Thoughts on Scholarly Writing

Suggestions for Authors Considering Publishing in RUSQ

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At a recent *RUSQ* board meeting, board members and I had a thoughtful and interesting discussion of the manuscript review process. As we have been working together now for a full volume of the journal, it seemed like a good time to review the processes and procedures we use to evaluate manuscripts and come to publication decisions. I hope that the information below, much of which comes out of that discussion, will be useful to authors considering publishing in *RUSQ* or in other scholarly journals.

When attempting to publish in any scholarly journal, the first thing a prospective author should consider and review is the journal's instructions to authors. Here, the journal editor and editorial board have established the process for submitting an article, the desired format of the article when submitted, and the citation standards used by the journal (see *RUSQ*'s instructions to authors at http://rusa.metapress.com/support/for-authors.mpx). For many editors, these instructions are an initial screening tool. If the instructions ask for a separate title and abstract page and that is not included, or if the citations are prepared as footnotes and the journal requested endnotes, there will be concerns about the paper before it has even been read. Similarly, if a paper is submitted with tracked changes or comments added during the writing process (i.e., not in its final form), it gives an immediate impression of incompleteness and is less likely to be considered for publication, let alone sent out for review. Additionally, be sure to check your submission for grammatical errors, misspellings, incorrect or missing citations, and the like. These sorts of errors in a submitted manuscript raise concerns about the quality of the paper.

One of the problems editors often face in reviewing manuscripts is the large number of submissions on the same topic. Former *RUSQ* editor Diane Zabel noted in 2006 that she was seeing "a disproportionate number of manuscripts relating to library instruction."[1] While the subject may have changed, digital reference services and the need for reference desks seem to be the current hot topics, the trend is sadly the same. Prospective authors will make their manuscripts more attractive to editors and to readers by looking for areas that have not already been widely explored. If you are examining a topic about which much has been written lately, you need to make clear what your work brings to the discussion and how it forwards that discussion in useful and perhaps provocative ways.

PEER REVIEW

The review process for *RUSQ* submissions is double-blind. Articles that are submitted and meet the basic criteria for consideration as a feature article in the journal are stripped of any information that could identify the author(s) and sent to two referees, neither of whom knows the other. The referees use a standard form to evaluate the article and may make comments and suggestions directly in the manuscript. The form asks the referees to rate and comment on the submission in several areas:

Topicality/Appropriateness to Readership

The referees evaluate whether the subject of the article fits the journal's mission. In the case of *RUSQ*, the journal seeks articles on "information of interest to reference librarians, information specialists, and other professionals involved in user-oriented library services. The scope of the journal includes all aspects of library service to adults and reference service and collection development at every level and for all types of libraries."[2] Prospective authors should consider the audience for their piece and submit it to an appropriate journal. In the case of *RUSQ*, the journal seeks feature articles that present and analyze original empirical research or theoretical pieces that might include a longer literature review and an analysis of a current issue in library science or a revival of an older issue that is still, or perhaps once again, relevant. The journal does not publish annotated bibliographies as feature articles.

Relevance

This criterion asks the referees to examine how the article builds on and advances existing scholarship on the chosen topic. Feature articles in *RUSQ* need to do more than simply comment on existing work. Rather, the research should seek to expand the profession's understanding of a particular area of reference librarianship. It is important to not only detail your research but to use that research to draw conclusions that move the profession forward. Too often, writers fail to take this next step of saying why what they did or discovered is important. While there are no set percentages for different sections of an article, we frequently see articles in which the literature review and results cover multiple pages and the conclusion and discussion cover only a paragraph or two. The conclusion should discuss what is new in the article and what this new knowledge contributes to the literature of the profession. The discussion and conclusion sections make the case for why your paper is worth publishing and should receive the attention they deserve.

Literature Review

The literature review is one of the most important parts of a scholarly article, but also one that frequently needs substantial revision when an article is first reviewed. The literature review has many functions. First, it should include the seminal writings on the selected topic, with some discussion that puts the new research into context of these works. While it is important to include these early writings, it is also easy to pile up a long list of citations trying to indicate that an author or authors have done their research. Instead, authors should use the literature to support their work or to show where it diverges from past research on their chosen topic. The literature review also needs to connect to the rest of the article. The articles cited in a literature review and the discussion of these articles should further the arguments presented in the submission, take as much space as needed to do so but not more, and demonstrate that the author(s) of the article understand the context in which their new research is situated. *RUSQ* encourages authors to look beyond the LIS field for pertinent items to include in literature reviews, particularly in the areas of instruction, literacy, and technology.

