

Thinking Straight and Writing That Way: Publishing in *Gifted Child Quarterly*

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- 1 Everyone who submits manuscripts to top-flight journals gets rejected by the reviewers more than once in his or her publishing career. Often the rejections seem, at best, inexplicable and, at worst, biased. Rejections sting.
- 2 In a cooler moment, the disappointed author looks over the rejected paper and tries to read the reviewers' comments more calmly. What do journal reviewers look for in a manuscript? What makes a submission publishable? How can you increase the likelihood that your work will be accepted? These are good questions for any would-be author — seasoned or new — to ask.
- 3 In general, sessions on publishing “how-to’s” rarely get beyond the obligatory lecture on the importance of the idea. We are told that if the idea is good, we should carry out the research study and proceed to submit the work for publication. If the how-to-get-published session gets past the point of explaining that a good study is one that asks an important question, then we are told that a publishable study is one that is reasonably free of design flaws. It seems to me that these two points ought to be considered givens. Although it is not always easy to think of a good idea, translate it into a researchable question, and design a competent study, most of us already understand the importance of these things. What we want to know now is how to increase our chances of getting competent work published.
- 4 Over the last eight years, I have developed the following questions to use when reviewing research manuscripts. They are offered as one reviewer’s “test” of the publishability of a manuscript and may be helpful as guides for the prospective author.

Reviewer Question 1: What’s the point?

- 5 Early on in the first “quick read,” I ask why I should be interested in this manuscript. Will this study fill a gap in the existing literature? Will this study reconcile apparently contradictory research results from studies already published? Is this study anchored to a real problem affecting the education and upbringing of children and youth? Is this study “newsworthy”? Does the author convince me in the first few paragraphs that this manuscript is going to present important information new to the field or be investigated from a fresh perspective?
- 6 The manuscripts that most effectively make their “point” often have brief introductions that state the essence of the issue in the first or last sentence of the first or second paragraph. As a reviewer, I look for that “essence of issue” sentence. It is a benchmark for clear thinking and writing.

Reviewer Question 2: Can I find the general research question?

- 7 Reviewer Question 2 is related to the first, but I am now looking for something a bit more technical. The general research question should be stated clearly, and it should serve as the lodestone for the

specific questions generated for the study. Congruence is important here. If I were to take each of these specific questions and check them against the general question, I would easily see the connection. For example, in a study of the family systems of underachieving males, the general question is, "What are the interactional relationships within families of gifted students?" (Green, Fine, & Tollefson, 1988). Two specific questions derived from the general one are:

- 8 "(1) Is there a difference in the proportion of families of achieving and underachieving gifted that are classified as functional and dysfunctional? (2) Do family members having achieving or underachieving gifted students differ in their satisfaction with their families?" (p. 268).
- 9 The manuscripts that most effectively answer Reviewer Question 2 place the general question at the end of the review of the literature. It will be stated as a question and prefaced with a lead-in like "the general purpose of this study" or "an important research question is." Then the specific questions for the study are enumerated and set apart in a list. The combination of text and visual cues makes it difficult for the reviewer to overlook the focus of the manuscript.

Reviewer Question 3: Can I get a "picture" of the subjects of this study?

- 10 The appropriate level of description for the subjects is difficult to judge. However, it is better to over-rather than under-describe them. This is true whether the study is experimental or a naturalistic inquiry. Insufficient information about the participants in the study leaves the reviewer wondering if the conclusions are suspect. Would the results be the same if other subjects had participated? Go beyond the breakdowns by age or grade, sex, and ethnicity. If the subjects are students in a gifted program, describe the identification procedure. If the subjects are school personnel, describe their professional positions, years in service, or other variables that might affect the results. As a reviewer, I always try to determine the extent to which a subject sample is volunteer and how seriously volunteerism might bias the results. If a study is conducted in one school building, district, or one teacher or parent advocate group, I look for descriptions of this context. How large is the school or organization? Is it rural, urban, or suburban? Who is responding to surveys? Fathers or mothers? Are families intact, single parent, or extended? What is the socioeconomic level?
- 11 For example, in a study of learning styles, Ricca (1984) included the following information to give a thorough picture of the subjects.

The study population included 425 students in grades four, five, and six from one city school and one suburban school district in Western New York. Descriptive contrast groups represented subjects who were identified as gifted and a contrast group taken from the remaining general school students available. Gifted students were identified by a multidimensional screening process with data sources indicated in Table 1 (p. 121).
- 12 This information is followed by a further explanation of the identification process and three brief tables that provide a tidy summary of student demographics and cognitive and academic characteristics. The combination of text and tables gives the reviewer a clear picture of the subjects in the study.
- 13 The reviewer may ultimately ask the author to trim the text on subjects, but over-zealous descriptions serve two purposes. First, they demonstrate to the reviewer that the author is a careful worker. Second, they rein in generalizations, which appear in the Conclusions and Implications sections of the manuscript. An author may well be entitled to make statements about the population from which the sample of subjects is drawn, but if the demographics of the group change, the conclusion may not be safely generalized.

