyediting. We found that having one or two associate editors performing all of the copyediting resulted in an article that upon acceptance appeared completely consistent in terms of formatting, grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, etc., with the other articles appearing in the journal.

*Strengths and weaknesses.* Authors spend a great deal of time and energy in developing, constructing, and submitting a manuscript for publication consideration. It is therefore incumbent upon editors and readers to recognize and respect the efforts made by authors and offer assessments accordingly.

Reviewers should identify areas of both strengths and weaknesses. Authors need to hear from reviewers about areas that are considered well developed, thoughtfully conceived, and clearly written. Point out specific passages that represent polished, well-crafted arguments. Identify and note specific areas in the manuscript that reveal insight, that offer something new to think about, and that highlight fresh perspectives that ought to be considered.

In a similar vein, reviewers should identify and discuss areas of perceived weakness while offering constructive solutions for sections that may be problematic. Authors are typically quite open and appreciative of recommendations for strengthening their manuscripts. I have regularly received emails from authors praising the value of feedback from our reviewers. In fact, some of the most positive emails I receive are from authors whose work has been rejected. I attribute this to the consistently high quality of reviews submitted by members of our panel of readers.

*Timeliness.* Editors have timelines beyond that of receiving reviews and communicating with authors. I know I certainly have appreciated

readers who were timely in the submission of their reviews. A journal's reputation may be defined in part by the timely return of reviews and recommendations to authors. Readers should contact editors immediately after receiving a manuscript if they will be unable to return a substantive review within the time limits set by the editorial board. This will allow for the editor to quickly replace the reader with a fellow colleague. We all know how easy it is to become overwhelmed under the pressures of institutional requirements for tenure and rank advancement. However, prompt attention to this aspect of professional service will go a long way toward contributing to the success of the journal as well as to the author's sense of academic achievement.

*Making recommendations to the editor.* Straightforward, clear, and well-reasoned evaluations and recommendations to the editor are of immense value. Editors are unlikely to have a well-developed sense of the quality of the manuscript in question due to the sheer volume of submissions and resubmissions they oversee. My advice for readers is to forward an honest and fair recommendation, one that is decisive and firm, yet fair, sensitive, and responsive to the kinds of feedback one would ask of others. Occasionally readers provide the editor with vague and conflicting feedback that offers little in the way of purposeful critique. Be confident in making a recommendation and, most importantly, provide a sufficient set of reasons and evidence for the stance taken. Editors are able to work with conflicting reviews as long as they are detailed and carefully written and present a strong case for a given recommendation.

Typically recommendations come in the form of accept as is, accept with minor revisions, major revisions required, or reject. I would encourage readers to offer the editor a definitive recommendation along with a meticulous and thorough narrative review. It has not been uncommon for me to receive reviews that are three-to-five pages in length, single-spaced. The editor can always tell how much effort and thoughtfulness went into a review submission.

### Final Thoughts

Serving as a reader for peer-reviewed academic journals is a wonderful way to engage in larger collegial contexts. Windows of opportunities open for collaboration, dialogue, and intellectual engagement with colleagues near and far. The process of becoming skilled and knowledgeable about the peer-review process naturally enhances one's own thinking and scholarly work. It is an occasion to connect in powerful ways with the

ideas driving the profession in both theory and practice. It is an excellent way to stay current and connect students with emerging scholarship. I have experienced a great deal of satisfaction working with others to improve upon our shared professional scholarship.

I encourage the readers of this article to become involved as a reader and reviewer for one or more journals in their specific fields of expertise, whether that is teacher education, curriculum, or other related areas in education. Sign up now. Get in touch with the editor of a familiar publication and ask to be considered for a position on their panel of readers. Remember, our work is not necessarily conducted in isolation, and our relationships with others are integral to our growth as academics. Connecting with colleagues in this realm is full of reward and possibility.

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