

Writing for Research Journals



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This chapter focuses on

- writing for research journals as a unique genre
- comparing and contrasting this genre to writing as disciplined talking
- revealing the process, but also the necessary commitment, characteristic of this genre
- providing general and specific guidelines aimed at assisting writers interested in writing for research journals

James Boswell, the 18th-century Scottish lawyer, diarist, and biographer of Samuel Johnson, is reputed to have said that good writing is disciplined talking. We think there is merit to his observation, and we explore that idea to some extent in this chapter. At the same time, we believe that Boswell's aphorism breaks down in some forms of writing. Talking and writing, although clearly related, are not simply mirror processes. In fact, academic writing in general and writing for journals in particular is probably the least talk-like among the many genres of writing and, consequently, may be one of the most abstract and difficult genres to master, at least in the expository realm.

Further, research journals represent a specialized genre with a unique discourse that requires writers to possess a high level of expertise about content. But just as important is developing an awareness and knowledge of the intricacies of academic discourse, including the vagaries of vetting manuscripts for publication and what ideas are likely to be embraced or rejected by whom. Such knowledge, which includes a nuanced awareness of many interrelated factors, is often difficult to state explicitly.

Successfully publishing work in top-notch research journals, at least in the field of education, often entails a long apprenticeship typically under the tutelage of experienced scholars and not infrequently with many false starts and recurrent rejections, from which one must also learn. In our role as editors, one of the most rewarding aspects of the work is the opportunity we have to assist inexperienced authors in their effort to turn sound research projects into equally sound research reports. This process is best described as developmental in scope, and it is in line with our approach to editing, which we describe metaphorically as a brokering process. This approach is described in detail in the inaugural issue of our editorship of *Reading Research Quarterly* (Alvermann & Reinking, 2003).

Thus, we acknowledge from the start that the complexities involved limit the likelihood that simply reading this chapter can provide the kind of advice that will result in furthering prospects for success in publishing in a research journal. What we can provide, however, is a fairly up-close look at the arduous process of writing for publication in such a journal. We hope that a glimpse into the nature of this genre may be valuable in developing an awareness of the work that is involved and the level of commitment required.

From Where We Sit as Editors

Having been engaged in one type of editing or another (research journals, books, handbooks, technical manuals, newsletters, and so forth) for over two decades now, we can say with certainty that it is easier being an editor than an author. This conclusion is especially the case when we reflect on our earlier years and the time we spent learning the trade of moving a research idea from the drawing board through to publication. Those years saw us exhilarated at times, frustrated at others, but always a bit wiser for the experiences we gained from working with editors and reviewers who were committed to publishing the best the field had to offer.

Although we do not want to oversell the difficulty of writing for research journals, we would be remiss if we failed to acknowledge the long hours, and sometimes even days or months, that go into each step of the process. Research journals, as noted earlier, represent a unique genre. However, once researchers who conduct rigorous and important studies have mastered the genre, their odds for publishing in a research journal are relatively high. At that point, it is much easier to get published than it is to convince more than a few people to read and use your ideas.

Because our objective in this chapter is to create an awareness both of the process involved when writing for research journals and the commitment demanded of authors, we begin by sharing some insights we have gained from reading the work of others who, like us, are interested in this particular genre. Whether good writing is similar to disciplined talking is a theme we examine in guidelines 1–5 that follow. Then, we move to a different level of analysis, one that explores some of the nuances of writing for research journals that we have found useful both as authors and editors that we discuss as specific advice from the editors in guidelines 6–9.

1 GUIDELINE

Understand the Nature of Academic Discourse as a Unique Genre

As with any discourse, there are certain ways of “doing” and “being” in the world—what Gee (1996) refers to as “discursive practices,” or one’s identity kit—that mark a person for membership (or not) in a particular group at a particular time. The same can be said for the discourse in which academics engage when writing for research journals. That discourse makes visible certain ways of behaving that are strategically sound if you want to be recognized by others as doing the work of an academic. For example, Kaufer and Carley (1993), in tracing the roots of academic journals, pointed out that many authors who have had success in writing for research journals engage in sophisticated strategies of selective citation.

