Heavy lies the editor's fingers on the keyboard
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HEAVY LIES THE EDITOR’S FINGERS ON THE KEYBOARD

MIKE ALLEN

No aspect of being an editor is perhaps more daunting then sorting through contradictory reviews given about a manuscript that is outside your area of methodological or theoretical expertise. To put together three volumes of this journal I have been required to make decisions about manuscripts involving rhetorical theory and methods. Unfortunately, I lack experience and expertise in this area. That is why journal editors have reviewers, persons whose opinions I can request and then use in making my evaluations. Reviewers provide advice to the editor, ultimately; the editor is and must be responsible for the content (the acceptance and rejection) of manuscripts.

The following questions have invaded my conscious thoughts during this time: (1) Is rhetorical reviewing different from scientific reviewing? And (2) Where does one go to learn about the requirements for publishable rhetorical scholarship? Admittedly, those questions are focused on my shortcomings. If the question involved issues about scientific research, my experience (some would call that arrogance) gives me the ability to feel as though I can and should make a decision. But, when you are outside of your domain, the reliance and trust that you place in others is greater and the higher the level of uncertainty about whether your evaluations are reasonable or not.

The classic scenario for me involves the receipt of three reviews. The reviewers all agree that the manuscript represents a competent piece of rhetorical scholarship and is well written. All three reviewers recommend rejection. I would look at this and shudder, how does one reject well written and competent scholarship? I can tell you that for most scientific writing if the piece is well written and the design competent, the chances at publication are very high. This puzzled me and made writing rejection letters rather difficult, why would one reject well written, competent scholarship?

I asked at least 15 different older and experienced rhetorical scholars some questions about the standards for “publishable” rhetorical scholarship. My question was what constituted sufficient material in a manuscript for publication, was competence enough? Suppose a manuscript came in that did a very good job of using a neo-Aristotelian analytic perspective to analyze Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. What a good analysis justify publication? Everyone answered no, that competence was not enough to warrant publication. I did then ask what more would be required for publication and everyone said some version of “the analysis would have to offer something new.” Now, for me, that is not unimportant, but it is a buzz word, because what is new? Brummett’s essay in this section does a good job of dissecting that issue and the kind of double bind (although it would probably be called a dialectic tension of some sort, the current term for a reinvention of the conceptual wheel currently popular). While the word provides a goal, the unpacking of what that word entails and how one meets that standards to me were a bit fuzzy.

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I asked for elaboration, whether new meant that the phenomenon had to be one unstudied and if unstudied was that new, if the theoretical perspective had to be new (I did ask if a neo-Aristotelian piece could ever be published and received mixed answers ranging from no, possibly, to yes, if...). Most persons said that the scholarship had to contain an argument that related to theory and extended our understanding of theory. I did ask, “how do you know it does that?” Getting beyond the statement of standards or requirements to the nitty gritty of what has to be present in a text for it to be considered publishable was difficult to assess. Many times I heard essentially some version of the definition of pornography, one could not define it, but you knew it when you saw it. My essay does not challenge that assertion, my goal is the explication of what such a view entails and the implications of embracing such a view. As editor I am occasionally queried about the standards for publication, what answer can or should I, or any editor, give to someone engaged in rhetorical approaches to scholarship.

The best explanation or definition I have ever heard of what rhetorical scholarship comes from Barry Brummett (who will claim I am misquoting and misrepresenting). He would help train my public speaking teaching assistants and define to goal of a rhetorical exercise as the production of a “rhetorical moment.” The generation of a reflection on the material that puts the text in a new light and creates a framework that never permits you to examine that discourse in quite the same way again. Sometimes that awareness will spark a change because the critique and insight will lead to action, sometimes it will not, the purpose is served if the reflection is created. This is I think echoed in the inability of scholars to create a structural definition for quality rhetorical scholarship, the view instead is the function such a inquiry provides the consumer of the material, such a view creates a very personal impact for scholarship more similar to how works of art are interpreted or valued, or how pornography receives definition.

The problem with the “aha” standard (something William Benoit, from the University of Missouri tried to explain to me at one point) is that it requires the reviewer to fundamentally learn something new. And what is new for one person is mundane or trivial for another person. But is that such a bad standard? After all, the purpose of scholarship ought to involve the presentation of information so that others can learn. If that is the case, then the requirement that the viewers learn something seems not that all unwarranted, for if the reviewer, an expert in the area, learns then others less well read should also learn from the essay. In a lot of ways this makes me a “bad” editor because I “learn” from virtually all the rhetorical manuscripts that I read.

Probably no aspect of the life of an academic carries as an uncertain nature about it then serving as a reviewer. At the same time, no aspect of the existence as an academic probably carries collectively more significance, at so many levels, as that as serving as a reviewer. A number of institutional issues are related to the successful reviews required for publication (promotion, tenure, merit raises).

The piece of the academy in which I have made my home lies in the quantitative social sciences. I admit that the home is a bit broken and has more than a few sets of issues and fights within that community of scholars. However, rejection often in the social sciences is based usually on one of two standards: (1) lack of competence in the design and/or analysis, and/or (2) lack of providing something new and worthy of publication to the rest of the community. While the application of those standards vary based on the circumstances of the individual article and topic, usually some variation of that theme typically serves as the basis for rejection of the manuscript.
After editing for a few months, I became acutely aware of my deficiencies as a rhetorical scholar. The problem was trying to decide between publication or non-publication of rhetorical manuscripts given the diversity of the views of the reviewers. When experts disagree and the issues constitute areas about which I am not clear, the problem is how to make a decision. Decisions are easy when there is a strong sense of agreement and the outcomes are not under dispute.

**THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SCIENCE AND THE HUMANITIES**

The greatest probably single difference between the techniques is in the issue of competence in relationship to scholarship. Reading my own reviews as well as the myriad of reviews as editor, scientists when reviewing concern themselves with primarily two issues: (1) is the technique in the investigation competent and (2) are the outcomes of the investigation worth reporting. If you examine the methodological literature in the social sciences, the resolution of arguments involve determinations of what constitutes competence in research. Competence is typically defined as adherence to a set of principles or rules. While there is some argument about the nature of particular statistics or various issues in measurement and validity, most of the essential requirements for competent research are generally well understood and fully explained.

The second criteria for social science involves a more sense of whether the investigation is grounded theoretically and the question asked and answered deserves journal space. This statement involves a series of value judgments and the criteria are not nearly as fixed, but I would argue that there is little argument about the existence of this standard and the need by the authors of a manuscript to consider how the essay would meet this standard. The authors must provide an argument to justify the requirements or value for the effort.

The focus of most rhetorical essays requires the scholar to make a clear and cogent argument about something. The argument ought to involves something new or original that contributes to understanding. But there does seem to be disagreement about whether the understanding involves theoretical understanding at an abstract level, understanding of the rhetorical phenomenon under investigation, or perhaps something else. The question is a bit clearer but the standards for such arguments, in other words, what is a good argument remain a bit less than clear. However, a focus on the making of an argument in order to advance a claim that fulfills a particular function is not unimportant.

The standards for what creates a compelling case, or the function that the argument must serve creates a bit of disagreement. The burden lies on the author to meet the standards for publication. The burden can be a rather heavy or difficult one, depending on the requirements and expectation of the reviewer. My own feeling is that some of the issue depends on how widely read the reviewer. For some reviewers that spend free time reading rhetorical scholarship, little is really new. For others that spend little time reading, the scholarly argument made very easily is new, particularly one imported from outside the discipline.

If I had to summarize what I believe the various elements to be saying, a writer needs to create a compelling argument about some rhetorical artifact. That argument can take a variety of forms dealing with either the theoretical implications of the analysis of the importance of the artifact under discussion. The argument must provide
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something new and interesting to the community to warrant attention. The author should present arguments to justify the attention that the artifact and the theory deserve by the rest of the community.

But this statement provides little solace or direction in terms of the specifics. The manuscripts contained in this section do not create a sense of uniformity and a careful reading will illustrate that these scholars differ based on the emphasis and the requirement of what should constituted publishable rhetorical scholarship.

WHY DEVOTE THIS SPACE TO SUCH AN ISSUE?

Like any scholar I asked several persons where I could go to read to distinguish the standards that would differentiate competent rhetorical scholarship (a necessary condition) from publishable rhetorical scholarship. The persons I asked thought about it for a few minutes and no one generated anything more than a part of a book chapter here or some possible essay there, but nothing directly dealing with the question. Given the centrality of the question to the nature of publication and the duties of reviewers and editors, this gap makes the process invisible. The goal of this set of essays is to present a broad view of such matters to the discipline. The question seems important to me as an editor.

The goal is not to standardize the reviewing process or to argue for or against the need for objectivity. The goal is to articulate why, in the view of the reviewers (usually members of the discipline), some scholarship is considered better (publishable) than other scholarship. Given that Communication Studies publishes about 18% of the manuscripts received, the evaluations about quality are important. Rhetorical scholars indicate by reviews which scholarship is deserving of public attention and which is not.

I did run a reliability analysis comparing the consistency of rhetorical reviewers to social scientific reviewers. The reliability coefficient for rhetorical reviewers was relatively low, .42. For social scientists the reliability was a lot higher, .77. This coefficient only indicates that the reviewers in one group are more likely to agree then reviewers in the other category (although it could be argued that as editor I could probably select reviewers more likely to agree in the social sciences rather than rhetoric).

Frankly this should not be surprising. If learning something new is a cornerstone for rhetorical reviewing, the amount of learning would vary from reviewer to reviewer quite a great deal, depending on the reading and view towards material. All this indicates is that generally rhetorical scholarship is simply going to generate more disagreement about the value of the published work compared to social scientists. But, since the goal is argumentative, issues like position and perspective play a much more central role. Consider that for the quantitative social scientist, the gender, politics, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity of the scientist should not influence the findings (and dozens of meta-analyses verify that view) whereas I think many rhetorical scholars would not agree about the lack of author influence with regards to the generation of rhetorical scholarship. Rhetorical scholarship is much more personal and the introduction of these idiosyncrasies of the individual play an intentional part of the scholarship. If this is true, recognition of this as an aspect of the process simply reflects the practice.

The challenge of this set of manuscripts was not to change rhetorical scholarship or practices (that is far too ambitious and pretentious). The challenge faced by the authors in this task was to articulate the practices of the rhetorical scholars. Such
articulation does not require agreement, for each person can have a separate perspective and procedure. Such articulation intends to generate understanding and reflection. Reflections intend to provide a picture of what is and potential assessments of what ought to be. The problem is that such reflections bring a picture of not what is, but rather what those creating the reflection perceive. I ask you to read the essays about the practices of rhetorical publications and then reflect on whether the picture represents the world as it is and the discipline as it should be.