

Publishing Advice for RCL Graduate Students

Selecting the Right Journal (and Revising for Its Mission/Audience)

Margaret: Ensure you've read several issues of the journal (not cover-to-cover, but a selection of pieces). Do a "journal report" that gives an overview of the journal, its purpose & audience, who the editor is, what topics it regularly features, how people frame their methodology in their articles, etc. Show your journal report to people who've published with that journal and ask what they think.

Margaret: Be very sensitive to audience--question #1 for a reviewer is not "is this a good article in general" but "is this article a good fit for this journal's audience?" Also see Liz's wise comments below about situating your argument within an ongoing conversation on this topic.

As a continuing FYI, here's what reviewers for *JTW* are asked to address:

Please Respond to the Following Questions:

1. Do the article's argument and evidence adequately support its main point?

Yes		Moderately		No	
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2. Does the article make a meaningful contribution to the knowledge area it addresses?

Yes		Moderately		No	
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3. Should the author have shown familiarity with any other published research?

Yes		Moderately		No	
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4. Is the article appropriate for *JTW* readers?

Yes		Moderately		No	
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Suggestions for the Writer:

Please type suggestions, speaking directly to the writer. If you suggest revision, describe specific changes and make marginal notes on the manuscript.

Scott DeWitt: I would like to add a bit more to the excellent suggestions above and below about how articles are reviewed. I have reviewed for *College English*, *College Composition and Communication (CCC)*, *Computers and Composition (C&C)*, *Kairos*, and The WAC Clearinghouse. Below are samples of questions I have been asked to consider as I review articles and book manuscripts. You can see many common threads running throughout the advice above and below and the kinds of questions reviewers are asked to consider as they read manuscripts.

College English (Articles)

Why do you believe that this subject will or will not interest many readers of *College English*?

Why do you believe or doubt that nonspecialists would find this article accessible?

To what extent has previous scholarship on the subject been acknowledged? What additions or deletions, if any, would you recommend?

What significant ideas does this article add to what we generally know about this subject? Why do you think future writers on this subject are or are not likely to cite this article?

How effective are the style and organization of the article?

Which of these actions do you recommend: accept, reject, or revise and resubmit?

The WAC Clearinghouse (Book manuscripts)

Is this manuscript a contribution to its field or subject? How important is the field or subject?

What is the nature and scope of the audience addressed?

Is the organization of the book sound? Do you have any suggestions for improving it?

Is the style adequate to the purpose of the book? Please comment also on general issues of style and readability.

Is the subject well-researched and carefully situated in the context of important contemporary issues and topics in the field?

Does the author offer a compelling case for this book as breaking new ground in an interesting or important way?

Are there competing books in the field? If so, how do you think this book would match up with them?

Please comment on any particular strengths or weaknesses of individual chapters in the collection, if applicable.

If you were a publisher of scholarly and creative books, would you consider this manuscript a worthy addition to your list?

My final reaction to this manuscript is that I **WOULD** | **WOULD NOT** publish it.

Advice on Turning Seminar Papers into Articles

Margaret: This is hard, because seminar papers vary so widely--especially here, where we (your profs) know you are taking up to 4 seminars at a time and thus we don't always assign conventional seminar papers. (I'm defining a "conventional seminar paper" as a first draft of a journal article--it generally includes **a main argument; some sort of lit review + theoretical framework; methodology; and evidence** ... and is around 6,000-8,000 words.) BUT with that said, revising a seminar paper so it contains the above listed components (in blue) is a good start. Requirements for how much you say about each of those components, as well as requirements for length, will vary dramatically between journals. See "selecting the right journal," above.

Kay: I would add to this that working from a seminar paper (or dissertation chapter) often means shifting from a sense that you need to "prove" you belong (as a scholar) to claiming that authority. I think this is related to Margaret's point about how much to say about each component. For many graduate student writers (although not always, of course) it often means shortening the lit review (showing that you know the literature) to focus on the pieces that are most centrally related to your argument. I think Graff and Birkenstein are really helpful in this regard--especially in conceptualizing the relationship between what "they" say and what "I" say. "Their" work isn't primary--it's a point of departure for what "I" say. (Not in a confrontational, dismissive fashion, but as various points of departure, the space for the "I" or "we"--in the case of collaborative writing.)

