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PROVOCATIONS AND PROVOCATEURS

Sitting in Your Reader's Chair

Attending to Your Academic Sensemakers

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This article describes to authors what journal reviewers expect of the scholarly publications they review and how authors can anticipate reviewers' sensemaking processes to increase their chances of being understood and making their contribution clear. Authors are urged to (a) clarify their research question and intended contribution early in the paper; (b) guide readers' understanding of literature relevant to the paper; (c) understand readers' perspective and anticipate their questions; (d) be aware of and explain how terms and figures are used; (e) obtain collegial feedback on a paper before submitting it; (f) use editors' and reviewers' feedback to understand how they made sense of the paper; (g) use feedback to improve the paper in revising; and (h) manage the flow of papers from a project to incorporate sensemaking feedback.

Keywords: *scholarly writing; scholarly publication; journal review process*

I had been managing editor at the *Administrative Science Quarterly* (*ASQ*) for only a few years when a (then) assistant professor I know got a rejection letter on a paper and called me, first to complain but then to try to understand how the reviewers could have provided three drastically different sets of recommendations on what to do with the paper—variously suggesting different theories to draw on, different variables to measure, and even different research questions to ask. The author felt angry, insulted, and completely baffled. I did my best to calm him down and help him interpret the reviewers' comments, pointing out that the reviewers had provided a total of 10 single-spaced pages of comments, which indicated that they had read the paper, recognized that the study involved a lot of hard work, and were trying to be helpful. By the end of the phone call, the author was already thinking of where he would submit the paper next, but I've continued to think about that particular review process (and many others) over the years, hoping that I could better articulate what went wrong. Clearly, some studies are just poorly done but others that appear to be competently done are also rejected. Gradually, I began to see that part of the problem is

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I thank Denny Gioia for giving me the opportunity to write this essay and past and current *Administrative Science Quarterly* editors, reviewers, and authors, all of whom contributed over the years to the ideas developed here. I particularly thank Don Palmer, Elaine Romanelli, John Wagner, Hayagreeva Rao, Kathleen McGinn, and Charlotte Rosen, who were curious enough to want to read and comment on the essay. The opinions expressed here are my own, however. Some of the details of the examples have been changed to protect the identity of the authors and reviewers from whom I have learned so much.

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that many writers don't think often enough about how their readers will make sense of what they've written. Reading is always an exercise in sensemaking. Guiding your readers' sensemaking is the secret to successfully navigating the publication process.

Learning to write up research for others' consumption may be the most frustrating part of an academic's job. It is often a haphazard, trial-and-error process with apparently random inputs through successive journal review processes, featuring reports written by faceless, nameless, seemingly brainless reviewers. Yet because publications are essential in contributing to knowledge generation (and getting tenure at most schools), scholars continue to subject their work to the judgments of others in spite of the frustrations. Many become better writers over time and, therefore, more successful in getting their work published. Successful authors develop an intuitive understanding of the publishing process—both by reviewing articles for journals and writing and rewriting their own work. Many others, however, continue to struggle, never quite understanding why one article receives a revise-and-submit decision and another gets rejected. Sometimes, from an author's perspective, it appears to be a capricious, hit-or-miss process. But it need not be so. Understanding how reviewers attempt to make sense of what they read and how authors contribute to or frustrate that sensemaking can help authors learn to write (and think) better and get more articles accepted. In the hope that this essay can begin to foster that understanding, I share with you some of what I have figured out about writing from the reviewers, editors, and authors in my 26 years as *ASQ*'s managing editor.