Anticipating who may be reading their manuscript to judge its acceptability for publication may lead savvy authors to cite or to highlight some work that may be viewed favorably and to avoid citation of other work that may be viewed less favorably. However, returning again to Boswell’s comparison, this type of enlightened self-interest is akin to taking into account the perspectives and biases of whomever you are addressing orally, especially if you wish your ideas to be well received. Thus, a highly developed sense of audience is critical for scholarly writing that is intended for a research journal.

As the previous example suggests, success in writing for a research journal means being deeply literate about the process of scholarly publication. An aspiring writer for research journals can learn much by carefully reading and analyzing articles published in leading research journals. However, as has been argued elsewhere (see Gaskins et al., 1998), the articles published in journals are only the visible tip of an enormous iceberg. More enlightening to the uninitiated is what happens below the surface. Fortunately, short of actually participating in the process by submitting a manuscript, there are sources of information about academic publishing written by those who are well familiar with the process. We include a listing of such sources in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1. Sources of Information About Academic Publishing

- Canagarajah, A.S. (2002). *A geopolitics of academic writing*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Henson, T.K. (1995). Writing for publication: Messages from editors. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76, 801–803.
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AUTHOR REFLECTIONS

Read Promiscuously and Study Others

I have written enough over the years to see the rough outlines of some high-utility practices. At the risk of sounding like an old Dutch uncle, I offer two of them as food for thought—read promiscuously and study others.

First, read promiscuously. Read narrowly in your specialty area and broadly in newly developing areas that could have some bearing on your specialty area. I have found that some of my best ideas have come while reading outside the literacy research arena. That is not to say that I ignore the journals, books, newspapers, and websites on literacy. I avidly scour *Reading Research Quarterly*, *The Reading Teacher*, *Australian Journal of Language & Literacy*, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *Journal of Literacy Research*, *Literacy*, *Written Communication*, *Practically Primary*, *Language Arts*, *Reading Research & Instruction*, *Literacy Learning: The Middle Years*, *Scientific Studies of Reading*, *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, *Journal of Research in Reading*, *College English*, and *English Journal*. Plus, I surf a wider swath of periodicals that sometimes include literacy-related scholarship: *Social Text*, *History of Education Quarterly*, *American Educational Research Journal*, *American Journal of Education*, *Educational Researcher*, *The Elementary School Journal*, *Signs*, *Harvard Educational Review*, *Teachers College Record*, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, and a few others.

To keep abreast of new ideas outside the literacy research community, I employ a strategy I learned from Peter Schwartz in his book *The Art of the Long View: Planning for the Future in an Uncertain World* (Currency, 1996). I read against the grain. I make time to immerse myself in unfamiliarity. I consciously seek to encounter difference. I tune my reading attention to frequencies on the fringe (which are not really the fringe to someone else, but only seen that way if literacy research is your center). I deliberately read across disciplines, subjects, social strata, and languages. I am looking for new insights and perceptions that run counter to the intellectual current of the day.

Second, study others. Read how others put their writing together. I started my career by studying more than the ideas presented in an article, chapter, or textbook: I studied *how* they put their ideas together. I learned to do this from a course I took in graduate school from Alan Peshkin on academic writing. He had us analyze lead paragraphs, for example, across a number of genres and tease out the features and patterns that worked well across these cases. We then tried our hand at writing lead paragraphs for our own academic manuscripts that exemplified some of these features. I have been doing it ever since.

Realize That Writing for a Research Journal Is More Calculated, Planned, and Rigorous Than Other Genres

Returning to the idea of writing as disciplined talk, writing for a research journal is more calculated and rigorously planned when compared to the relative spontaneity of talk, even more so than other genres of writing. Arguably, writing for a research journal is more labor-intensive than any other genre of writing. To make our point,

“Your manuscript is both good and original. The part that is good is not original, and the part that is original is not good.”

