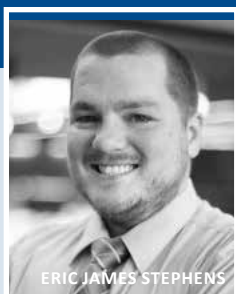


Tutors' Column: "A Successful Failure: What I Wish I'd Known about Research before Submitting to a Journal"

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As part of a research methods course in my master's program, I designed and conducted a research study seeking to understand the ways tutors use—and don't use—audience awareness during their sessions. It began as a project for one of my courses, became an IWCA presentation, and turned into a collaborative study with the assistant director. As a graduate student trying to get into a Ph. D. program, I revised and condensed the paper into an article to submit to *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*. I submitted it with that air of confidence that only graduate students seem to have. Not too much later, I received an email from the editors, which I clicked on with excitement. Rather than containing the glowing praise I expected, the email included a thoughtful message with an invitation to chat on the phone regarding the "extensive note[s] in the comment section." With a bit of dread, I opened the attachment and began reading their insightful comments. Clearly, I had work to do.

By the time I received the feedback, however, I had begun my Ph.D. coursework at another institution, and the article and notes drifted to the back of my mind until I received a follow-up email a year and a half later from one of the editors, who had "decided to audit [their] 'incomplete' manuscript list, and wanted to know what [I] decided about the article." I dug into my hard-drive to reread the article and their comments with the intention of revising the article. I quickly realized it was "incomplete" in more ways than one. Not only were there flaws in my argument, but my Ph.D. coursework illuminated the flaws of the study itself. With a dissertation to write and the original site of study nearly 2,000 miles away, I made a decision regarding my incomplete manuscript—to scrap it and build it into something more useful. What follows are some of the lessons I learned and suggestions for new scholars looking to publish their work.

FIRST THINGS FIRST: FIND A MENTOR

I don't think I would go so far as to say a single mentor got me from point A to point B. As we teach our first-year composition students or writing center patrons, writing is a communal practice. It's a shame we sometimes forget that about our own writing process. I do suggest, however, that everyone who submits to a journal—especially new scholars like myself—finds a mentor. There were many people along the way who helped me to find my way through and around the study and article writing. Of course, my MA committee helped me construct and conduct the study. When I received the feedback from *WLN*, it was my committee who told me to sit on it for a few weeks and return to revising.

Having others read your article is helpful and builds a community of writing, but a mentor can guide you through the research, writing, revising, and publishing process by drawing on their own experiences publishing their own work. Finding a single mentor for a manuscript, I believe, would have helped me get to the point of writing this particular article sooner. Below are some of the lessons I learned on my own and from several mentor figures during my graduate school years. My hope is that this article might help newer scholars not make some of the same mistakes I did; and I hope to offer experienced scholars a rough framework to use when those newer scholars come to them for help.

SOME LESSONS LEARNED

Define Your Terms

Defining terms may seem a simple step, but this is where my study fell apart. My article's overall argument was that writing center literature too often conflates the definitions of "reader" and "audience." Given my argument, one would think I would have clearly defined those terms. The editors and reviewers saw the flaw immediately. Their comments explicitly address this lack of definition and separation of terms, and in one comment they pointed to where I conflated the terms myself—the thing I was supposed to have been critiquing. Most studies should be informed by theory, and in explicating that theory, be sure to define the key terms.

Don't Just Review the Literature—Know It

Perhaps the most embarrassing part of this whole ordeal was not fully realizing how much there is to know in the writing center research field and how much more I needed to learn. The editors and reviewers were kind and took the time to explain to me how I was either unclear or misrepresenting others' work. I received

comments about my use of Aristotle, Walter Ong, Douglas Park, Peter Elbow, and Virginia Davidson—more than half of my resources for the paper. Some of their critique was spot on, and some I disagree with; the problem, however, was that I failed to articulate why I read these thinkers the way I did. I thought I had spent adequate time and effort digesting the literature, but that effort was not reflected in my writing.

Justify the Methods

The methods for a study matter just as much as the theory driving the study. Once my article shifted into the discussion of my methods, the tone of the comments changed from critique to interest; both challenged my thinking, but the subtlety mattered. The editors' and reviewers' comments on the theory reflected my lack of understanding of the literature, but their comments on the methods showed genuine interest. Comments shifted from helping me understand what others were saying to wanting to know more about the study itself. The way you test theory provides the platform for how/where you can make an impact on the field.

Reign in the Conclusions

I thought the study would change the way writing centers teach tutors about audience awareness. This ambition, I have found, is not unique to myself—many new scholars share my overzealous desire for change/impact. The way I designed and conducted the study, however, prevented that opportunity for change. My article looked like an hourglass: broad theory going back to Aristotle at the top, a precise study involving nineteen tutors at a single institution in the middle, and sweeping claims for the field at the bottom. I got so caught up in wanting to add myself to the conversation and to make a difference that I tried to solve “audience awareness” in fewer than 3,000 words and one sample study. A well-written, data-driven article using research methodologies should situate itself quickly in the ongoing conversation, explain the methods, and draw conclusions without making sweeping claims for the entire field. Close with calls for further research, but don't make a claim (like I did) about changing the field. It might show some enthusiasm, but it's laced with arrogance and naïveté. Keep your conclusions close to your study.

Expect Critique from Reviewers and Welcome It

The title of my submission was “A Tutor's Audience is Never a Fiction,” playing off Walter Ong's work. It was the first time I ever submitted a manuscript for publication. Receiving feedback that

questioned nearly every turn I made frustrated me, and I wasn't ready for it. Having received a few more rejections, I've come to appreciate the feedback from the *WLN* editors and reviewers. Having friends or professors read your work just isn't the same as a stranger reading it. When friends and professors (usually) try to balance constructive critique with maintaining a personal relationship, a reviewer has one thing in mind: the integrity of the field. Does this work enhance the field's understanding? Does the work know how to locate itself in what's happening in the field? I didn't see past the comments, but after rereading them, it's a little embarrassing how spot-on their advice was.

Other Lessons Learned

As I write this article and reflect on my own research and writing process, I wanted to mention a few other quick points worth mentioning.

- Find current literature written within the last ten years.
- Know the difference between a class paper and a journal article and then find a balance.
- Spend more time on your methods and results than you do on your literature review.
- Be aware of the space you have in an article. If what they allow isn't enough, then another publishing venue would be more beneficial. Pay attention to whether or not that word limit includes the Works Cited.
- Don't wait too long to hit the revisions. Give yourself a week or two and then get back to it.
- Don't give up.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

My previous manuscript is incomplete, and until I have the opportunity to redesign and recreate the study it will remain incomplete. Academia is a tough game that takes its toll in more ways than one—especially researching, writing, and publishing a manuscript. Too often we read articles in journals and write drafts for classes or projects with high hopes of publication, but we don't know what happens in the middle.



WORKS CITED

Ong, Walter. "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction." *PMLA*, vol. 90, no. 1, pp. 9-21.