Since my first day on the job, I've been proofreading the decision letters for typos and reviewers' reports for inappropriate or self-identifying comments. By a rough estimate, I've read more than 19,000 reviews and more than 8,000 decision letters. Technical problems—inadequate theory development, questionable data, inappropriate methods—are the biggest reason for rejection. But over the years, I began to see that a pervasive problem for reviewers, even if they suspect that a study might be worthwhile, is that they are not able to make sense of everything authors are trying to tell them. Reviewers may not say that the writing itself is at fault, but their many questions in Comments to the Author indicate that it is. They ask how certain terms are defined, whether terms used interchangeably really have the same meaning, why seemingly related pieces in the literature have been ignored, why certain variables are included or others left out, why the context is appropriate, why only certain people were interviewed, what questions were asked, and who did the coding and how. The list goes on, but the culminating and most serious question is what the contribution to the literature is or, stated more bluntly, "Why am I reading this work and why should I care?" The author's task is to anticipate these questions and answer them early and convincingly. With thought and practice, you can learn to anticipate readers' questions. Reading your own manuscript as if you were reviewing for the journal to which you're submitting can help you articulate a clear research question early in the paper, focus on it throughout the paper, and establish your contribution.

The concept of a contribution is meaningful only in terms of a particular audience of readers and what they already know from previous work. Anne Sigismund Huff (1999), in her book, *Writing for Scholarly Publication*, talks about scholarly publishing as entering a conversation with others who are already talking about particular topics.[1] The target journal for an article determines the conversation that an author is attempting to enter and which literature (theories, findings, assumptions) the audience can be expected to know. Reviewers get manuscripts to review in their areas of interest and expertise, thus reviewers generally are relatively confident that they know a lot about the subject. Authors first need to convince them that they too know these things, sketching out the common understandings and accepted findings in the area, to establish the basis for the conversation that author and readers will have. Yet almost simultaneously, the author has to gently pull reviewers away from their certainties about the area and make them question their knowledge and assumptions. This is what draws them into your web. Now they are relying on you to help them make sense of something they thought they understood. So how do you do it? I have some hints from the thousands of failures and hundreds of successes I have seen over my years in the catbird's seat at *ASQ*. Here are a few:

Hint 1: Make Your Contribution Clear Right Away

Establish your paper's contribution in the first two to three pages of the paper and do not discuss the paper itself until it is clear what question you are going to answer and why it is important to answer that question. Imposing these criteria on yourself helps you to provide a strong motivation for your work to your reader. Any relevant previous study can be used as a building block for establishing a paper's motivation, but you have to present the study in a way that highlights those aspects that help set up your research for your sensemaking reader. For example, if you are presenting a study focusing on creativity and tenure in long-term project teams, you could point to previous findings on group creativity using MBA student subjects, pointing out that they did not involve tenure—and why tenure is likely to be important (drawing on findings on tenure and creativity). In describing specific findings from past research that are relevant for the current paper, explain what has been left undone (and, of course, why it needs to be done now). Are there inconsistent findings in this literature? Is there something that has not been done, for example, in terms of examining the processes or precursors involved, and why is it important to understand it? Answering these questions provides the motivation for the paper, giving reviewers a reason to read it and care about it. A previous author's call for more work on a topic is never sufficient motivation. Talk is cheap. Developing a strong motivation takes work. If you can't make a convincing argument that you are filling an important gap in the literature, you will have a hard time establishing that you have a contribution to make to that literature. You might be surprised at how many authors miss this fundamental point.

Hint 2: Draw Your Dear Reader in Early

Some scholars erroneously think that discussing the literature in which they are anchoring their work is a matter of ritual citation, which often means that they do not use it to their advantage. But the paper you want to write also has to be the paper others want to read, and your task is to convince them that they really do want to read it. The introductions to published papers can be useful examples of how others have used previous literature as building blocks for their own arguments. How did they guide readers into their way of thinking about the research questions they sought to answer? How did they help the readers make sense of literature they likely already knew and then draw different conclusions from it than they might have before reading the paper? Your writing will be clearer if you understand how readers attempt to make sense of what they read. Your job is to consciously guide them in understanding what it is you are trying to communicate.

