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Publishing in Honors: Advice from Reviewers of *HIP* and *JNCHC*

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Abstract: This article shares advice to prospective authors from reviewers of *Honors in Practice (HIP)* and the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council (JNCHC)*. Its aim is to demystify publishing in honors by providing flexible guidelines to those interested in pursuing honors publication.

Keywords: publishing, publication, scholarship, honors, writing

INTRODUCTION

Writing for publication can feel like riding a roller coaster. The writing phase proceeds like a slow, steep ascent toward a lofty goal: manuscript completion. Once a piece is complete and sent out for review, the wait is akin to the pause at the peak of the coaster's first big lift, where white-knuckled riders balance in anticipation and dread. Reviewer feedback ends the suspense, triggering the sensation of dive drops, cobra rolls, pretzel knots, and double dips that writers experience while reading reviews of their work.

As an academic, I know well the thrill-ride elation and misery of the peer review process. I have had my fair share of reviewer-induced pleasure and pain. I have exulted over reviewers' praise for my "breadth and depth of knowledge" and "clear, fluent prose." Encouraging editorial feedback has put a smile on my face and spring in my step for weeks. Conversely, I have been discouraged by less-than-favorable reviews, including being told in one review that "the piece doesn't travel all that far" and in another that "it's time for a survey of scholarship [in this area]. But let's make it a good one."

Despite the variety in tenor and opinion in reviewer response, reviewers' intentions are generally admirable: to help writers produce pieces that will benefit the larger disciplinary community. An insightful review is an invaluable commodity. Writing is made easier with assistance from others in refining ideas, identifying relevant sources, assessing audience needs, tightening organization, and making wise stylistic and editing decisions.

Within honors, this assistance may be particularly valuable. Those of us who work in this area were often raised in another discipline. We have adopted honors as a second disciplinary home. Whether our stay is temporary or permanent, we share a desire to grow within the honors community, to learn from our colleagues and participate in the community's activities. One way to do so is to undertake scholarly honors projects and to share our contributions through publication in the National Collegiate Honors Council's journals or elsewhere. This work allows us to add to the collective body of knowledge generated by the honors community. As writers in a less familiar disciplinary space, however, we may benefit from the advice of knowledgeable insiders along the way.

Reviewers can provide this assistance by helping us become familiar with the writing expectations of the honors community. Like other academic disciplines, honors is guided by a malleable set of discursive practices that define the questions that can be asked, the research methods that will be accepted, and the writing style that is normalized. To understand these norms is to understand the shared assumptions and values of the honors community. This knowledge, made more accessible by a good review, can help us deepen our involvement in honors and succeed in honors publishing endeavors.

My intent here is to help others find their footing within honors research by sharing advice from reviewers for *Honors in Practice (HIP)* and the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council (JNCHC)*. My aim is to help demystify publishing in honors and spur additional scholarly productivity and quality. My goal is not to establish a comprehensive guide to the writing

activities of honors scholars nor to offer a formal discourse analysis of the writing practices of NCHC contributors but rather to provide flexible guidelines to those interested in pursuing honors publication.

I gathered advice from editorial board members of *HIP* and *JNCHC* in the fall of 2016, inviting them to weigh in on a cluster of questions related to honors publication:

What do *JNCHC* and *HIP* reviewers *love* to see in a submission?
 What shortcomings do they find across the pieces they review? What advice would they give to those who are new to publishing in honors?

Fourteen reviewers responded to my request. Their advice addressed both the scholarly writing process and the final written product. Some tips were repeated by multiple reviewers, underscoring their shared appreciation for certain features of honors scholarship. Other views came from a single reviewer but were sufficiently insightful to warrant inclusion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To frame reviewer responses, I rely on a conceptual model developed by Carole L. Palmer, Professor and Associate Dean of Research at the University of Washington's Information School. Palmer has studied interdisciplinary research processes, including their similarities to and differences from traditional disciplinary research activity. Her model of interdisciplinary research practices among humanities scholars provides a useful heuristic for understanding the research and writing processes of honors scholars.

Admittedly, superimposing Palmer's model on honors scholarly practices and on reviewers' remarks has some limitations. First, Palmer's model was derived from the humanities whereas honors brings together scholars from various disciplines. Second, Palmer's primary focus is interdisciplinary practices whereas scholarship in honors is not necessarily interdisciplinary. Third, the framework imposes an order on reviewers' comments that precludes alternative categorizations that might usefully privilege other themes.

Nevertheless, Palmer's model illuminates reviewers' feedback in helpful ways, establishing a structure that foregrounds themes evident in reviewers' comments. Moreover, the parallels between working in interdisciplinary spaces and writing for honors are compelling enough to justify the use of the model. Similar to interdisciplinary scholars, honors scholars face the prospect of joining a new, unfamiliar academic community, and they must shape their

work—imprinted by the norms of another community—for a new audience. These similarities make Palmer’s research model a good fit.

