

2007

Writing Reviews as a Way of Mentoring Fellow Authors

Alice H. Merz

Indiana University-Purdue University, Fort Wayne

Stella C. Batagiannis

Indiana University-Purdue University, Fort Wayne

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/mwer>

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Recommended Citation

Merz, Alice H. and Batagiannis, Stella C. (2007) "Writing Reviews as a Way of Mentoring Fellow Authors," *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*. Vol. 20: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/mwer/vol20/iss1/6>

This Featured Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mid-Western Educational Researcher by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@BGSU.

Writing Reviews as a Way of Mentoring Fellow Authors

Alice H. Merz

Stella C. Batagiannis

Indiana University – Purdue University Fort Wayne

Abstract

The Fall 2006 conference provided an opportunity to explore service to MWERA. In this article Merz and Batagiannis reflect on and extend how reviewers can serve the Mid-Western Educational Research Journal.

As junior faculty members in a Department of Education, we are both interested in the publishing process. As authors, however, what occurs to our papers after we submit them to a journal has always been something of a mystery to us. It was with great interest that we attended a workshop on “How To Write a Review” presented by Deborah Jenkins and Adrian Rodgers at the Mid-Western Educational Research Association Conference.

Our initial hope was that we would learn more about the review process, but we also found that Jenkins and Rodgers argued that the review process is a form of mentoring through which our members of the professoriate can support one another. It was this argument that caused us to undertake additional inquiry so that we could better situate our own understandings of the review process.

In this article we:

- highlight the review process used by the current editors of the *Researcher*;
- contextualize Jenkins and Rodgers’ argument that the review process is a mentoring tool;
- and extend their argument by considering the viewpoints of other authors.

Our purpose in writing this article is to share what we have learned about the writing and publishing process with fellow authors so that they can consider their own roles, both as author and reviewer.

One of the premises of the workshop led by Jenkins and Rodgers (2006) was their philosophical stance that as editors they believe in mentoring faculty and students in the publishing process. While they typically mentor authors with revising their manuscripts, Jenkins and Rodgers also think editors need to mentor reviewers. One of the techniques Jenkins and Rodgers have used is to provide reviewers with the full set of blind reviews related to one manuscript. By providing each reviewer with a complete set of reviews, individuals can reflect on the comments of their peers with the goal of learning from each other. The claim of Jenkins’ and Rodgers’ that reviews should mentor, as much as they critique, shapes our own understanding of how we should write our reviews. We concluded that a journal editors’ philosophical stance regarding the review process should have an effect on what we as reviewers attend to and how we write our review.

Jenkins and Rodgers (2006) also suggested that reviewers need to develop a shared understanding about the importance and purpose of the review process. More precisely, we were

able to see that when approaching the review process with a mentorship lens, the process is no longer about a “*strategic site of contention and negotiation* among author, editor, and referees” (Berkenkotter, 1995, p. 247) where reviewers “feel compelled to find something wrong” (VanTassell, McLemore, & Roberts, 1992, p. 249). Instead, as Fetting (1983) noted, “Careful reviews are at the heart of the manuscript evaluation process” (p. 2). Thoughtful, detailed reviews provide feedback to authors that allow them to improve their manuscript and that allow editors to continue guiding them (Jenkins and Rodgers, 2006). As one author put it, “this [revision] process, as anxiety-producing as it is, leads to what is inevitably a better and tighter manuscript” (Berkenkotter, 1995, p. 247). And, with a mentoring approach, the anxiety no longer has to be an integral component.

Selecting Reviewers

In selecting the reviewers for a particular manuscript, we learned that Jenkins and Rodgers send out the manuscript electronically to three reviewers for a blind review after the editors’ own preliminary review of it. One reviewer is chosen from the journal advisory board because of his or her experience in reviewing manuscripts. A second reviewer is chosen from faculty with expertise in the area, and a third reviewer is chosen from doctoral students who have applied for graduate reviewer status and who write as reviewers-in-training (Jenkins & Rodgers, 2006; Klingner, Scanlon, & Pressley, 2005).

Determining a “Good Fit”

When thinking about the appropriateness of a manuscript for publication in a journal, the editor and reviewers pay attention to the relevance of the manuscript or how the manuscript has been framed in relation to the journal’s focus and target audience (Klingner, Scanlon, & Pressley, 2005; VanTassell, McLemore, & Roberts, 1992). In the *Mid-Western Educational Researcher (MWER)*, manuscripts should be framed for an audience of educational faculty, students and professionals concerned about educational issues (Jenkins & Rodgers, 2006).

In addition to the reviewers’ consideration of the manuscript in relation to the focus and audience of the journal, the reviewers and editors check for the type of manuscript that has been submitted to the journal. In the *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*, the acceptable types of manuscripts are research-based articles, reviews of literature, theoretical ideas, and methodological issues. Jenkins and Rodgers (2006) pointed out that both overtly political pieces and craft pieces or ‘how-to’ pieces would not be good matches.

