Advice for Prospective Authors

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I have read numerous manuscripts in the past few years in my role as an editorial board member for two journals and a monographic series. I recently spoke on the topic of journal publishing for an in-house workshop on tenure and promotion. Since my appointment as editor of *Reference & User Services Quarterly* (*RUSQ*), I have responded to several queries about publishing in *RUSQ*. I am using this column to pass along my perspectives on writing for peer-reviewed journals in general, and *RUSQ* in particular. I want to acknowledge the assistance of former *RUSQ* editors Connie Van Fleet and Danny Wallace, who knowledgeably and patiently answered my many questions about the *RUSQ* referee process during the past few months. Additionally, I want to thank David Kohl, my mentor and role model, for sharing his insights about scholarly publishing as well as his philosophy about the role of a journal editor.

First, there are some general trends that I have observed. It appears that there has been an increase in manuscript flow. In the case of the journals that I have been involved with, there have been more manuscript submissions in the past few years. Perhaps the number of librarians on the tenure track has increased. Unfortunately, too many of these prospective authors are writing about the same topic. As a manuscript reviewer, I have evaluated a disproportionate number of manuscripts relating to library instruction. There are literally hundreds of articles published annually on this topic. My advice to authors is to find an area that has been largely ignored. For example, my perception is that there are far fewer articles published per year relating to access services than library instruction.

I have frequently been asked by untenured colleagues to provide some sense about a particular journal's prestige. I caution against placing too much emphasis on a journal's impact factor, as this measurement is derived from a tool that does not index many of our profession's journals. Additionally, certain types of articles (like review articles) are often read but rarely cited. A better gauge of a journal's prestige may be the recent Nisonger and Davis study (which replicates the 1985 Kohl-Davis study) ranking the perception of library and information science (LIS) journals by LIS educators (deans to be precise) and directors of Association of Research Libraries (ARL) libraries.[1]

I have also been asked about the manuscript review process. Most journals publish instructions to authors that establish the review process for that journal. These instructions will let you know if an editor alone is a referee, if an article is submitted to a single blind reviewer, or if a double-blind review process is used. The instructions will also let

you know how long the review process takes. Prospective *RUSQ* authors can review the "Instructions to Authors" in the Fall 2006 issue of *RUSQ* (vol. 46, no. 1). These instructions can also be found online at www.rusq.org/index.php/instructions-to-authors. *RUSQ* employs a double-blind review process, meaning that manuscripts are sent to two reviewers for evaluation. The referees do not know who has written the manuscript, as information that might identify the author is removed. Members of the *RUSQ* Editorial Advisory Board serve as blind reviewers. However, if the manuscript flow is too much for the editorial board to handle or if a manuscript is specialized, the *RUSQ* editor may call upon other experts to serve as referees. The *RUSQ* review process generally takes six to eight weeks.

Most journal editors are going to instruct reviewers to look at common elements. When I send out a manuscript to reviewers, I ask them to complete the *RUSQ* Referee Evaluation Form. This form uses five selection criteria. Because these five areas represent typical pitfalls (not only for *RUSQ* submissions but journal submissions in general), I would like to provide some guidance on how to avoid common problems.

TOPICALITY AND APPROPRIATENESS TO READERSHIP

Make sure that your topic matches the scope of the journal to which you are submitting. In the case of *RUSQ,* manuscripts should report scholarship relating to any aspect of reference and user services. For journals other than *RUSQ,* consult the instructions to authors or browse through several issues of the journal. If you are still not sure, contact the journal editor (including the *RUSQ* journal editor). I appreciate inquiries (as do most journal editors) that provide at least a brief abstract of a proposed work. It is important that you convey how you intend to approach a topic.

CONTEXT

Referees will assess whether an author has provided context through an appropriate and adequate literature review. Surprisingly, many manuscripts in our discipline fail to include a well-done literature review. Because this is a problematic area for many writers, I recommend reviewing Charlene Kellsey's tips for writing the literature review.[2] Almost all research builds on the work of others. The literature review provides not only the foundation for an article, but gives it a sense of continuity as well. Successful authors connect their findings back to what they have found in the literature. Consequently, the discussion section of a manuscript should refer back to the literature review. Additionally, referees will assess a manuscript's bibliography for timeliness and coverage.

RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

RUSQ referees are asked to determine whether the author has demonstrated an understanding of the research process and applied it. Has the research study been properly set up and executed? Reviewers will assess an author's method for soundness. Many prospective authors fret over methodology, assuming that it is essential to employ sophisticated methodologies. It is not always necessary to use complicated methods. You may be able to get useful data through simple tabulations or quick surveys. What is essential is that you do not make assertions without appropriate data.

QUANTITATIVE AND STATISTICAL FINDINGS

Referees are asked to assess whether the findings reported in a manuscript are relevant. Specifically, *RUSQ* reviewers are asked to determine whether the author explains findings in a manner that can be understood by the nonspecialist. If there are graphic presentations, they should clarify and summarize findings for the reader. Many manuscripts present too much data. I recently reviewed a manuscript containing almost twenty tables. Few journals have the space to print this many tables, and frankly, few readers will want to examine so many tables. Instead, it is critical for authors to interpret the significance of these data and to come to a conclusion. Also, it is important for authors to return to the literature review to define how their research adds to the literature, and how their research helps solve a problem.

Style and Quality of Writing

RUSQ referees are asked to assess whether a manuscript's writing style reflects the scholarly nature of the journal. However, at the same time, the manuscript must be readable. If writing is difficult for you, ask a colleague to critically review your manuscript for grammar and clarity. Consult the "Instructions to Authors" to find information concerning stylistic requirements. In particular, please pay attention to instructions about the preparation of your manuscript because it is important that you *do not* use automatic features of word-processing software, such as embedded footnotes. Please keep in mind that in our discipline, most journal editors and manuscript reviewers are essentially volunteers. It is not really their job to do massive rewrites or to spend huge amounts of time reworking a manuscript because an author has failed to carefully prepare a manuscript according to guidelines.

RUSQ referees will return their review to the *RUSQ* editor and recommend one of the following five options: 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, suggest consideration for a *RUSQ* column; or reject for *RUSQ*. The final decision rests with the *RUSQ* editor. Most manuscripts require some author revisions. The decision letter from the *RUSQ* editor will probably summarize commentary from the referees and offer suggestions for improvement. If your