Palmer’s model divides interdisciplinary research activity into two broad categories: exploration and translation. According to Palmer, when interdisciplinary scholars undertake research, they “explore broadly across a wide array of materials,” employing “exploratory scanning” to take in new information (107, 102). They also seek out “channels for receiving information from outside domains,” including participating in academic conferences, editorial activities, cross-disciplinary conversations, and interdisciplinary teaching (102). When this information “grazing” leads them to identify knowledge gaps, they gather additional resources to round out their understanding (103, 104).

Interdisciplinary scholars also translate. To meet the challenge of speaking across disciplines in their research, they consult with colleagues and texts outside their area of expertise. Experienced colleagues and key texts help interdisciplinary scholars appropriate unfamiliar disciplinary concepts to their own ends. This work involves both vocabulary development and repurposing of ideas. “[Interdisciplinary] scholars define, interpret, and redefine new information,” Palmer writes, “retaining essential elements of the original context while revising and reapplying it for their own purposes” (107).

While Palmer’s stated objective was to analyze the research practices of the interdisciplinary humanities community, her findings also provide a glimpse into the character traits of this group. Throughout her analysis, Palmer portrays members of this community as admirably ambitious, firmly committed to boundary-crossing work, with a voracious appetite for a wide range of resources. According to Palmer, these interdisciplinarians manifest a “strong dedication to learning and communicating across boundaries” and engage in research that is “elaborate,” typified by a “diverse and scattered use of information” (109, 107). In their research, they seek out “highly complex networks that include many people, activities, and resources linked to various intellectual communities and institutions” (109). Interdisciplinary scholars could be characterized as academia’s overachievers: they seek challenges that “complicate the already intensive information gathering, reading, and writing processes” of their disciplinary peers (107). Palmer’s analysis implies that interdisciplinary humanities scholars possess a set of traits that enable them to advance their interdisciplinary scholarship and make unique intellectual contributions.

WRITING FOR HONORS

Exploration

Palmer's interdisciplinary research framework is relevant to writing for honors publications. According to *JNCHC* and *HIP* reviewers, prospective writers need to explore, inspecting the existing literature on honors education and bringing scholarship outside of honors to bear on their research. Reviewers note that consulting an array of sources can lead to project ideas and prepare honors researchers to situate their research within a larger conversation. Multiple reviewers stress the importance of this research activity. As one reviewer explains:

Using literature both in and outside of NCHC, authors should be able to see how the work they do and the issues that interest them are part of a bigger body of scholarship. Since drawing from this literature to frame any one project will be required for publication, getting familiar with what is already published will generate ideas and help authors think about how to pose a question or present results in ways that will be appropriate for this audience.

Another reviewer states, “The saddest scenario may be the author who hasn’t realized or recognized the corporate body of knowledge that already exists. When there are existing *JNCHC* and/or *HIP* articles on the topic, it’s critical to cite them!” Reviewers’ comments highlight that successful honors projects are informed by other projects in the field in design, focus, and presentation. Such projects explicitly participate in conversations that matter to the honors community. Exploration—within and beyond the walls of honors—prepares writers to join the conversation.

Relationship building, an important strand in the exploratory practices of interdisciplinary researchers, is also recommended by reviewers. They suggest that prospective writers explore by nurturing relationships with people who might further their research goals. One reviewer advises writers to “make connections with others in honors who share [their] interests” while another notes the benefits of doing so by stating, “Collaborating with honors colleagues from other institutions in producing a publishable piece can lead to productive ideas and tighter quality control.”

One area in which honors scholars might profitably collaborate is research methodology. The spirit of honors is to be accepting of a wide range of research processes, allowing members to bring their academic training to

bear on the fields' problems and questions. Diverse epistemological inflections add a richness to honors scholarship. While embracing heterogeneity, honors research nonetheless strives to maintain standards in methodological quality. One reviewer comments, "I love to see some data supporting assertions and claims. Our articles do not necessarily need the rigor of a top level Psychology journal, but I like to see something objective to support anecdotal evidence." Another reviewer clarifies that honors researchers do not have to have the same research methods training to produce a sound study, but then continues, "If you aren't a social scientist or education professor and you want to run a 'study' examining learning, then it would behoove you to collaborate with someone familiar with the methodology associated with studying learning [to strengthen your research]." The takeaway here is that connecting with colleagues during exploration enables writers to tap into others' disciplinary expertise, honors experience, creative thinking, and incisive feedback.

Translate

HIP and *JNCHC* reviewers also indicate that translation is important to success in honors. Their responses stress one particular form of translating above all others: generalizing to other contexts. In honors, as in other disciplines, the onus is on researchers to clearly show the relevance and portability of their ideas. The mantra "generalize, generalize, generalize" and "appeal to wider audiences" is prominent in reviewers' responses. As one reviewer explains,

I think the biggest pitfall that I've seen is that many authors are excited about something that worked at their campus and write an article that is 'too specific' to their campus/program. They need to think about how their idea/innovation can be generalized to other settings and populations. Oftentimes the idea can be generalized but the first draft does not make those leaps.