—SAMUEL JOHNSON

we offer this conjecture: If one were to create a numerical value representing the proportion of person-hours of work per word in an article published in a research journal, we believe it would be a higher number than for any other kind of academic writing. Consider, for example, the number of hours devoted to planning and conducting a study, collecting and analyzing data, writing a draft of a manuscript, and revising that draft multiple times before and after submission. Then, after submission, factor in the hours that reviewers and editors spend in reading multiple drafts and in writing their own prose (a review of a research manuscript is another genre) to provide authors with feedback. The review process points to another fairly unique dimension of academic writing: Few other genres of writing are as carefully and deeply scrutinized as a manuscript submitted to a research journal.

Realize That Precision and Clarity Are Highly Valued and That Manuscripts Are Rigorously Scrutinized for These Qualities

Those who are most successful in having their work accepted for publication in top-notch research journals understand and accept the need for a high level of scrutiny, which has a profound effect on the way they approach and carry out their writing. Although as editors we subscribe to the notion that a highly developed sense of precision and clarity is one of the hallmarks of academic writing, some writers of academic prose question that notion and, in fact, test its limits on theoretical grounds (e.g., see Aoki, 2000; Lather, 1996). The need for precision and clarity in academic writing extends far beyond most oral communication, in which a variety of missteps or misstatements are tolerated, and it even goes beyond what is typically tolerated in most other genres of writing. From our perspective, individuals who are inexperienced in writing research reports often attempt to achieve just the opposite effect. That is, they seem to operate on the principle that writing academic prose requires inflating ordinary ideas by

using esoteric prose, often laced with jargon. In the worst cases, these attempts could be interpreted as purposefully disguising a lack of substance.

The precision and clarity demanded of writing for research journals may mean adopting a writing style contrary to a style that speakers and writers in other genres employ to add variety and spice to prose. For example, speakers and writers often are advised to vary their choice of words and phrasing in order to avoid repetition and maintain their audiences' attention. However, if you followed that advice while writing for a research journal, the consequences would be less positive. Varying language in research reports more often than not leads to confusion. For example, referring in a report of a research study to a single test as alternately an "exam," "standardized test," "assessment protocol," "evaluation instrument," and a "pre- or posttest" can result in a lack of precision and clarity that are expected by a scholarly readership. In a research report, precision and clarity always trump rhetorical variety and cleverness. On the other hand, skillful writers of research reports can make their prose interesting and engaging on an intellectual, if not aesthetic, level. We would argue that a well-crafted research report can have a certain aesthetic appeal to those who understand and appreciate that genre.

When compared to speaking, scholarly writing might best be compared to a president's (more accurately a president's speech writers') composition of a State of the Union address. Every word, every line, every idea is carefully crafted to communicate a particular viewpoint, but also one that is politically astute and aimed at carrying the listener along toward an inevitable conclusion. It is also crafted with the awareness that a variety of pundits and political analysts will deconstruct every word, line, and idea to look for errors, weaknesses in logic, and so forth. Likewise, it is important for those who wish to write for scholarly journals to realize that their writing process needs to be distinctly intense and meticulously slow in attending to every word, phrase, and sentence.

4 GUIDELINE

Know Intimately the Intended Outlet for Your Work and Its Likely Audience, Including Editors, Reviewers, and Readers

As noted earlier, the parallels between good writing and disciplined talk are interesting to contemplate, though in research report writing they have limited application compared to other genres. Still, one application in particular stands out when we think of some advice we might offer individuals seeking to publish in a research journal for the first time. Just as in oral communication, it is a good idea to know your audience in terms of its background, interests, biases, and the like. It is equally a good plan to research a journal's history, goals, intended audience, and reach.

A good place to begin is to locate previously published articles in the targeted outlet for your work and to study them carefully to determine how your work compares, especially in terms of scope. For example, pilot studies, and other research efforts of limited scope or duration, are not typically considered for publication in major research journals, although sometimes research journals publish brief research reports in a separate section. But this is just one consideration. In addition, savvy authors will sometimes examine the list of members of the editorial review board of a particular journal trying to anticipate who might be selected to review a manuscript they intend to submit. Likewise, knowing the perspectives of the editors helps. In many instances editors will publish their editorial philosophies or orientations when beginning their tenure as editors. Some editors also present at conference sessions or conduct workshops aimed at providing advice about publishing in research journals.