Hint 3: Disarm Readers' Objections Before They Come Up

Our tendency when reading something new is to make sense of it as we go along, often by mentally asking ourselves questions. The first question is "What's this about?" We look for that answer in the first paragraph. If the study is about, say, career moves in biotechnology firms and the first paragraph is about biotechnology firms as a context in which to study organizational behavior, we continue to ask what the study is about as we get to the second paragraph. Unfortunately for the authors, however, we academic readers are impatient for an answer once we have asked a question. If an answer is not offered quickly, readers are likely to supply a sort of provisional answer from their own stock of knowledge. This sensemaking process continues to play out, producing further questions and, if the author is not helping, more provisional answers. If the first page mentions the importance of identity, for instance, but the author does not supply a definition, we use our most readily available definition of identity. When the author's definition finally comes up on page 10, readers are ready to argue with it: "No, others have already shown that identity is not always stable and enduring!" As the reader proceeds, the questions and quibbles proliferate. Define terms as you use them—this is when the reader needs them. A paragraph made up of a list of definitions early in a paper is not as easy to digest as smaller bits of information as we go along—placed strategically to help the readers make sense of your study in the way you intend.

Hint 4: Sit Down in Your Readers' Chairs

The point here is that readers need your guidance, which means that you need to think about us as you develop your arguments and lay out your study. Try to avoid acronyms, especially in the beginning when we are not sure yet what the paper is about. Acronyms typically save you space on the page, but they do not do much for our understanding of the topic. One author I know had developed an unusual and potentially interesting perspective on leadership, which he described and named on the first page but thereafter referred to by an acronym, something like NRL, though I can't remember it now nor the concept it represented. (See what I mean?). If an idea is new, expose us to it in words as often as possible so that we can really grasp it.

Like acronyms, figures are shortcuts for authors but often create sensemaking problems for readers. Introduce a figure only after you have explained in the text every term and relationship. An author with a tough revise-and-submit decision at another journal once complained to me that one of the reviewers had been unusually cranky about a figure that summarized the theory, proposing additional variables and even different causal directions among the variables. One look at the manuscript revealed that the figure was inserted before any of the terms or relationships had been explained. Because the author had not helped the reader make sense of the figure, the reviewer provided a provisional explanation of the figure's content from his or her own stock of knowledge and found it wanting.

Hint 5: Anticipate Your Readers' Stumbles

Readers also need to know in what ways your theory, context, sample, method, and analyses are appropriate for answering the question you ask. They will make their assessments of the value of the research and the validity of your findings from the information you provide. One way to get practice in anticipating reviewers' questions is to ask for feedback, before submitting a paper, from trusted but tough-minded peers who understand the interests of the journal audience you are trying to engage. If they are willing to be honest, and if you are willing to be thick-skinned enough to hear what they say, you can often see what to clarify, cut, expand, and what other literature you can draw on or tie into. An honest peer reader can help you rule out alternative explanations you had not considered. Such alternative explanations are a critical part of the discussion section, where you first summarize your findings (your answer to the research question) and then tie them into the literature to which you are contributing to make sure your reader sees its value.

Once you have had a chance to revise the paper a final time with the benefit of collegial feedback, proofread it carefully before you submit it. Reviewers notice typos, missing references (especially for citations they do not recognize and want to look up), or misnumbered tables and take those little oversights as an indication that the research itself was haphazardly done. As a result, they become hypervigilant in uncovering the flaws in a paper, finding more than they would ever notice in a carefully written paper. No self-respecting author willingly invites that kind of scrutiny, so you should not do it inadvertently in your haste to get a paper out the door.

Hint 6: Attend to Editors' and Reviewers' Feedback

Finally, you can learn a tremendous amount about writing up research and how to help readers make sense of your work from successive journal review processes, especially if you have targeted the right journal for each paper. Once you have gotten over your initial emotional reaction (joy, frustration, confusion), read the editor's and reviewers' comments carefully. Try to appreciate their sensemaking attempts. Given their comments, was the journal the right audience for your paper? Why might editors and reviewers have said what they did? If they cited a particular passage in your text, look at it and try to see it from their perspective. If they didn't understand you, how might you have led them astray in the way you presented the material? What kinds of questions did they ask? That is, what information were they missing? Authors bear a fair amount of responsibility for the way reviewers receive their work—and for the amount of frustration some of them reveal in their comments to the authors, despite their intentions to be dispassionate. Reviewers put a lot of thought and time into making sense of your paper. They are not ogres, nor do they set out to torpedo your work without considering its possible value. But they do get irritated when they can't understand what you are trying to say or what you did. A good review takes many precious hours, hours that reviewers could spend on their own research. They review for journals as their service to the field, and they look for interesting papers to which they can contribute something because of their expertise. The more comments you get back from a reviewer, however dispiriting the feedback may seem, the more likely it is that the reviewer was interested in helping you improve the paper for future readers.

