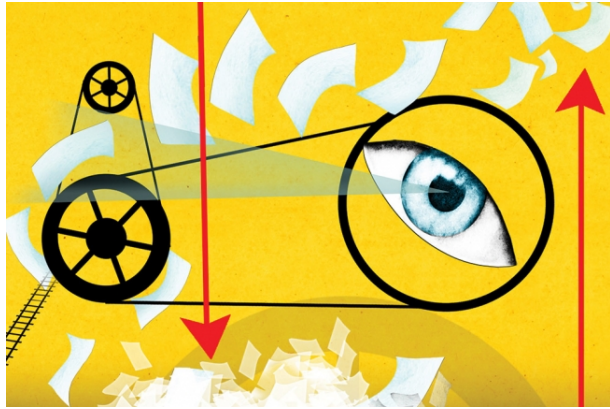


THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

ADVICE

How Your Journal Editor Works

A glimpse into the not-so-glamorous lives and habits of scholarly gatekeepers



Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle

By *Devoney Looser* | JUNE 26, 2016

When I first began submitting work to scholarly journals, I had every sort of outlandish idea about the editor on the other side of the transaction. In hopeful moments, I imagined a kindly bespectacled someone with a jumbo coffee cup at a spotless wooden desk, or holding a glass of

wine in an overstuffed chair near a fireplace. This faceless editor would read my essay slowly, nodding approvingly and then more vigorously. "Brilliant!" the editor would say. "Eureka! Accept with no revisions!"

Most of the time, however, fear prevailed over hope. I envisioned my work sent into a black hole where humanoid trash compactors would crush it to dust. On paranoid days, I thought of my rejector-editors as over-caffeinated cynics in a chaotic Watergate-era newsroom. One would read aloud a line of my essay to harried colleagues ("Hey, get a load of this one!"). They'd laugh maniacally, shooting wadded-up pages of my work into a wastebasket.

Today I have fewer illusions, rosy or nightmarish. Now when I send an essay to a journal, I often know the editors. I can picture them. I know the journal — its contents, scope, and direction. I have a clearer sense of the editorial process. There are still fears involved, and occasional rejections, as I've previously written. But now — with the benefit of a decade of experience as a scholarly editor myself — I have greater insights into the submission process.

So I offer here a reality check for those who haven't (yet) been on both sides: a look into the not-so-glamorous lives and habits of journal editors.

Your scholarly editor is a real person living in real time. Editors know we have power — a combination of gatekeeper, talent scout, and helpmate. Each of us wields those things with different emphases. I generally did my editorial work from my muddled campus office, especially during office hours when no one showed up. Or I turned to it late at night, as I plowed through my email after the kids went to bed. I probably did this work at just about the same variety of pace and energy level as you grade your students' papers or exams.

We all know that academic life is especially harried at beginnings and ends of terms or right before our discipline's annual conference. Just as you are, we editors are slower to respond then. The worst time to submit an essay is at the beginning of an academic term, with its crazy deluge of submissions. Everyone rushes to hit "send" before the summer's (or holiday break's) end. "Rushing" is key here, as work that comes to us then tends not to be quite ready — or so we expect. You can expect, too, that everything will take longer for us to process in those periods. Worst of all, it takes longer to find reviewers.

As editors, we are more likely to get a nonresponse or an outright no from a reviewer at academic crunch times. Do you want the submission process to take longer and lessen the likelihood of your essay's ending up in the hands of your editor's first-choice reviewer? Then submit at our busiest times. But just as submitting a job application at the last possible moment means it's probably being read less carefully by the search committee, the arrival of your scholarly essay at the beginning of a term means it's probably not getting Cadillac care.

Scholarly editors are often happy to share our insights, especially before we have your work in hand. Yet it's surprising how rarely we're asked about our editorial protocols.

No matter when you submit, your goal is first to clear the main editor's hurdle. Most editors don't send absolutely everything out for review. We don't want to waste reviewers' time. We do a quick "in-house read," as we call it. If you've ever received a form rejection or a paragraph-long reader's report, your work was probably dinged in-house.

First we look at your essay's title. Does it suggest more cleverness than substance? Does it provide an argument or just name a topic? In crafting your title, follow the journal's conventions. Editors rarely send work out to trusted reviewers if it comes from unproven authors using jazz-hands titles. (I was recently asked to read an essay for a journal, and the editor went to great lengths to apologize to me for its bad title, assuring me the piece itself would prove better. That's a good editor.)

