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Editorial: Improving Quality

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Editorial: Improving Quality

In our last editorial, Peter Hernon and I outlined our hopes for the future of the *Journal of Academic Librarianship* and provided some basic information about how to get your work published in *JAL*. This editorial offers suggestions for providing high-quality submissions. As students of the quality movement, we firmly believe that doing work correctly the first time provides the most effective results.

A basic question facing practitioners is why should they do research and other types of scholarly writing when they are so busy and when they have little training in research (its philosophy, reflective inquiry, research design, and methodologies), critical thinking, and problem solving within a social scientific framework. In 1990, I addressed part of the issue by saying that "Research identifies and develops successful responses to the challenges of the future."[1] More recently, Stephen Wiberley, responding to Don Riggs' article in *American Libraries*, noted "I would submit that unless a significant number of practitioners do research our field will become so weak that it will lose its standing in the universities and we will lose understanding of what we do. Then none of us will be able to do our jobs well."[2] Practitioners who are a part of a larger tradition and community of researchers approach problems with a curiosity and inquisitiveness necessary to understand problems, their magnitude, and their implications for their library and for the larger profession in a time of rapid change.

Research involves discovering and creating knowledge; testing, confirming, and refuting knowledge; and investigating for local decision making. Researchers proceed through five basic activities: initiating reflective inquiry, selecting appropriate procedures, collecting data, analyzing data, and presenting findings.[3] Four quality initiatives—answering the "so what" question, placing the article in the context of the literature of library and information science, and other disciplines, using appropriate statistics (for quantitative studies) that address research questions or hypotheses, and using clear, concise, and interesting writing—can result in better articles.

Answering The "So What" Question

The five basic activities outlined above are designed to produce studies for which the "so what" question is answered. Articles that derive from initiatives around discovering and creating knowledge or testing/confirming/refuting it carry their own justifications within them. The more frequent question asked about such articles is whether or not the knowledge is applicable to library operations. However, most researchers believe that all knowledge, no matter how seemingly esoteric, contributes to the base of the discipline.

The practical, "how I done it good," genre of article is popular with aspiring authors because it allows them to share their own work experience with their colleagues. Other practitioners like to read these articles if they are well done, but in order to be well done, the authors must show that their experience can be replicated in other places. Throughout, the authors need to consider the principles of librarianship involved and how this one experience illustrates them, changes them, or reinterprets them.

JAL's referees are generally censorious about these "how to" articles and express their disdain by asking "so what?" So what if your library combined two reference desks into one, set up a new bulletin board, started doing online searches for undergraduates, added onto your building, outsourced your Asian cataloging, or rewrote your collection development policy? What difference does that make to the readers of an internationally-focused journal? How will that make them better librarians? Successful articles about local experiences must answer these questions in a clear and conscious fashion and place local decision making in the context of broader knowledge on librarianship.

Placing the Article in the Context of the Literature

Rarely do editors accept papers for publication that do not fit into an existing body of work. A review of the literature, however, must be more than an annotated bibliography. Authors should select those works within and outside library and information science that are relevant and evaluate them in the con-

text of their problem, objectives, and research design. At the end of the literature review, the reader should understand clearly how the article at hand relates to the larger body of knowledge about this topic. Referees are quick to catch sloppy scholarship and equally quick to recommend rejection.

Further, the citations should all be accurate and complete. Poor citations are a sign of authorial inattention and a real headache to the editor, the publisher, and the reader. Authors should follow the prescribed style sheet (see the "Guidelines for Article Contributions" at the end of each issue of *JAL*) and should be scrupulous in the creation and maintenance of notes.

Consulting Local Peers on Statistics

Statistics comprise one analytical tool to provide meaning to a dataset as an investigator interprets the study objectives, research questions, or hypotheses. When statistics are involved, they need to be appropriate and done correctly. The process of collecting and analyzing data is simply too expensive and time-consuming to allow for errors. If the sampling, for instance, is not done accurately, then the results cannot be generalized to a more inclusive population.

Unless authors have experience and expertise in this area, they should seek advice in designing a study that will use statistical tests. Co-authoring with someone who has a sophisticated sense of statistical issues, using the campus statistical consultants, prevailing on friends and colleagues who are proficient, and running the design by experts are techniques that can assure a successful statistical study.

Using Clear, Concise Writing

Using clear, concise, and interesting writing is essential for the effective presentation of findings. Referees often comment about grammar, spelling, passive voice, imprecise wording, split infinitives, and vagueness. Because expertise in library and information science is not necessary to detect such weakness in an article, using peers on the campus to read the manuscript for logic, clarity, grammar, and answering the "so what" question vastly improves the likelihood of acceptance.

Such local peer reviewing can provide the benefits of refereeing without the perils of rejection. Scholars in most disciplines do ask their colleagues to read their works and make suggestions. That would mean that before a manuscript was sent off to a journal, it would have been read by a few colleagues who could offer friendly suggestions for improvement. These colleagues can help clarify the logic of the paper, can point out phrases or sentences that do not make sense, and can generally improve grammar and syntax. Some institutions handle this process more formally by having a manuscript reading group, which can be most beneficial to all its members.

Conclusion

Most librarians believe that librarianship is changing more rapidly than ever before. The pressures of change and of decreasing resources to address increasing workload demand quality practices. We urge potential authors to answer the "so what" question, place their work in the context of the literature—library and information science, and other—, and, when appropriate, seek advice on statistics and writing. Excellent research and scholarship are essential to understanding the critical roles of an evolving library in a 21st century college or university.

As librarians, we all want to excel at our day-to-day jobs. Let us also excel at the task of researching solutions for challenges in the future of librarianship and of advancing the scholarship on academic librarianship. As mentioned in the previous editorial, we reaffirm our pledge to work with authors to ensure that the papers appearing in the pages of *JAL* are of the highest quality and survive the "so what" test.—GSt.C & PH

Notes

1. Gloriana St. Clair, "Barriers to Research" (Editorial) *College & Research Libraries* 51 (6): (November 1990): 509-510.
2. Stephen E. Wiberley, Jr., Letter to author, July 1996; see also Peter Hernon et. al. "Editorial: Serious Stuff to Ponder" *Library & Information Science Research* 16 (1994): 271-278.
3. Peter Hernon, *Statistics: A Component of the Research Process* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1994), p. 4.