

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 365 994

CS 214 170

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 TITLE Refereeing and Ethics: What Makes Refereeing Fair?  
 PUB DATE 20 Nov 93  
 NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (83rd, Pittsburgh, PA, November 17-22, 1993).  
 PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)  
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
 DESCRIPTORS Ethics; Faculty Publishing; Higher Education; \*Peer Evaluation; \*Scholarly Journals; \*Writing Evaluation; Writing for Publication  
 IDENTIFIERS \*Professional Concerns; Referees; Scholarly Writing

ABSTRACT

The main task of reviewers for scholarly periodicals is to provide a fair reading of a paper, and thereby to help determine its suitability for publication. The reviewer's job is to evaluate the article according to the journal's criteria, most of which are publicly stated. Implicit criteria also exist which stretch, expand, or otherwise change shape to accommodate those highly unconventional, innovative pieces that break the rules. The reviewer has an obligation to serve diverse constituencies impartially: society at large, the profession, the journal, the author of the articles in question, and the referee's personal standards. The reviewers' Hippocratic Oath might read, "I will use my review to help the manuscript according to my ability and judgment, but never with a view to injury and wrongdoing. Above all, my aim is to help, or at least to do no harm." (RS)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

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November 20, 1993

### Refereeing and Ethics: What Makes Refereeing Fair?

All reviewers, I'll wager, would contend that they're being absolutely fair in their judgments--as authors of the articles they accept will readily agree. But what about the rest of the authors, the 85-90% in the case of *College English*, whose articles are returned (*MLA Directory*, 57)? One implicit function of a reviewer's written report is to convince the authors of articles recommended for "reject" or "revise and resubmit" that their judgment is fair.

#### I. The ideal of fairness

The reviewer's main task is to provide a fair reading of a paper, and thereby to help determine its suitability for publication. The other speakers on this panel will address two related issues: the extent to which this reading educates the paper's author, and enhances the knowledge in the field. I will concentrate on what, in an ethical sense, constitutes a fair reading?

The reviewer's job is to evaluate the article according to the journal's criteria. Most of these are publicly stated. I am assuming that, except for the occasional crank or curmudgeon, this is the fundamental operative principle, understood and implicitly agreed to by all journal editors and all reviewers.

In the case of *College English*, the editorial policy specifies:

- a. **Subject areas:** "various subspecialties of the discipline," among them "literature (including nonfiction), linguistics, literacy, critical theory, reading theory, rhetoric, composition, pedagogy, and professional issues."
- b. **Audience:** "general interest within the profession"
- c. **Level of technicality:** "the treatment [should be] accessible to scholars whose particular expertise lies in other areas."
- d. **Emphasis:** "Contributions should either *add new knowledge to what is already known, challenge received opinion,*" (italics supplied) or translate specialized research for a more general audience.
- e. **Exclusions:** "studies of single works and descriptions of particular classroom practices" unless they are made more generally applicable through illustrating a critical or pedagogical theory.

Contributors have access to these criteria; they appear in every issue of the journal. If contributors ignore these, they do so at

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their peril. For by submitting an article the author is asserting that she's met these criteria and deserves to be published. The reviewer says, "Prove it."

In addition to the journals' explicit criteria, there are also **implicit criteria**. All journals have them, including the aboveboard *College English*. These are elastic criteria that stretch, expand, or otherwise change shape to accommodate those highly unconventional, innovative pieces that break the rules as they exceed the boundaries of the field as we know it at any given time. Ethical reviewers need to be regular readers of the journals they're reviewing so they can recognize such work, for to accommodate the creative, breakthrough articles--those that look exciting instead of simply highly competent--may easily be the reviewer's, and the journal's, most important task. This criterion, what some of my colleagues call the "mystery factor," is implied in the latitude of selection allowed by the *College English* editorial procedure. And this is what keeps journals truly on the cutting edge. But reviewers, like journal editors, need to keep their balance on this razor's edge between the stated and unstated criteria, between professional prudence and personal passion.

In brief, for all of the journals for which I review (*PMLA*, *Prose Studies*, a/b: *Auto/Biography*, *CCC*, *JAC*, *Rhetoric Review*, . . . as well as *CE*), the criteria, stated and unstated, coalesce in two essential questions: "What does this work contribute to the state of knowledge in the profession and at what level?" "Is the work suitable for this--or some other--journal? The answers to these determine who wins the tight competition for journal space. The reviewer's decision can never be objective, but it should be made with the combination of knowledge, respect, courtesy, disinterestedness and good faith that should ensure as fair a reading as possible.

## II. What can be done to ensure fairness?

The reviewer has an obligation to serve diverse constituencies impartially: society at large, the profession, the journal for which one is refereeing, the author of the article in question, one's personal standards. To the extent that these constituencies overlap, to serve the interests of one is to serve the interests of all; the points at which they are actually or potentially at variance are the points of greatest potential ethical conflict.

**Society.** The interests of society are best served by what I'll call equal opportunity reviewing--the chance for every member of the profession, irrespective of gender, race, creed, geographical location, or institutional affiliation (or its absence) to submit manuscripts and have them read without bias. Nowadays non-traditional subjects or non-traditional discussions of perennial subjects, that open up new angles of vision along formerly marginal perspectives are also a major consideration in attaining editorial

balance in many journals.