Next, most editors glance over the whole essay. Did you send something too short or too long, based on our guidelines? Is the scholarly apparatus what we'd expect (endnotes, bibliography, all appropriate to the length of the piece)? If editors know something about the topic, we'll look for sources we'd expect to see. Are they up to date? If an editor knows of a relevant major book or article and the piece doesn't mention it, that's a red flag.

Then we read your first and last pages. Sorry. We rarely start from your first word and trudge through to your last, like dutiful marching-band captains. Does your essay let readers know right away what's at stake, what's original, why the essay makes a needed contribution? Does the last page give a sense of its contribution, pointing helpfully forward? Of course, we're attuned to errors, generalizations, and clichés, too.

A smart author will study the structure of award-winning essays previously published in the journal. Look at the anecdotes and the evidence, the rhetoric and the diction. Compare and contrast. Emulate.

If your work passes muster, we brainstorm about appropriate reviewers. How we choose rarely involves darts or Ouija boards. That list of people on our journal's masthead is a real thing. It's true that Big Name Senior Scholars may be on that list only to add luster and gravitas. But some of those scholars, especially advisory editors, are regularly consulted about submissions. If your essay is close to the work of one of them, that

individual may read — or be asked to suggest someone to read — your submission.

Should you cite the relevant work of a scholar in your field who is on our masthead? Um, yes! If you happen to have written an essay eviscerating said work, perhaps submit that one to another journal. (Or reconsider said evisceration.)

When editors aren't exactly sure where to send your submission for review, we might look at the scholars you cite and contact one of them. Keep that in mind as you construct your notes or bibliography.

Then four, six, or eight weeks pass, and everything proceeds in a timely fashion. (This is where you and the editor share a common fantasy.) You receive a reader's report or two. Reviewers almost invariably see ways to make something better, resulting — if you're lucky — in a judgment of "revise and resubmit."

Journal editors and reviewers both tend to believe there is always room for improvement. That said, we recognize when a reviewer's report veers away from the constructive toward the egotistical ("This essay does not refer to the seminal work of [insert anonymous reviewer's own name here]!" is one telling clue we can't share with you.) But even if we realize a reviewer isn't coming from an entirely selfless place, we still think you'd do well to incorporate some of the advice. That is our process. Please follow the process. It's usually a good process — or so we editors would like to believe, as we imagine we're editing a good journal.

Do not — repeat, do not — complain to the editor about the reader reports you receive. (Find a friend, a mentor, or a therapist for that.) Also, do not send back a "revised" essay within days of receiving the reports. Editors will automatically think you did not take revision seriously, no matter how many hours you worked on it straight through without sleeping.

The point is not just to make changes but to reflect on the reports. Ask a mentor what is an appropriate timeframe for resubmission in your discipline. In the humanities, it should take you at least a month to revise and resubmit, unless an editor suggests you resubmit sooner. Don't take longer than four months. Respond in a timely way, and an editor will still remember you and remember you as timely.

Scholarly editors are often happy to share our insights, especially before we have your work in hand. (Questions that come in after your submission — more often than not — sound like consumer complaints or criminal investigations.) Yet it's surprising how rarely we're asked about our editorial protocols.

What's even more rare is being thanked for our labors. Were you grateful for some feedback on a piece of work you submitted? Editors helped get you that feedback and might someday report your gratitude to anonymous reviewers. It's always OK to offer brief, gracious thanks to journal editors when it's warranted. Was your essay published, and do you like how it looks? Thank the editors. Better yet, help us promote your article and our journal, and then show (or tell) us how you did so. Read the rest of the contents surrounding yours. Report how happy you are to be in that fine company, and why.

That isn't just good manners. It's a good career move. Do these things because you want an editor to mention you and your work positively. Give us more than the excellence of your submission to recommend. Let us think of you not only as the author of a fine piece of scholarship but as a colleague we'll want to call on for expertise in the future. Become someone we can trust and turn to for leadership and professionalism in years to come.

When you take over as a scholarly editor one day yourself, I hope you'll find that the crucial professional work you do as an editor is met with widespread gratitude, and that the need to demystify the process has lessened. I also hope you get that glass of wine, fireplace, and overstuffed chair.

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