5 GUIDELINE

Realize That Writing for Research Journals Means Carefully Managing Emotions, Biases, Interpretive Preferences, and So Forth

Like all communication, whether oral or written, there is a personal and emotional aspect to writing for scholarly journals, which may be useful for writers to acknowledge outright. In that sense, all writing, even for research journals, is rhetorical (see Cherryholmes, 1993). Everyone has pet perspectives and theories that they would like to advance, and many researchers are highly invested in certain viewpoints. These biases unavoidably enter into scholarly writing to some extent whether that is the intention or not. Various research traditions and approaches view the personal and emotional aspects of academic writing differently, but writing for research journals typically involves to some extent managing, explicitly or implicitly, your biases and preferred interpretations. If potential biases are not managed, even if not acknowledged explicitly, they are apt to be quite evident to reviewers and editors who are likely to question a writer's commitment to considering a variety of interpretations of data. Failure to take into account the possibility of more than one interpretation undermines the notion of skepticism, which is a key component of scientific research, used in the broadest sense of the term (see Robson, 2002).

“Always make sure you are right and then—go for it.”

—DAVY CROCKETT

To summarize the preceding general guidelines, writing for research journals is similar and dissimilar in some respects to disciplined talk. It certainly is extremely disciplined even if it is not always like talk. However, in addition to the exceptional discipline required for the sake of clarity and precision and for the

sake of more dispassionate interpretation, writing for research journals often entails high stakes for authors. Specifically, people interested and engaged in writing for research journals typically do so because their jobs depend on it. Publication in research journals, more than any other type of scholarly writing, paves the road to success for scholars and is typically a requirement for them to retain their place in academia, to be promoted, to obtain salary increases, or to increase their standing in the academic community. Thus, in most instances, for those who engage in writing for research journals, the enjoyment, pleasure, satisfaction, and rewards often occur late rather than early in the writing process, particularly because the earliest stages of writing can be particularly arduous.

But more specifically, what advice might be offered to an inexperienced author who is writing or considering submitting a manuscript to a rigorous, peer-reviewed research journal? That is, what might we suggest as editors that would not only help writers to achieve their goal of publishing a piece, but perhaps even to enjoy the disciplined process? That is the focus of the next set of guidelines.

GUIDELINE

Establish a Clear Focus

It has been our experience as editors that reviewers have little tolerance for manuscripts that clearly lack focus. Their frustration is understandable given the time that is required to review a manuscript and the irritation that inevitably develops from rereading a paper several times to infer an author's main purpose or intent. It is better to do the hard work of focusing up front so that a manuscript presents the data in the best and most interpretable light. Following this guideline is often challenging for authors because they are so immersed in the topic and methodology of their research that they fail to see where a reviewer or reader, even one familiar with their topic, might need help understanding the rationale and methodology. A good strategy for adhering to Guideline 6 is to ask colleagues (and here we include graduate students)—especially individuals who are not that familiar with your work and who will be honest—to read your manuscript before submitting it.

As a related aside, writing a good abstract, which is required for most journal articles, is critical to conveying a clear focus. In our own writing for research journals, we typically write our abstract after a first draft. If, in writing our abstract, it is difficult to write a concise summary that conveys a central focus, that probably means that we have not been successful in establishing a clear focus for our work in the body of the manuscript. We also tend to devote more time to writing the abstract than to writing any prose of comparable length in a manuscript. The reason is simple. Not only is it an intense exercise to concisely explain the focus of our work; it is the first thing that editors and reviewers typically read. For better or worse, a strong opinion is often formed about a manuscript after reading its abstract. In our experience, many abstracts, even of otherwise good

manuscripts, are poorly written and often do not conform to standards such as specified in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, a source that should be studied and used by anyone who aspires to write for research journals in the social sciences.