What are common problems you see when you review manuscripts for journals? What features and issues lead you to recommend "rejection" or "revise and resubmit" for a manuscript?

Liz Weiser here: It is surprising how often "poor writing" crops up in manuscripts. I mean basics like read the manuscript repeatedly and edit yourself (or better, get a friend to edit you) mercilessly. Wordy, convoluted, and just grammatically incorrect prose is much too common, always astonishes me, and frankly makes me wonder if a marginal piece can be saved. If I see clear, stylish writing with a flaw in the argument that keeps it from immediate publication, I'm much more likely to believe that that person will be able to salvage the piece. Along with that, I know this sounds insane but make *sure* you have a thesis statement--and don't put it on page 6. It is, again, astonishing to me how many writers are so eager to tell me the details of their topic that they forget to tell me what the topic (and the argument!) really is.

But I find I've done this myself, too, and have to catch it in my pre-submission revisions. After all, *we know* what we're writing about, and why! But the readers don't, yet.

Margaret: Second the motion about making sure your main argument is SUPER clearly stated and appears very early. I always think mine is totally clear & early, and then multiple people point out that it emerges in a vague way on page 12.

Margaret: In articles I review for journals, I commonly see one (or both) of the following two arguments, and I usually point out that that argument in itself is probably not enough to warrant publication.

- No one has done this exact thing before.
- I am reading "x" text (or event) (or whatever the primary source material is) using a "y" framework.

A helpful question to ask is this: "What does this article add to the field of _____? And why?" It doesn't have to offer practical advice (your intervention might be a theoretical one), but it should offer something that your readers can pick up and do something with. (PS, be aware that some journals will expect a list of "Suggestions for Practice" or "Suggestions for Teaching" at the end of each article they publish. Your journal research will indicate which these are.)

Christa: I feel like I'm always asking authors to provide more detail about their analytic activities, or what Smagorinsky asks for: how did your data move from a raw state to a cooked state?

What are common problems you see in the writing of graduate students and other early career scholars?

Liz W.: (1) I've forgotten the percentages now, but I remember being told by the *Rhetoric Review* editor that most people who receive a revise & resubmit never resubmit. Revise/resub *really good* and you should always do it. I personally rant & rave at the obviously obtuse reviewers, then work hard to either incorporate their recommendations OR consider what is behind the recommendation (what's the exigence) and address that in some other way. And of course the article is *always* better because of the reviewers in the end.

(2) When I worked at *Composition Studies*, and also when editing book collections, the biggest flaw we saw was that people didn't situate their writing within the ongoing conversation. This was almost always a cause for rejecting the article. [Margaret: Yes!](#)

(3) What I see far too much of is (to be harsh) simplistic debunking. If you can quickly and easily see the giant flaw in whatever you're looking at, stop and wonder if perhaps you're not seeing the full complex picture, you don't yet know all the permutations, and (most of all) if there isn't some less obvious analysis you can make to contribute to the ongoing conversation. Novel analyses are so much more interesting than the ones where we say, "Oh well, of course the [symbolic action] is doing THAT." Push yourself to discover what ELSE it is doing. The obvious

critique can always be folded into that more novel approach. Pure debunking is just too armchair-easy.

(4) I know this shouldn't be the case, but I've observed repeatedly that an intriguing example goes much further than it should. We all want to be engaged with your argument...but if you can tie the argument to a text/image event that people find fascinating, it really does seem to stand a better chance of making it into a conference and probably from there into an article, or a book people will pick up.

Margaret: Second the motion about revise & resubmit (R&R)! When I got my first one, I cried and threw it away. (It was from *Rhetoric Review*.) Much later I learned that the editor had been excited about my submission and eager to publish it. (Sad trombone noise.) Someone once paraphrased an "R&R" decision to me as follows: "We [the editorial staff] WANT to work with you on this article."

Helpful Readings

- McNabb, R. (2001). "Making the Gesture: Graduate Student Submissions and the Expectation of Journal Referees." *Composition Studies*, 29(1), 9-26. (Christa has a copy)
- Smagorinsky, P. (2008). "The method section as conceptual epicenter in constructing social science research reports." *Written Communication*, 25(3), 389-411. (Christa has a copy)