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To Revise or Rewrite Anew: That Is the Question

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Abstract

I discuss my transition from humanities to social sciences through the lens of academic writing, identifying the propensity of academic scholarship to use unnecessary jargon in lieu of concise prose to convey clearly articulated research questions. Using two recent experiences responding to peer review and one from a term as a journal editor, I highlight the importance of a strong editorial hand in guiding revisions and improving manuscripts.

Keywords: Research question; peer review; jargon; wordiness; clear ideas.

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> Writing is thinking. To write well is to think clearly. That's why it's so hard. (McCullough, 2002)

Writing was my greatest weakness in graduate school. Only part of this limitation was due to my shift from humanities to social science as a graduate student. Drawing on my background in literature to interpret social science led to more creative if not well written papers, but lack of training in research methods and data analysis made the transition difficult. Despite the appeal of objectivity in social science, I was clueless how to write about numbers when I began my first empirical paper about women's labor force participation in Mexico. Jane Miller had not yet published her excellent primer, *The Chicago Guide to Writing about Numbers* (2004), but it would have saved me endless revisions. This volume became a staple of my undergraduate methods seminars and still sits in my home library.

That several research seminars required research proposals rather than literature reviews for final projects was fortuitous because it helped structure my thinking from topics to research questions. Then came the test — conceptualizing and writing a master's thesis using newly published Mexican census data. Using Friden desktop calculators to generate descriptive statistics from hand-coded data and IBM punch cards to program regressions were minor feats compared with the goal of interpreting and summarizing results in concise prose. The first draft probably read like a stream of consciousness. My readers — a demographer and a labor economist — agreed that the findings were promising but advised that the analyses and writing needed "tightening." It was a polite way of saying that a major overhaul was in order: data re-analysis, new tables, and a sharp storyline aligned with the research questions. And tables should always be self-contained so that readers do not need to read the text to understand them.[1] With the benefit of my advisor's strong editorial hand and guidance about what to modify and how, I produced a stronger thesis. Both empirical chapters were accepted for publication before I began the dissertation project. The life lesson was clear enough: publication required a willingness to embrace constructive criticism, discard, or revise drafts, and repeat the process until deadline. Note I did not say until perfect.

Word-processing software has certainly facilitated manuscript revision, but only authors must decide when sections of a manuscript are superfluous. In my experience introductions and background sections often qualify, particularly when I am trespassing disciplines or beginning a new project. The sputtering introduction to the chapter I co-authored for the *Urban Underclass* volume edited by Sandy Jencks and Paul Peterson (1991) was largely "throat-clearing," according to commentary on the first draft. The two seasoned editors were correct, of course, and their message guides critical reviews of my own writing and that of others. I revise introductions several times as I write, often scrapping and starting anew, as I did for this essay. I also advise students to write their introductions last, once both key arguments and evidence are clear.

Legal writing is replete with throat-clearing, but so is the world of academic scholarship. Jonathan Wallace (2014), expert copy editor for *The Future of Children* volumes, warned volume authors against throat clearing, which he illustrated using Princeton University Library's 2018 mission statement.

> In this era of rapid technological change, it is the goal of the Library to address the information needs of each group among its diverse set of users — faculty, undergraduates, graduate students, staff and the general public. With this goal in

1. As a reviewer I always study the tables before reading an empirical paper.

> mind, the Library endeavors to continually review and update its collections and resources to ensure that it is providing access to those tools and materials — both in print and electronically — that best meet the University's evolving mission of scholarship. (83 words)

Restated in plain English:

> The library strives to give all its users the tools and materials they need. (14 words)

Wallace's (2014) pithy reformulation may oversimplify, but the message is accurate and his point about unnecessary wordiness in academic writing is warranted. Important ideas do not require more words, but rather succinct exposition. Clarify, explain, avoid jargon, and eliminate wordiness. These principles guide my approach to revision both in my own writing and that of students and collaborators. I confess to more success with others' manuscripts than my own.

Partly because I was driven to improve my writing and partly because I had access to editorial assistance and word processing support in my early career, I revised manuscripts relentlessly. As a newcomer to sociology and demography, I often delivered muddled prose laced with jargon, which Jamie Whyte (2004) defines as "the substitution of bizarre, large and opaque words for ordinary, small and well-understood words." (p. 117) Harley Browning, my dissertation director, despised jargon as much as he appreciated clear, crisp text. I still have the paperback copy of Strunk and White's (1972) paperback edition of *The Elements of Style*, with a hand-written dedication, "For Marta, Best wishes on the eternal quest." On completing my dissertation, he gifted me a dictionary to assist my "quest for the right word."