Research/Scholarship

When evaluating the quality of the research and scholarship in an *RUSQ* submission, the referees are looking to see if the author has demonstrated an understanding of the research process and correctly applied it, and if the research study has been properly designed and executed. One problem frequently seen in submitted articles is small sample size. Authors often try to extrapolate from very short studies, covering a single class or semester, or from a very new project. While these initial studies sometimes provide interesting information, the paper would be stronger if the research was carried out over a longer period or with a larger sample size, allowing the author to apply more rigorous statistical analysis. If your study has a small sample size, or is more of a preliminary study, be sure to discuss that in the method and results sections of the paper. Do not draw conclusions that are not justified by the research.

Quantitative/Statistical Findings

In this section of the review, the referees consider several questions: (1) Are the findings relevant? (2) Has the author explained them in a manner that can be understood by the nonspecialist? and (3) If there are graphic presentations, do they clarify and summarize findings for the reader? Often, the analysis of statistical data is one of the weaker part of submitted pieces. An *RUSQ* board member noted that when planning a paper, authors should include a plan for statistical analysis in the research design. When writing up the results, be sure to go beyond simply reporting quantitative data, and use appropriate statistical tests to measure the significance of the results. Authors should consider carefully the best way to present their findings. Graphs, charts, and tables are useful ways to quickly give the reader an overview of the findings. However, not all results merit a separate table or chart. Sometimes it is clearer to simply use the body of the article to relate the findings. One great advantage to having *RUSQ*

in digital form is that we have the opportunity to incorporate digital files of supporting material that might not be appropriate to include in the main article. These could include sound files as well as documents and charts, and authors should be aware of these options. While the primary audience for *RUSQ* is reference librarians, articles submitted should be free of library jargon that would make them less clear to other readers.

Style/Quality of Writing

Finally, *RUSQ* referees, and journal editors in general, are looking for clearly written, readable articles. The tone of feature articles in *RUSQ* should be scholarly, but scholarly writing does not need to be impenetrable and obscure. Active voice, declarative sentences, and attention to language are all important. Editors will work with authors to improve the writing and make a piece stronger, but it is incumbent on the author to make his or her article as clear as possible from the beginning. One suggestion here is to have a colleague review your piece before submitting it; a second set of eyes will usually catch some errors that need correcting.

AFTER PEER REVIEW

Once an *RUSQ* submission has been sent out for review, the turnaround time for a publication decision is about eight weeks. The referees can make one of five recommendations:

- Publish without revision.
- Publish with minor revisions as indicated, not requiring further referee evaluation.
- Not acceptable as is, needs major revisions as indicated and requires further referee evaluation.
- Not acceptable as a feature article. Consider for one of *RUSQ* columns. In this case, the editor will consult with the column editors, who have the final decision on column choices.
- Reject for *RUSQ*. If the referees feel that the piece might be appropriate for an alternative journal, they can specify that title.

Taking into account the referees' suggestions, the *RUSQ* editor will make a publication decision and notify the author of the article. Most articles that are accepted require minor revisions, and the publication decision letter will included comments from the referees and the editor making specific suggestions for changes. Similarly, if the reviewers return an article as not acceptable and in need of major revisions, the editor will indicate what revisions might make the article acceptable as a feature piece in the journal. In this case, if the author chooses to resubmit the piece, it will go through a second review process similar to the initial review, and it is possible that an article will be rejected on this second review.

Publishing in *RUSQ*, or other scholarly journals, can be a satisfying experience, and I hope the articles published in *RUSQ* enable all of us to improve our practice of reference librarianship in its myriad forms. I hope as well that the information above will encourage writers to submit thoughtful, elegantly written manuscripts for consideration so that *RUSQ* can continue its role as a model of scholarly communication.

References

1. Diane Zabel, "Advice for Prospective Authors," *Reference & User Services Association* 46, no. 2 (Winter 2006): 4.
2. "Instructions to Authors," *Reference & User Services Association*, accessed June 24, 2013, http://rusa.metapress.com/support/for-authors.mpx.