Guest Editorial: Why Journals Dialogue with Each Other

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As you begin to organize your next publication, you might consider the argument you have in mind in terms of the needs of the journal you have selected to contact. There's more of a connection here than you might think, and it can work to your advantage. A good scholarly journal wants to be in a dialogue with its competitors and cohorts; it does not wish to exist in isolation. It exists because its editors and readers want it to be a recognized and respected player in our profession, a fount of the best and most engaging thought from scholars, young and old, working today.

Why is this so, and what does it have to do with the essay you're going to submit for consideration?

The answer is simple: its relevancy. The journal you're interested in seeks to be relevant to current critical debates in the field. If it's not, it runs the risk of falling into irrelevancy, an outcome that is as deleterious for you as it is for the journal.

So, knowing this, how should you proceed?

I suggest that, as you are drafting your new study, you cite perhaps three other scholars who have published pertinent essays in your journal or in related journals. In my experience, as the author of a few critical studies and as an editor and reader of others, I find two citations to be a bit thin but four or more to be too many. Three seems to be a good number, as, without being excessive in doing so, it allows you to situate your argument in the context of what you consider the most germane studies that exist.

I further suggest that, in concise form, you sum up the basic argument of each of these other studies and how yours would relate to them. The point of doing this is to show that (1) you know what the most up-to-date bibliography is; that (2) you can demonstrate how and why your argument contributes to the current debate; and (3) how the argument made in your study advances our understanding of the question at hand.

To proceed in this fashion has a two-fold value: it will help you write a stronger, more convincing essay (one with a better chance of being published), and it will keep your journal engaged with others in the field. You will benefit from this tactic but so does your journal, a point not lost on its editorial staff.

Beware, however, of padding, of adding unnecessary or extraneous citations to your essay simply to make yourself seem more "scholarly." In an article-sized study, this will work against you and lessen your chances of having your piece

accepted. Be judicious about the other studies you mention. Make certain they are the most important ones. By highlighting these essays and not others, you show that you are writing as an informed scholar, that you know what is going on in your field. And that you can demonstrate how your argument speaks to the arguments these other studies are making. This is how the professional dialogue that you and your journal want to be a part of develops.

As much as possible, eschew jargon. Use it only to make a point or to explain something. Do not allow it to characterize your style. Cultivate instead precision of thought and clarity of expression.

In this same regard, I would like to pass along to you something that our colleague, the late, great Gregory Rabassa, once told me about being a useful, productive scholar: "Have something to say, then say it."

The writing strategy I've suggested here doesn't always result in a publication, of course. When we shoot on goal we don't always score. Not even Pelé scored all the time. But if followed, I can assure you that this system will help you become a better, more cogent writer of scholarly articles. And this, the most important thing, will increase your odds of getting published.