Browning had an uncanny ability to identify confused ideas cloaked in jargon and garbled prose for lack of clear thinking, and he always called me out with a simple question: "What IS the question?" Rather than more or different words, revision first required re-thinking or sharpening the question, which often meant a restart. Even as marginal comments praised promising ideas in later drafts, his sharp pencil left extensive editorial "track changes" on dissertation chapters that rivaled those received by non-native English speakers. I embraced his pointed, but always fair criticisms. Professional editors at the University of Wisconsin-Madison further improved my writing for clarity and conciseness. Their mark-up drafts became study guides as I edited my writing and learned to "test" whether ideas made sense at various stages of incubation. Over time I became an obsessive editor of my own manuscripts and those of collaborators and students, although not everyone appreciates my heavy-handed word smithing.[2] Currently external reviewers and journal editors structure my approach to revision, but in different ways.

1 Revise and Resubmit: A Tale of Three Manuscripts

My scholarship has benefitted immeasurably from peer review partly because revisions often resulted better alignment between writing and thinking. Only a handful of my papers were accepted conditionally or with optional revisions on first submission, and I have had my share of outright rejections that required makeovers before seeking new venues. Early in my career,

2. A former undergraduate thesis advisee expressed her appreciation for my heavy-handed "editorial guidance" with a gift of three red pens to partly replace the red ink I spilled on her thesis drafts. Graduate students who are not native speakers are always grateful.

manuscripts typically required one revision and resubmission (R&R), usually accompanied by a cover letter summarizing key changes.

Over time, R&R decisions became repeating events, with most manuscripts subjected to two, and occasionally three, rounds of review, revision, and resubmission. The revision ritual involved making marginal comments on the referee reports, charting new analyses, and multiple rounds of rewriting. Responses to referee reports also have become more comprehensive and laborious because editors now request and referees expect detailed responses to their reports. Preparation of responses to reviewers presents another opportunity to re-align thinking with writing by finding common themes in the comments, consulting new studies, and crafting diplomatic replies when the referee is dead wrong. Revision usually entails switching back and forth between the manuscript and the responses, tightening prose in both directions.

Decisions to subject a manuscript to a second (or third) round of review presume a high degree of confidence that the manuscript will be accepted. For this reason, journal editors are cautious about inviting revised resubmissions. Because invitations to revise manuscripts explicitly acknowledge that publication is not guaranteed, R&R decisions motivate authors to address referee reports comprehensively. Whether and how editors participate in the decision process varies appreciably and yet is quite important when referee reports conflict. A strong "editorial hand" can prevent response memos from becoming a discussion between authors and referees, can influence the odds that revised submissions succeed, and can also bring promising ideas to fruition, as the following cases illustrate.

1.1 Case 1

How many reviews are required to fairly adjudicate the scientific merit of a social science manuscript? In my experience, two to three independent referee reports typically accompanied editorial decisions, but occasionally an additional late review followed the editor's decision to accept, reject or invite a revision. I was surprised to receive an invitation to revise and resubmit a manuscript, accompanied by six lengthy referee reports in the first round of review of a co-authored manuscript. The lead author, a graduate student for whom a publication in a top journal carries considerable weight in the job market, was undaunted by the pages and pages of comments. Addressing the critiques required re-estimation of complex models along with several robustness checks, re-writing large sections of the text, and preparation of extensive supplementary appendix material.

Revisions in response to the first round of reviews improved the clarity of the arguments and the exposition of technical results, but neither additional analysis nor robustness checks changed the main findings. The revised manuscript was resubmitted along with several appendices and a 17-page point-by-point response to referee comments that connected specific comments to the revised text. The second round involved two original and a new referee. All three praised the responsiveness of the revision to the six referee reports, and yet requested more analyses. Revisions in response to the second round of review involved more robustness checks with supporting text and different supplementary materials. The editor was silent in the exchange between authors and referees, never indicating which should be addressed.

Did the peer review process improve the manuscript? Yes, especially on the first round. Was a second round of revision required? Perhaps, but editorial guidance would have benefitted the revision process. Adding a new referee in addition to the two most critical referees from the first round required reversing modifications made in response to prior suggestions. Through both major revisions, results proved robust to alternative specifications and seemingly endless

sensitivity tests to verify or disprove counterfactuals the reviewers proposed. Modifications in response to the second round largely involved re-writing text, adding a new "current study" section, eliminating appendices requested in the first-round review, then cutting 900 words to stay within the allowable word count. The editor's hand was largely invisible in the adjudication process, which was relegated to iterative consensus among reviewers.

1.2 Case 2

While the prior manuscript toggled between revisions and resubmissions, a second co-authored manuscript had a very different revision journey — one guided by a strong editorial hand. Within four weeks of submission, we received two reviews and a "soft" rejection letter. Based on the referee reports, the editor had every reason to decline the manuscript yet saw promise in both the originality and timeliness of the study. Rather than render a typical reject verdict, the editor served as the third reviewer and left the door open for revision and resubmission, inviting a response to the referee reports before rendering a final decision:

> [...] I would like to receive general thoughts on how you would address key concerns (just to reduce the chances of a negative editorial decision after having spent so much energy revising). [...] I desk reject the vast majority of submissions, indicating that if I sent it out for review in the first place, I am quite interested in supporting it.