To avoid the "here's what we do at our institution" syndrome, one reviewer recommends learning to recognize quality contributions and find opportunities to similarly contribute. The reviewer remarks:

Valued scholarship in any discipline has impact beyond the individual situation or circumstance. Take note of those perspectives of others for which you find value, then watch for those occasions where your integration and analysis have the potential to likewise impact the broader community.

In Their Own Words: Advice from *HIP* and *JNCHC* Reviewers

On Exploration

- Understand and acknowledge the existing scholarship on your topic, both in honors and outside of it.
- Definitely authors should show familiarity with NCHC publications in the area they are treating and avoid duplication.
- Do a quick lit review. Why did you try this practice/approach? What literature informed you or inspired you to try it?
- Attend NCHC conferences; read the journals to determine what approaches and topics represent excellent contributions to the honors community, as they will provide useful models.
- Contact *HIP* authors whose articles are in the area that you have an interest and chat about your ideas.

On Translation

- One of the biggest shortcomings is focusing simply on “here’s what we do at our institution.”
- Link to how ideas/projects discussed in your manuscript are portable to other honors programs.
- Ask yourself how/why your discussion will help others in honors-land.
- Please don’t just tell us what you do in your program or at your school; please generalize your experience to apply to the rest of us. . . . Tell us what you think the rest of us can learn from your experience. To put it more crudely, tell us why we should care about what works for you.
- Do not submit pieces that have only local relevance or importance. Essays should have generalizable, widely transferable, and applicable qualities that readers can use in different contexts.

While most project ideas will no doubt stem from the local setting, reviewers' comments underscore the need for honors scholarship to elucidate broader applications.

Character Traits of Honors Researchers

Just as Palmer's analysis sheds light on the character of interdisciplinary humanities scholars, the comments by *HIP* and *JNCHC* reviewers illuminate character traits that they hope honors researchers will cultivate. These traits aid researchers in their scholarly pursuits and boost the quality of the final product. While far from exhaustive, the following list of characteristics provides a starting point for scholars new to honors publication.

Enthusiasm

LET YOUR PASSION FUEL YOUR PROJECTS

One reviewer counsels prospective authors to use their positive emotions to identify project ideas. He observes, "As for where to begin, start where you're passionate. If you've got an idea that fills you with excitement, it is probably something that the rest of us can use." Personal enthusiasm is a good metric for determining whether an initiative has potential for research and writing. Enthusiasm is invigorating and contagious: it helps authors maintain momentum during manuscript production and inspires readers to try new approaches.

Foresight

LEARN TO ENVISION THE FUTURE RESEARCH PROJECT UP FRONT

The ability to see research potential in the early stages of honors projects prevents researchers from dealing with a host of problems later on. Stressing the importance of taking the long view, one reviewer offers this advice:

As you think about new curricular or co-curricular ideas, think about what you would like to publish before you start. That makes it easier for you to develop a project in ways that will provide you with the information you need, rather than requiring you to recollect or not have the information you need later on.

From their home disciplines, many honors faculty and administrators bring significant experience building research projects out of teaching and service

initiatives. If transported into honors work, this same anticipatory, connective thinking and activity will position scholars for honors publication success as well.

Honesty

BE BRAVE ENOUGH TO SHARE THE GOOD, BAD, AND UGLY

Obscuring the challenges associated with a project may do more damage than good. This rhetorical move has the potential to lower reader morale and incite skepticism. As one reviewer explains,

Most readers of *HIP* will have struggled in various ways to launch honors activities and projects, only to encounter difficulties or obstacles; for them to read about a project that is described only in glowing terms can be dispiriting or, at least, not credible. I reckon I am asking for submissions that are honest.

Honors administrators can learn as much from other institutions' failures as their successes; thus, publications that expose challenges and grapple with problems are valuable. Accurate renderings contribute to an atmosphere of trust and openness within the honors community.

Polish

MAKE THE ELEGANCE OF THE WRITING PARALLEL THE GENIUS OF THE IDEAS

Widespread in reviewer feedback was the sentiment that most honors submissions would benefit from a thorough edit before being submitted for review. "Submit clear, concise, well-organized, relatively error-free writing," requests one reviewer, while another admonishes, "Never pass up the opportunity to edit, edit, edit." Reviewers admire "vibrant, muscular prose" and welcome submissions with stylistic flair, but they will settle for clear, correct writing that provides easy access to writers' good ideas.

CONCLUSION

Much of this advice is reflected in the *HIP* and *JNCHC* submission guidelines and style sheet, important sources of information for any honors research project. The additional commentary provided here reinforces and elaborates on that information. Notably, reviewers' willingness to provide

advice highlights their supportiveness for writers through the peer review process. *HIP* and *JNCHC* reviewers want writers to succeed, though it is easy to mistake their reviews for a barrier rather than a support. Speaking to this misperception, one reviewer advises prospective writers to “take the reviewers’ comments as they’re meant: not as harsh or cruel, though they may be blunt, but as constructive criticism designed to improve the article.” Helping writers improve their work and make genuine contributions to the honors literature: that is the goal. Working together, writers and reviewers can help excellence in research writing be the norm in honors education—a boon to the entire honors community.

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