- 14 The manuscripts that most effectively create a picture of their sample include the basics like age, grade, sex, and ethnicity succinctly sometimes in tabled form. Case study researchers are less likely to use tables because of smaller samples, but they do identify the reasons why they believe a subject is representative of a large group. In studies of gifted children, the most effective manuscripts clearly state the selection procedure and identify specific instruments or checklists, if appropriate, under the Subjects section of the paper.

Reviewer Question 4: Is this author killing flies with an elephant gun?

- 15 As a reviewer, I examine the manuscript for a comfortable fit among the research questions, the kinds of data that have been collected, and the tools of analysis. In the case of manuscripts that present quantitative data and statistical analyses, I apply Occam's razor. The simplest statistics are usually the best. A good research question can be insightfully investigated with relatively simple analyses provided the assumptions are not too badly violated. The purpose of statistics is to summarize and clarify, not to fog.
- 16 Of course, authors who seek to control confounded variables through the use of more sophisticated statistical treatments like the currently popular LISREL increase the likelihood that multiple causation is disentangled. We certainly gain from technological innovation; however, the key is to determine if the impetus for the study is a substantive research question or a fascination with the newest techniques.
- 17 The manuscripts that answer Reviewer Question 4 most effectively are those in which hypotheses do not sink under the weight of the analyses. As I read the Design and Analysis sections, am I able to keep my eye on the important variables? A good indicator is a sentence in the Design section that gives me the rationale for using quite sophisticated or new statistical and qualitative techniques. For example, a study of ethnic differences in a mathematics program for gifted students included the following explanation for the selection of a specialized kind of regression analysis (Robinson, Bradley, & Stanley, in review):

Regression discontinuity is a quasi-experimental design which allows the experimenter to test for treatment effects without a randomized control group and the attendant withholding of services. This a priori design statistically controls for prior differences by using the identification variable along with program participation (status) as independent variables in a multiple regression model (p.7).

- 18 Another indication that the study is being driven by its questions rather than its statistics is the author's effort to make connecting statements between a technique and its interpretation. To return to the previous regression example:

If the associated *t*-test of the regression coefficient is significant, it is indicative of a program that impacts on its participants (p. 7).

Reviewer Question 5: Would George Orwell approve?

- 19 Dogging the reviewer through both the "quick read" and the "close read" of the manuscript is the ease with which the author has answered the first four questions. If we look back at those questions, we see the common thread of clarity running through them. What is the point? Where is the question? Who is this study about? Does the analysis illuminate rather than obfuscate?
- 20 Reviewer Question 5 is the final test. Would George Orwell approve? In 1946, Orwell published "Politics and the English Language," one of the clearest statements on writing effectively ever to appear in

print. The thesis of his essay was that “modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. . . prose consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of phrases tacked together like sections of a prefabricated hen-house” (p. 159). Orwell was clearly unhappy with vague writing and professional jargon. He felt that poor writing was an indication of sloppy thinking, and he excused neither the social scientist nor the novelist from his strict dicta of good, vigorous writing. He had a particular dislike of using ready-made phrases like “lay the foundation,” and he was equally appalled at the indiscriminate use of scientific terms to give the impression of objectivity to biased statements.

- 21 As a reviewer, I apply Orwell’s tough rules to the test of every manuscript I receive. It means that the manuscript author has answered Reviewer Questions 1 through 4 successfully. According to Orwell, “the following rules will cover most cases:
- 0. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
 - 0. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
 - 0. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
 - 0. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
 - 0. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
 - 0. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous” (p. 170).
- 22 Orwell had the good sense to include the sixth rule as a disclaimer. All writers make errors and violate rules, sometimes out of carelessness, sometimes for effect. It is also true that writing for highly specialized journals does require the judicious use of technical language, just as sheep shearers need specialized terms to describe differing grades of wool. However, moderation in the use and the arbitrary, spontaneous creation of specialized vocabulary is certainly warranted in our field. It is refreshing to read an author who states that the subjects in the study are “thinking critically” rather than “realizing greater cognitive gains.”
- 23 Orwell makes many fine points about the importance of sincerity in thinking and writing. For the prospective social science writer, none are more important than the careful selection and lively use of technical terms. I know of no more rigorous test to apply to a manuscript than to ask if George Orwell would approve. Passing this “test” means the author is thinking straight and writing that way.

References

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