The last sentence reveals an engaged and active editor who willingly encouraged promising ideas that were underdeveloped. There was no commitment to re-consider a revised manuscript, but we accepted the challenge. With support from my co-author, I drafted and revised several times a three-page memo that addressed referee reports and mapped a clear revision plan. The exercise was critical in forcing an alignment between thinking and writing. We acknowledged the constructive critiques, set forth plans to revise analyses, yet diplomatically noted which comments were ill-advised. It was not a point-by-point response, but rather a revision strategy. It was successful:

> Well, if ever there was a well-crafted response, yours is it! Substantively, I do think your intended responses are moving in the right direction for our journal.

The response from a veteran editor was especially reassuring, but also illustrates how to use the peer review process to shape social science research. Encouraged that the manuscript could be salvaged, he provided detailed guidance about requirements for a successful resubmission.

I now appreciate why the revision strategy memo succeeded in converting the rejection decision to an invitation to revise. Although the guiding research questions remained unchanged, the original manuscript lacked a clear storyline. One referee rightly called out a the "background" section, which I realized was throat clearing because it contained extraneous information that deflected attention from the core questions. The revision replaced the background section with a succinct literature review that situated the study theoretically and substantively. A new "current study" paragraph framed the research gap and emphasized the novel contributions. In addition to tipping the editorial decision from reject to R&R, the strategy memo guided the revision from theoretical reframing through empirical execution. The memo also served as a template for the detailed response to reviewers. No additional review was required. I credit the success of the revision to a seasoned editor who saw promise in an idea and used editorial discretion to bring it to fruition.

1.3 Case 3

The final example is from my term as editor of the *American Journal of Sociology* when I exercised editorial discretion to avoid rejecting a manuscript about differential fertility and the distribution of IQ by Samuel Preston and Cameron Campbell (1993a). In the early 1990s the proliferating literature about the urban underclass often invoked intergenerational transmission to explain persisting poverty, but seldom provided rigorous empirical evidence. This manuscript was an important exception. I recruited James Coleman, a distinguished social theorist and mathematical sociologist and David Lam, an economic demographer with expertise in differential fertility and theories of population change, to serve as referees. I recall that at least one recommended outright rejection and the other likely requested a substantial revision. Had I followed typical protocol, the article would have been declined without further consideration. But that decision seemed unreasonable given the limited rigorous literature about intergenerational transmission processes at the time and the novelty of the submitted manuscript.

I approached Coleman and asked to speak about his critical review. His response was just what I needed: he had been thinking about the manuscript since he wrote the critique and thought it deserved further consideration. I invited him and Lam to participate in a symposium that elaborated their referee reports into self-standing responses to the article and would invite Preston and Campbell to prepare a short rejoinder (1993b). Both invited responses were subjected to peer review. It was one of the rare moments when, with support of the associate editors and always deft guidance from managing editor, Susan Allan, I exercised editorial discretion to showcase the value of interdisciplinary approaches in the study of inequality and social change. The original submission along with the two peer-reviewed comments and authors' rejoinder were published as a *"Symposium on Intergenerational Transmission"* in Volume *98*(5) of the *American Journal of Sociology*. (Preston & Campbell, 1993a, 1993b; Coleman, 1993; Lam, 1993) In this instance, peer review broadened the conversation about intergenerational transmission processes, exposing the need for rigorous theoretical formulations and genuine multi-generational data.

2 Epilogue

I was invited to write this short essay about revision as a process of improving a book or an article just as I was finishing revisions of the two articles described above and was excited about the opportunity to describe the painstaking process of editing, revising, and rewriting. Two days into the essay I started anew because I was writing about how technology modified manuscript processing and peer review, rather than on the process of "revising, reviewing, and editing," as requested. This is the 8th revision of the essay, not counting the numerous re-writes of the introduction or the re-start. A four-day hiatus provided a needed refresh that allowed me to see that a paragraph I had revised several times was a digression- a remnant from the false start. I excised it on the 7th revision.

The key take-away message is that revision is a repeat process that relies heavily on both critics and editors. The three cases feature distinct approaches to the exercise of editorial influence in both reviews and revisions. I added the *AJS* symposium to bolster my argument about the importance of active "editorial hands" in shaping which ideas appear in print by drawing on their expertise and by purposefully using peer review as a tool to improve academic scholarship. Reviewers play an important part in screening and improving social science, but editors also can exert outsized influence when they actively guide promising manuscripts. Few editors

allow authors to challenge editorial decisions even when reviewers offer misguided criticisms. Preparing revision strategy memos can guide manuscript revisions more effectively than segmented responses to specific critiques, but the latter are often required to satisfy referees. Authors should embrace constructive criticism, revise text for clarity and conciseness, and repeat the process as needed until deadline.

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