Next, Jenkins and Rodgers (2006) led us in a discussion about the importance of the reviewers' focusing their attention on the quality of the manuscript. Of course even within the mentoring approach, the review process is also intended to support the reporting of quality research. An author's research design and theoretical base is paramount for a quality article (Jenkins & Rodgers, 2006). More specifically, in a quantitative design, the reviewers will be looking for enough detail so that they can address instrumental issues, validity, and reliability. In a qualitative design, the reviewers will be looking for enough detail in the descriptions of the methods and participants to ensure the author meets the requirements of a quality case, narrative, or action-research description (Klingner, Scanlon, & Pressley, 2005). In a theoretical piece, the reviewers will be looking for a logical soundness. Because the design is the basis for the study, if there is a design flaw, then it may become a fatal flaw for the acceptance of the manuscript (Jenkins & Rodgers, 2006).

In a study by VanTassell, McLemore, and Roberts (1992), reviewers were asked to rank on a 10-point scale the importance of criteria that they used in evaluating manuscripts. Similar to Jenkins and Rodgers' (2006) insight on the importance of the research design, they found that logical and theoretical soundness of the research ranked as the most important. Data validity, clarity and overall contribution to the field came in next. Organization, grammar, innovative approaches, and relevance for peers came in the middle of the rankings. And, syntax, length and methodological sophistication came in last.

Quality of writing: Formulating depth and accuracy.

Another aspect of the manuscript's quality is its depth in the formulation of the review of literature, connection to a theoretical framework and problem statement (Klingner, Scanlon, & Pressley, 2005). Specifically with the literature review, if an author claims that there are no publications on this topic, the reviewer may suspect that the author did not do an in-depth or broad enough investigation of the literature to see connections to the authors' topic (Klingner, Scanlon, & Pressley, 2005). Reviewers look for recent citations and, for well-known and more developed topics, the reviewers will be looking for both seminal and recent accounts in the field (Klingner, Scanlon, & Pressley, 2005). If new connections are being made, reviewers will be looking for a clear articulation of these connections, along with an explanation about how and why they are being connected in new ways.

With regard to the data and discussion, the reviewers will determine if there is sufficient data to support the author's claims or if the claims have been over-extended (Jenkins & Rodgers, 2006; and Klingner, Scanlon, & Pressley, 2005). Similarly, the reviewer is looking to see that the discussion is succinct and thorough enough to connect the results with the literature review and to further understanding.

Finally, even though the actual citing of references can be perceived as technical, reviewers look to see if the references have been represented accurately. For some reviewers, the accuracy (or lack of it) may indicate if the author has thoroughly read and understood the sources that he or she is citing. (Klingner, Scanlon, & Pressley, 2005)

Quality of writing: Overall quality and technical issues of writing.

Finally, the reviewers consider the overall quality of writing in the manuscript. In this case, overall quality is represented through such things as clarity, coherence, clear integration of ideas, syntax, effective use of vocabulary, varied and interesting sentence structure, and a manuscript that communicates ideas distinctly and creatively.

When reviewers consider the technical issues, they may include the following: the appropriate APA formatting, incomplete or inaccurate references throughout the manuscript and reference section, spelling and grammar errors, missing sections of the manuscript (such as a missing "discussion section"), and adherence to length and general formatting issues (such as margins, type font and size, headers, and footnotes).

If there are questions about the overall quality of writing or technical issues, then the reviewers may make recommendations for changes. As a way to minimize this kind of editing, reviewers recommend that authors have their colleagues proofread their manuscript before submission. Similarly, the author needs to proofread the manuscript more than once. For instance, in one reading, the author may be looking for quality of writing issues while in a second reading, the author may focus on technical issues, such as formatting. A third and highly recommended option is that the author hire a professional proof reader familiar with APA style to proof the manuscript prior to submission. So, while it is expected that the author will initially submit a quality manuscript, some weakness in the writing may be excused and the manuscript accepted conditionally, pending revision (Jenkins & Rodgers, 2006). Even so, the weaknesses may affect the reviewers' confidence in an author's work and dissuade some reviewers from recommending the manuscript for acceptance (VanTassell, McLemore, & Roberts, 1992).

Being Reviewed: Writing a Helpful, Quality Review

One of the significant aspects of Jenkins and Rodgers' presentation was the focus on the reviewer's role of writing thoughtful, detailed reviews. During this part of the workshop, Jenkins and Rodgers engaged us in an investigation that critiqued a number of blind reviews as a way to facilitate a dialogue about the importance of reviews and how to write feedback that is helpful. As a part of our conversation, Jenkins and Rodgers helped us construct a list of characteristics that are a part of a well-written review. While the criteria could not be a comprehensive list, they were meant to highlight some important issues for both beginning and seasoned reviewers.

Consider Demeanor of the Reviewer and Genre of the Review

Reviewers should consider using language in the review that reflects a mentoring demeanor. In other words, the reviewers should avoid using language that is deliberately dismissive, rude, demoralizing, or attacking (Nicholls, 1999). Instead, the review should be respectful and constructive.

