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Reflections on Two Years of Manuscript Reviewing

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Guest Editorial

Reflections on Two Years of Manuscript Reviewing



College & Research Libraries receives a large number of manuscripts each year that have kept the two of us busy, as editorial assistants, with many of the initial reviews of submission for the journal during the last two years. In 2011 alone *C&RL* received 134 submissions, of which only 46 were finally selected for publication. This acceptance rate demonstrates the rigor of our review process, but it is coupled with our desire to help prospective authors succeed.

There are insights we can offer from our editorial experience that help explain why manuscripts are rejected as well as advice on how to overcome typical problems and barriers we have observed. We would like to frame our insights around the editorial questions we are asked to answer in our initial evaluation of manuscripts.

1. Documentation of sources/background information/literature review

The literature review needs to introduce the topic or concept, identify notable and relevant existing scholarship, and most importantly frame the research. This does not equate to merely defining key terms and summarizing previous scholarship. It should include providing the reader with discerning insights that highlight patterns, conflicts, or voids in the scholarship. It is within the literature review that the author constructs the context for the research question. It is the author's job to evaluate and explain research that is objective and valuable to the position or argument. If this is lacking, weak, or incomplete, the connection made from your research to what is known about the issue or topic will be inadequate or

unpersuasive. When a literature review is strong, it is easy to see how your study or investigation, extends, argues with, or refutes what others have found.

2. Methodology

We have frequently seen papers that have no research question and thus no methodology. A research question is formulated to advance or disprove an argument or hypothesis. The research question is the "what", followed by the methodology or "how" to answer the question. We also see a number of papers with poor research questions or weak methodologies. A good research question should be relevant, focused, and novel to pass the "so what" test.

The methodology should be a sound process to collect appropriate data that is made richer by critical analysis. The researcher must carefully choose a valid data collection method to ensure valid data. Clearly defining the methodology helps the reader understand the logic and validity of the paper's argument.

Campus support services such as an Office of Research or Institutional Review Board can facilitate the process of adhering to research appropriateness and ethical principles. We have reviewed submissions that asked sensitive questions and exposed human subjects to easy identification due to a lack of research integrity.

3. Analysis/Logic of argumentation

The researcher must present organized data or evidence that supports assertions that soundly answer the research question. Point the reader to strengths

and weaknesses of the outcomes. The researcher must also anticipate and address counter-arguments and questions while avoiding tangents that only serve to confuse. Analysis should explain the implications of the collected data and spot trends that point to future impact or need for further research. Some submissions (e.g. case studies or think pieces) work differently, but nonetheless must present their ideas logically and support assertions with evidence. Above all things, the author must bring a fresh and original perspective engaging readers and enriching the professional literature.

4. Presentation

This is where we address how well written the piece is, how readable the charts are, and whether or not the correct tone has been reached. Some studies are highly technical and we want to see that the author(s) are able to explain their findings with data and in clear English. Some data are hard to interpret as presented, but with a few adjustments can be made comprehensible. Watch your tone: some writing is too informal and personal for presentation in a scholarly publication.

It is somewhat disheartening to report that a number of pieces come with numerous basic grammatical problems or are simply poorly written. Authors should turn to colleagues for review and feedback to revise and refine their manuscripts before submission.

5. Relevance to advancing knowledge in the field of academic librarianship

As the "official scholarly research journal of the Association of College & Research Libraries," *C&RL* serves to advance knowledge in the field. Some articles are well written and interesting but really have nothing new to contribute to the field. Such is often the case with articles that only present a project or program at a single library. Even with a literature review, an author's singular learning or growth experience may not serve anyone beyond him/herself.

A note about international submissions
C&RL receives a respectable amount of international submissions which in and of itself is a wonderful opportunity to understand cross-national and cross-cultural similarities and differences in our field. However, opportunities for shared international information are often lost because of some common barriers:

- Need for clear English language expression. Non-native English language authors should have their writing reviewed by seasoned writers or editors and revised for clear English expression before submitting their work.
- Need to understand the basic format or elements of a research article. Review what has been published here and look for common elements, possibly through a global lens. We are looking for an introduction to the problem, a literature review that shows how others have studied it, a clear explanation of the methodology you used to study it, what you found, and what questions you still have.
- Need for context. *C&RL* readers are largely North American librarians less familiar with higher education structure outside our part of the world. We will need to know institutional demographics/profile; we will need acronyms spelled out, consortia descriptions, and perhaps explanations of unique academic or cultural circumstances.

We have enjoyed contributing to the profession through editorial review services and we hope in turn these comments help and inspire readers to contribute to the profession through research and publication.

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