7 GUIDELINE

State Research Questions Clearly and Succinctly

The ability to state questions clearly and concisely is both a science and an art. Striving for clarity and conciseness, however, need not distract from the larger goal of wording questions in such a way that they are interesting to read, intellectually engaging, and memorable. To state questions at that level, adequate time must be devoted to composing questions for a research report. An author who has learned the art of crafting questions that take into account the theory behind them, while not losing sight of the study's focus, will have succeeded on two counts. First, the questions will be true to the study's theoretical framework, producing a cohesiveness that is both pleasing to read and necessary for making connections between theory and purpose. Second, the questions will serve as guides to keep the author focused while writing the paper, and just as important, these questions will keep the reviewers on track while reading a manuscript. Sustaining reviewers' attention and their sense of feeling that they know where they are going in a well-crafted manuscript can thus have many positive effects.

On the other hand, experience tells us that even the best-worded questions will not serve their purpose if authors fail to systematically state them the same way throughout the different sections of the report. A common misperception is that by changing the wording of a perfectly good question, repetition and the potential loss of audience through boredom can be avoided. Questions that are worded one way in the introduction to the manuscript, but metamorphose into something else halfway through the report, only to reappear as a new amalgam at the end of a manuscript, serve to confuse, not guide, readers. To prevent this unnecessary complication, state the questions the same way throughout the study (unless, of course, it is a qualitative study in which the questions truly did change, and a methodological note is needed to that effect).

8 GUIDELINE

Clearly Explain the Research Methodology as a Logical Extension of Your Questions and Theoretical Stance

Because the methodology section of a manuscript involves more than simply the methods used to collect and analyze the data, editors and reviewers expect to see some connection between it and the theoretical framework that situates the ques-

tions and all that follows. For example, when, as editors, we initially read a manuscript to decide whether or not it should be sent out for review, we look for a thread that connects the theoretical framework to the research questions, to the methodology, and to the interpretation of the findings. If this thread is broken or snagged at any one of those points, then the study is not cohesive. It is often useful for authors to discuss explicitly why their methodology fits the questions and issues they are addressing and why it is particularly appropriate to the theoretical stance they are taking. Of course, it is even more important to establish this logical connection and coherence before conceptualizing and conducting a study.

Appropriate methodologies are those that work with, not against, the theoretical framework and literature review that ground a study. For example, a study of adolescents' multiliteracies would make little sense if grounded in a theory that views reading as an autonomous process, or one that focuses on cognitive development to the near exclusion of the sociocultural and historical contexts that embed such development.

In regard to reports of quantitative studies, it is important to name the design and not leave it up to the reviewers and editors to infer it, which we find is a common problem. In regard to quantitative studies, well-written reports state specifically whether or not there was random assignment and a control group, as well as the effect sizes obtained for any statistically significant results. As editors, we continue to be surprised at the number of submitted manuscripts that lack both an explicitly stated research design and the effect sizes of the findings.

Any manuscript reporting the results of a research study should provide sufficient detail so that another researcher could replicate the study. This is foundational to maintaining a strong research base in any field. Good methods sections meet this standard, particularly in the most rigorous research journals. In reporting research of any kind, it is imperative that a rigorous accounting be made of how the data were collected and analyzed. Reports of qualitative research in particular must give sufficient details about the study's participants, the procedures used in collecting the data, and the role of the researcher. Without this information, editors and reviewers have little or no basis for making judgments about the authenticity of the data or the degree to which the researcher is aware of how his or her subjectivities enter into the research process and affect the trustworthiness of the data.

Clearly Support Your Findings, Conclusions, and Interpretations With Data (and Do Not Go Beyond Your Data)

It is important to be cognizant of the fact that meanings are made rather than found. Data do inform results, but the interpretation a researcher gives data is

AUTHOR REFLECTIONS

Alexander's "Rules of the West"



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When I was a professor at Texas A&M University coming up through the ranks, there were certain personal guidelines to which I adhered—guidelines that helped me to shape my current approach to professional writing. I am never shy about sharing my thoughts with anyone in earshot and I am passionate about mentoring graduate students. I must have strongly voiced my personal guidelines on repeated occasions to aspiring Texas A&M PhDs because the students humorously christened them Alexander's "Rules of the West" for professional writing.