As a way to encourage the author, a creative and supportive genre is used by some reviewers. For example, reviewers that

mentor approach the review as if they were writing a letter directly to the author (Jenkins & Rodgers, 2006). By doing so it makes it possible for the reviewers to implement a more personalized type of mentoring approach. Reviewers also conceptualize the review as if they were giving feedback to one of their colleagues or one of their students with sufficient specificity for the author to make the necessary improvements (Jenkins & Rodgers, 2006).

Provide Specific, Substantial, and Substantiated Comments

A reviewer's specific, constructive comments about the content are an important vehicle for encouraging authors to grow in the development and submission of their work, whether a manuscript is recommended for acceptance or not. As a result, reviewers should focus on the content of the manuscript and avoid supplanting the author's views with their own as part of the critique.

While a reviewer also can provide editing comments to the author, these comments are not the substantive components that the editor uses to base decisions on regarding the acceptability of the manuscript. As a result, reviewers should focus on using specific, substantiated statements as a way to provide accountability in their feedback (Jenkins & Rodgers, 2006). "The same kind of rigor must be used in review as the writer used in manuscript or grant preparation..." (Nicholls, 1999, p. 1853).

Again, while it is easy to assume that good papers do not need many comments, the substantive comments are vital for the editor, especially since it is more common than not for reviewers to disagree (Bakanic, McPhail, & Simon, 1987; VanTassell, McLemore, & Roberts, 1992). Many times, the most difficult decision for the editor revolves around making a decision about the merits of the manuscript and deciding whether or not to accept or reject the manuscript based on the conflicting information. In other words, the editor and authors need detailed feedback in order to make sense of the disparity. Some of the disparity may be a result of differences in reviewers' expertise in both content and methods. There may also be differences in reviewers' theoretical frameworks. A reviewer's specificity, accompanied with examples and justifications, will provide the editor and author with more information upon which to base their decisions and possible revisions. In addition, almost three-quarters of reviewers, in one study, expected the author to provide a detailed account about how they responded to the comments in their revisions (VanTassell, McLemore, & Roberts, 1992). So, the more detailed the reviewers' feedback, the more helpful it will be for the author and editor to work together to incorporate and address that feedback.

Be Timely in Submitting the Review

Reviewers should allow themselves sufficient time, within their allotted 4-6 weeks, to complete the review (Jenkins & Rodgers, 2006). One study reported that reviewers spend an average of 5-8 hours examining and writing up their review of a manuscript, depending on the journal (VanTassell, McLemore, & Roberts, 1992). If reviewers short-change themselves with

the time spent in the review process, that shortage of time may become evident in the quality of the review feedback. If reviewers do not have time, they should not feel obligated to accept a manuscript. Similarly, if the reviewer finds that the manuscript is not one that he or she is comfortable with reviewing for any reason, it is not a problem to return it. However, the reviewer should do so promptly, so that the review process is not delayed for the editors or the author.

In a more general sense, if reviews are not returned on a timely basis, the editor has to either cajole the reviewer with email prompts to improve the timeliness (Caruso & Kennedy, 2004) or find a new reviewer who has the necessary expertise and time to return another review in a more timely manner. An incomplete or insufficient review provides an extra burden on the editor, delays the process, evokes frustration from the editor and authors, and reflects on the priority of the reviewer (VanTassell, McLemore, & Roberts, 1992).

Conclusion

In conclusion, those who commit to reviewing a manuscript have accepted a significant responsibility. Although sometimes an individual commits to this responsibility to augment personal service obligations for promotion or tenure, the reviewer should focus on the responsibility of providing invaluable professional feedback to colleagues. In carrying out this responsibility, the reviewer is encouraged to be honest and to maintain a kind, helpful demeanor.

References

- Bakanic, V., McPhail, C., & Simon, R. J. (1987). The manuscript review and decision-making process. *American Sociological Review*, 52(5), 631-642.
- Berkenkotter, C. (1995). The power and the perils of peer review. *Rhetoric Review*, 13(2), 245-248.
- Caruso, M., & Kennedy, C. H. (2004). Effects of a reviewer-prompting strategy on timely manuscript reviews. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 37(4), 523-526.
- Fettig, L. P. (1983). An editorial perspective on getting manuscripts accepted for journal publication. *North Central Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 5(2), 1-3.
- Klingner, J. K., Scanlon, D., & Pressley, M. (2005). How to publish in scholarly journals. *Educational Researcher*, 34(8), 14-20.
- Jenkins, D. B., & Rodgers, A. (2006, October). *How to write a review*. Presented at the annual meeting of the Mid-Western Educational Research Association, Columbus, OH.
- Nicholls, R. D. (1999). Peer review under review. *Science*, 286, 1853.
- VanTassell, L. W., McLemore, D. L., & Roberts, R. K. (1992). Expectations and perceptions of the peer review process: A study of four agricultural economics journals. *Review of Agricultural Economics*, 14(2), 241-254.