Before *PMLA* went to blind reviewing--a system in which the authors' names were not disclosed to the reviewers (but see Jehlen/Quilligan, 771-72)--the journal published a far higher proportion of articles by men--about 50% more, though in fairness it should be acknowledged that these scholars were widely distributed at a variety of prestigious, middle rank institutions, and schools whose national rankings were below the top 50. That a far higher percentage of women and people at lower ranks now publish in *PMLA* than they did in the decade before blind reviewing was introduced treats its constituencies fairly, rather than implicitly or explicitly singling out one group for special treatment (see Kronik; Jehlen and Quilligan; and Fish's opposing view).

**The profession at large.** This is a nebulous agglomeration of diverse groups, represented by professional specialties and sub-specialties, each with particular vested interests, territoriality, and rivalries both internecine and extramural. The reviewer's job is to represent the collective sense of that segment of the profession on which the journal focuses. Thus when we ask the key question, *Will this article advance the state of knowledge in the profession?* we really have in mind the particular subset of the field on which the author's work--and our own--focuses.

The level at which we expect the article to do this, *high, middle, or low*, depends on the expectations of the editorial policy. *High level work* involves such considerations as: Does the work represent innovative thinking, innovative methodology, or innovative techniques of style or presentation that are on the cutting edge of the field? To what extent is the article under review likely to influence the work of subsequent researchers, or to engender other significant related research projects of the author's own?

*Middle level work* exemplifies less innovative but nevertheless solid contributions to the existing state of knowledge or to research methodology or style; or, less often, interpretations of others' research for an audience unfamiliar with it--preferably with a twist or application of the author's own, as in Maxine Hairston's "Winds of Change," which applies Thomas Kuhn's paradigmatic structure of scientific revolutions to the shift in teaching composition, from product to process. *Low level work* either goes over old ground, deals with peripheral or trivial issues, or--most commonly in my experience as a reviewer--belabors what would be obvious to a reader better grounded in the ongoing professional dialogue. Authors of such works seem unaware of the current ideas and voices in this dialogue, and exhibit little or no sense of what their manuscript contributes to this ongoing conversation. Their work often, after a lengthy discussion, arrives at a conclusion with which a high level researcher would

have begun or even taken for granted. Except for elementary textbooks, this work is probably not publishable.

**The journal itself.** One way that editors could make sure that reviewers were evaluating papers according to journal criteria would be to conduct, either in person or by mail or conference calls, review sessions analogous to the ETS sessions intended to establish normative readings of the work at hand. Although the editorial board of at least one journal I know of meets annually for precisely that purpose, my guess is that editors of most journals have more subtle means of protecting themselves and their contributors against cranky and idiosyncratic reviewers. They send a manuscript and evaluation sheet which reiterates the journal's criteria (see "Guidelines") to someone whose own work is in the author's area and see what that reviewer says. If the article is returned with a compelling line of reasoning, even though the editors may disagree with the verdict, they'll call on that reviewer again. If not, sayonara. The journal editor is aware of the slant any given reader brings to a reading, and in a just world will have the work reviewed by readers who together represent a balanced perspective among the many possible ways of reading a given text.

**The author.** The reviewer owes the author a clear, courteous, specific explanation of her reasons to "reject" or to "revise and resubmit." Providing explanations in a letter obliges one to read the manuscript carefully and thoroughly; indeed, the more severe the judgment, the more temperate the language should be. It's easy to maintain collegiality and avoid condescension by imagining one is writing the requisite letter of commentary to a friend or graduate student. I keep in mind some recent reviewers' comments on my own work as models of what to avoid--"Junk!" and "Barf!" written in the margins by one reviewer; whole pages crossed out with heavily penciled Xs by another; "not for us"--with no explanation by a third. (With the vindication of the villified, I would like to add that all these works were subsequently published in good places.)

**Self: The reviewer's personal qualities.**

**Knowledge.** Reviewers need to have a sense of what's hot and what's not, what's the cutting edge and what's dull familiarity. They need to move the field along. The ideal reviewer knows the manuscript's field or the subset of its field and has herself published enough so she does not feel in competition with the author. She should consequently be able to make recommendations based solely on the quality of the manuscript, even if it contradicts, challenges, or even threatens her work and point of view.

**Open-mindedness.** The reviewer needs to have in mind beforehand the range of possibilities of what a very good article on the subject

would say. Nevertheless, to prevent reading the paper through a procrustean grid of what it *ought* to be, the reviewer should respond to what the article under review actually *does* say, its reasoning, research method, examples and sources, and style. Moreover, the reviewer should always be willing to be surprised by joy--the delight of the unexpectedly imaginative, the witty, even the wild or warty or off-the-wall work.

*The ability to be self-effacing.* The reviewer functions as an anonymous good citizen, presumably acting for the good of society, the profession, and the journal rather than herself. The reviewer's commentary should address the paper under review, noting what's right about the work and what could be done to make it better--without imposing on the author the (much better) article the reviewer would have written on the same subject.

*Generosity.* All reviewing is a gift--of professional expertise, of thought, of time, in a world that offers no reward for this activity except the journal editor's good will. In an ideal existence the reviewer would have world enough and time to devote an hour, if not a century, to each aspect of this coy manuscript. The reality, however, is that most of us probably review articles the way we read students' late papers--tucked into the interstices of time already scheduled for a host of other activities, and doing it with our minds half on other pressing demands.

**Conclusion:** The reviewers' Hippocratic Oath might read, "I will use my review to help the manuscript according to my ability and judgment, but never with a view to injury and wrongdoing. Above all, my aim is to help, or at least to do no harm.

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