Even though I left Texas for the wide open spaces of Maryland in 1995, I did not fail to bring those infamous rules along with me. Even though the western moniker may not carry the same meaning to those outside Texas, the students and young faculty have acknowledged the utility and practicality of these guidelines for professional writing. Therefore, I share a few of them with the endorsement that they have served me and a generation of graduate students well.

Rule #1. Seek quality in every piece you write, but do not hold out for perfection. Quality and perfection should not be confused when it comes to writing for literacy publication. Whatever you elect to make part of the public discourse that carries your name should always be constructed with quality in mind. Care, thoughtfulness, and precision are aspects of that quality. However, no manuscript, no matter how much care, thought, and precision are involved, will ever achieve perfection. There simply are no perfect manuscripts. So abandon the quest for perfection, but never relinquish the goal of quality.

Rule #2. Get yourself in a research–writing cycle that works for you. One of the observations I have made about productive individuals is that they operate within a particular research–writing cycle. Because of that cyclical behavior, they are consistent and not sporadic in their work. Even though their rate or pace of writing can vary, they are rarely idle. For me and my graduate students, that research–writing cycle is clearly displayed on a large board in our lab. We always seek to have a study in conceptualization, another in data analysis or writing, even while other works are under review or in revision. It is rewarding for us to watch ideas take shape on the board and eventually find their way into manuscript and hopefully into publication.

Rule #3. Become known for a line of inquiry. Contrary to popular opinion, it is not the sheer number of publications that matter most in the literacy field. Rather it is the quality and significance of the ideas conveyed in those publications. From the standpoint of academic success in literacy publication, one measure of quality and significance for the individual comes in the form of a discernible line of inquiry. What is the message or related ideas that you are seeking to share with the literacy community? The leading scholars in literacy are known for those messages and ideas. They have a line of inquiry with which they are associated, and the combined weight of their related works helps to communicate that message to the broader community of educational researchers and practitioners.

Whether or not these particular rules work for you, I believe that we all benefit from well-articulated, personal guidelines to which we can turn as we grow and develop as literacy researchers and practitioners.

what determines their meaning. That is, meanings are constructed based on any number of interpretive stances a single researcher might take; they do not simply emerge, full-blown, from data. Researchers' backgrounds, theoretical perspectives, historical context, issues of power, and numerous other factors come into play when meaning is made of data. Although we often see the inappropriate use of phrases, such as "the findings emerged...", the problems and issues run deeper. Editors and reviewers want to see clear support for an author's findings and conclusions. The theoretical framework, the types of questions asked, and the methodological choices made are at stake in drawing conclusions from data, and these are much too important pieces of information to bury in jargon or to assume that readers will accept without appropriate evidence.

Likewise, it is important to limit discussion of findings and interpretation of them to the data presented. Inexperienced authors often give in to the temptation to extrapolate the meanings, interpretations, and implications of their data far beyond the data and the inherent limitations of a single study. They do so, presumably, for at least two reasons. First, they may want to emphasize the importance of their work and its far-reaching implications. Second, and this is the more deadly error, they may want to advance a preferred perspective or bias. On the other hand, the discussion section of a research report invites some reasonable speculation about and extrapolation of data. Thus, a careful balance must be sought between engaging in reasonable, moderate, data-based speculation and going too far beyond the data or even further toward risking the impression of unmitigated bias.

Closing Thoughts

Writing for research journals requires a set of well-honed skills and an overall understanding of this particular genre's intricacies. Though not for the undisciplined writer, it is at the same time a genre that is capable of providing both enjoyment and a sense of accomplishment among writers who devote the necessary time to master it, which often means dealing with rejection (see Pressley, chapter 10, this volume). For certain, our own time will have been well spent in writing this chapter about writing for research journals if it invites new writers into the field and encourages them to add to the many nuances already present in this genre.

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