What Professors Want From Editors and Peer Reviewers
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Lynn Worsham, editor of JAC, a quarterly journal of rhetoric, writing, culture, and politics, recently wrote a helpful essay offering suggestions to professors to help them navigate the peer review process and have articles published in their field. It was so helpful, in fact, that I passed it out to our students who are thinking about one day entering into the disciplinary conversation. However, what I found missing from it was what we professors would like to see from editors and peer reviewers. As we are expected to follow some written and unwritten rules, editors and readers should be reminded of a few ideas, as well.

First, most professors I talk to about this issue complain a good deal about the amount of time it takes for them to hear back from editors and readers. Many of us know that the problem often lies in the hands of the peer reviewers, as we have been readers at one time or another ourselves. However, when we are the readers, we seem to forget about the professors at the other end of the submission process, so it only bothers us when we are the ones doing the submitting. There are times, though, where editors and readers are simply not holding up their end of the bargain by returning a decision in a timely fashion. If professors wait over a year for a response, their progress toward tenure is severely affected, especially if they actually honor some journals’ requests for not submitting the same article to various journals simultaneously.

What can make this matter even worse is when professors have to keep track of which journals have responded to the articles they’ve submitted so that they can remind the editor of the submitting. There are times, though, where editors and readers are simply not holding up their end of the bargain by returning a decision in a timely fashion. If professors wait over a year for a response, their progress toward tenure is severely affected, especially if they actually honor some journals’ requests for not submitting the same article to various journals simultaneously.

Next, editors should also follow the rules that they set for us writers. For those journals that still require hard copies of submissions, a self-addressed stamped envelope is almost always requested (and should be sent anyway, as most professors know, though some choose to ignore that knowledge). However, I have had several journals send rejection notices via e-mail and keep the stamped envelope. This practice is a minor inconvenience, of course, especially for those of us who do not have to pay our own postage. However, for graduate students and part-time faculty, those mailing expenses can add up, and every stamp that is not used simply adds to the cost of submission. Just as professors’ not numbering pages correctly or not quite following the correct formatting is a reflection of their inattention to details, editors’ not following their own rules reflects poorly on the journal and its staff.

The last and most important issue when it comes to editors’ and readers’ responses to professors, though, is the tone of the response. Those of us who are engaged in academic discourse know that readers will disagree with our arguments, and we know that editors will
decide, for whatever reason, that our submissions should not be published in their journals. However, that does not give them license to insult either our work or us. In speaking to friends and colleagues, we all have horror stories about responses from editors and readers that are nothing more than ad hominem attacks or a dismissal of ideas because of the readers’ particular view of a work.

This type of response can be especially problematic for graduate students and professors just beginning in a field. When I was in graduate school, I submitted an essay on Edith Wharton to a journal. The essay was the best one I had ever written, as far as I could tell, and I was eager to begin participating in what I hoped would be my future discipline. I attended a college, though, where professors never discussed publishing, so I had no knowledge of it before I entered graduate school. Not surprisingly, the journal turned down the essay and rightly so, as it was certainly not the caliber of writing that editors should expect. However, the response has stuck with me for years, as the reader simply wrote, “This is a good essay, for an undergraduate.” When I tell that to most people, they are surprised that I stayed in the profession and that I ever submitted anything again.

As professors we are not afraid of a healthy debate about ideas, and we seek honest feedback on our work. However, insults, whether directed at those ideas or at us personally, have no place in the critical debate. We would never allow our students to write essays using some of the responses I have seen from readers, nor would we write those comments on our students’ papers. Instead, we would tell them to focus on the ideas of the critics, as we focus on the ideas our students present in their essays. We put aside our personal feelings about the students and try to truly engage the ideas in and of themselves.

What professors truly want is constructive feedback that will make them better writers, thinkers and researchers. If, especially in our early days, we have somehow overlooked a seminal work (or a work that a reader at least believes is seminal), or have faulty logic, then, please, tell us so, but do so in an effort to make us and, therefore, the discipline, stronger.

I have had several wonderful editors help me take an article that was not fully formed and change it into one that they and I could be proud of, simply by asking a few questions or making one or two truly helpful suggestions. One editor simply suggested looking at two or three sources; only one of them turned out to be helpful, but that one led me to turn a few-page opinion piece into a full-length article that went beyond a scope I could have imagined. When I submitted a book manuscript to a university press, I received a rejection letter that was a page and a half long, and, to be honest, it stung. However, after reflecting on the comments, I revised the manuscript, adding enough material to lengthen it by a third, then had another press pick it up.

We do not expect to be coddled, but we do expect to be treated decently and to have our efforts dealt with respectfully. In the same way that editors and readers wish to be treated as professionals who have guidelines that writers should follow, so, too, do professors wish to be treated as ones who are trying to make a contribution to our disciplines.

— Kevin Brown
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