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Reviewer Essay: What Makes for a High Quality SoTL Research Article?

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Abstract

Excerpt: In reviewing submissions for this and other journals, the most common problems I see flow from writers wearing blinders, focusing only on what is immediately in front of them rather than the big picture. They know better, but for the moment forget what they know. Dr. Johnson's dictum is exactly to the point: we 'more frequently require to be reminded than informed.

Keywords

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What Makes for a High Quality SoTL Research Article?

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In reviewing submissions for this and other journals, the most common problems I see flow from writers wearing blinders, focusing only on what is immediately in front of them rather than the big picture. They know better, but for the moment forget what they know. Dr. Johnson's dictum is exactly to the point: we "more frequently require to be reminded than informed." Hence, a few reminders:

1. **Make a point.**

The defining quality of argument, as opposed to narrative, is that it brings readers to a conclusion that will unify the exercise and bring it together in the end. We know this. But the narrative of the research being described in a paper can overwhelm the hypothesis being tested. Tell your story, but tell it to a purpose, and make that purpose continuously clear. Readers need to understand at each stage of the article what the controlling question is. Anything that does not respond to that question should leave this article and find a home elsewhere.

2. **Keep the literature review and background germane.**

In writing about SoTL, connecting your research to that done by others can be especially important because many readers are familiar with research in their own disciplines, but not in yours. When describing a fairly large research history, I often fall into the trap of writing, not to my readers, but to myself. Reviewing the prior research on a subject invites me to integrate what I already knew with what I have recently learned. This is not a bad thing, but it can lead to the background obscuring the foreground. Add to this the tendency of we academics to show off—Look how much *I* know about self-handicapping behavior among suburban high school students with braces!—and we can get too much of a good thing. When readers get to the end of the literature review, will they remember what the essay is about? If not, trimming and shaping is in order.

3. **Write to readers who do not already know what you are telling them.**

Beginning writers often tend to write as if everybody knows what they know. This is a bad habit many relearn in graduate school, where the odds are that professors really do already know what the students know, so students often use citations as shorthand for explanation. When you are writing to readers who are well-read in your discipline, citations can sometimes call to mind familiar arguments and sources. But the SoTL audience comes from a variety of disciplines. So always provide the context that readers need, assuming those readers do not already know what you know.

4. **Revise from the perspective of someone who doubts your claims.**

As you would with your students, play the devil's advocate in order to see where you can strengthen the writing. Read it aloud; have an "ignorant" reader read it; have someone else read it to you. The hardest thing for you to do as a writer is to see

and hear what you have in fact written. Once you do, most revision is easy; the road to concision, vividness, clarity, and power lies before you. Why, you wonder, didn't I say it that way in the first place? The reason, of course, is that you were doing something else at the time. But once you see the way clear, you take it, and you're on the way.