Hint 7: Use Journal Feedback to Revise, Revise, Revise

If you are offered an opportunity to revise a paper, first celebrate. Then get to work making sense of the editor's and reviewers' feedback. Do your best to respond to the reviewers' points in the revised paper. If there are contradictory recommendations or you do not understand a central point, you can often get clarification from the editor. Though editors are often portrayed as gatekeepers who try to keep authors from publishing in their journals, most are in fact doing their best in every letter they write to help authors improve their work for publication, if not in their journal then in another. After all, without papers to publish, journals would cease to exist. Editors will not be able to tell you exactly how to rewrite a paper, but they can often tell you which are the most important things to attend to in the revision.

If a paper is rejected, you can use the reviewers' comments to improve the paper for submission to another journal, again considering the audience that will read the newest version. All audiences are not the same, so think about what the new audience members read and know. Remember as well that audiences for different journals overlap, and the same scholars review in their areas of expertise for multiple journals. If you send your paper out to another journal without revising it (i.e., not taking into account the comments you got from the first journal), you may be unpleasantly and embarrassingly surprised to find that you get one of the same reviewers at the next journal. One reviewer to whom this happened had spent many hours on the first review and responded to the review request at the second journal dismissively, refusing to waste any more time on authors who paid no attention the first time and enclosing a copy of the first review.

Hint 8: Be Patient

Often, several papers come from one large research project, but you may want to be careful about managing the flow of papers from such a project if you do not have much experience with the review process yet. A new assistant professor I know simultaneously submitted several papers to journals from a big research project, unaware until the decisions came in that there was a serious flaw in the main analyses of all of them. None of the papers got a revise-and-resubmit decision. Moreover, most journals will not review a revised version of a rejected paper, which reduces the author's options on the next round. Had the author gotten a decision and set of reviews back on one paper, the error could have been corrected with a little more data collection and reanalysis before subsequent papers went out for review—to say nothing of correcting the sensemaking issues that the first review might have revealed. The good news is that the papers were eventually published, though it took more time on the tenure clock than the author had wanted. Sending out the strongest paper first and, once it is accepted for publication, building on that one and distinguishing later papers from it (and from each other) can build a strong publishing record. Learning to attend to the audience's sensemaking needs along the way will make successive review processes more useful to you as you become better at engaging in the scholarly conversations in which you want to take part.

CONCLUSION

The young assistant professor who started me thinking about all this years ago is now tenured, very productive, and active in the field. I'm sure he does not know what a long sensemaking trek he sent me on. I hope that what I've tried to articulate about thinking and writing in this essay might give heart to those who struggle to become better writers and that they can share their ideas through published journal articles with others of like mind. We can learn from the ways that already-published scholars have illuminated our paths with their work and helped us with our own sensemaking, as well as by asking useful questions of authors whose papers we are asked to read. So many exciting new theories, ideas, innovative methods, and new contexts and relationships to study are just waiting to be written up. We would like to have the best of these come to *ASQ* if there is a conversation going on that interests you. It is a feast of ideas with many scholars seated around the table, and you are welcome to bring your dish for the others to taste and enjoy.

NOTE

1. Huff's (1999) book also offers advice on finding useful exemplars on which to model your paper, writing abstracts as a way to define a research question, structuring a paper—especially what to include in the Discussion section—and rewriting, among other topics that I do not have space to discuss here. I recommend it highly.

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Huff, A. S. (1999). *Writing for scholarly publication*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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