

Readers' Reports on Book MSS: Writing and Utilizing Advice

This advice derives from a 2014 Career Session with (Chair) Tracy C. Davis (Northwestern University), LeAnn Fields (University of Michigan Press), Paige McGinley (Washington University), Heather Nathans (Tufts University), and Marc Robinson (Yale University). Special thanks to Leah Englund Brick for framing these notes.

Advice to presses is one form of (blind) academic peer review. This panel was convened to explain how reports are utilized by presses and authors, advise scholars on how to frame reports constructively, and guide authors' responses to reports.

Important Terms:

Acquisitions or Commissioning Editor – Press staff person assigned to subject field. For non-series books this will be the author's first point of contact.

MS -- Book manuscript (plural MSS).

Press Board or Editorial Board – Standing committee that reviews proposals. University presses enlist faculty in specialties representing the breadth of the press's list.

Reader – Expert commissioned by press to advise on proposals or manuscripts.

Series Editor – An academic under contract with a press to develop projects for a series.

About reader's reports:

Readers' reports are used when an academic publisher is considering a proposal and deciding whether or not to invite the full manuscript, and when deciding whether or not to offer a contract for a full manuscript. A project will not be formally approved until reports are reviewed positively by the press's editorial board.

- ◆ Reports in humanistic fields tend to be 2-3 pages long and are usually requested of tenured faculty.
 - ◆ Reports for multi-author collections are often much longer than standard reports because feedback is given on each essay as well as to the editor(s) of the collection, addressing how the parts contribute to the whole. Readers' reports can help collection editors broker difficult conversations with authors, lending weight to advice.
- ◆ Interdisciplinary projects may require reports from readers outside an author's home discipline, in addition to reports from experts in the field.
- ◆ In addition to evaluative advice, reports make an explicit recommendations about revisions and whether a book warrants publication.

What is the process?

The goal of this multistage process is to help the author develop their work in as thoughtful a way as possible.

- ◆ Editors appreciate authors who use their own informal network to vet material before offering it to a press. LeAnn Fields shared an anecdote about a MS whose chapters treat six distinct periods in theater history. The author had sent individual chapters to be vetted by various specialists; s/he did

not include full formal reports from those readers with the MS, but the process had made the manuscript much stronger and gave the press confidence.

- ◆ When an author submits to a series, such as Heather Nathans' "Studies in Theatre History and Culture" series at Iowa University Press or Tracy C. Davis's "Theatre and Performance Theory" series at Cambridge University Press the series editor (and sometimes the acquisitions) editor generally offer the author one or two rounds of comments and questions before soliciting a reader's report.
- ◆ At the University of Michigan Press, Cambridge University Press, Iowa University Press, and Northwestern University Press, the first step is an in-house reading where editors determine how broad an application the work might have beyond its own specialized topic; consider a generalist's point of view; and focus on organization and structure of the manuscript, evidence and documentation, and how the author engages with other foundational works and recent studies in areas of specialization. Editors are looking for ways the manuscript poses interesting questions in new ways, expands the field, and/or brings different fields together in new ways. Feedback may be given to the author and revisions made. Reader's reports are solicited if the in-house review is positive.

"Odds are pretty good that you will, at some point, be asked to review a manuscript. Odds are even better that you will not tackle the assignment in the same way as others, with the same skills, or with the same assumptions about what the publisher wants." Patrick H. Alexander, "[What Just Ain't So](#)," *Inside Higher Ed*, 6 April 2009.

- ◆ Via readers' reports, outside experts advise on how the project intersects with current thinking in a particular area; anything the author has overlooked, such as significant critical facets of the topic; and whether the project makes a substantive contribution to ongoing scholarly conversation(s).
- ◆ Most projects are reviewed simultaneously by two or more reviewers, however in some cases reports are solicited sequentially.
- ◆ Because not two reports will be the same, the editor may be reluctant to give author the reports until *all* solicited reports are available. Authors need to patiently await their full set of reports. Otherwise, an author may start to revise based on just one report and be challenged to reconcile this with additional reports.
- ◆ Once the acquisitions editor has the readers' reports, s/he distills them into comments for the author. This may be accompanied with recommendations about how the comments should be applied. For example, authors may be instructed to give less weight to feedback that is not consistent with their vision for the project, or to use the criticism and recommendations as inspiration to do some things differently.
- ◆ During this multi-stage process, while a project is under review and/or after the manuscript has been accepted, series editors and/or acquisitions editors may try to collaborate with authors by engaging in ongoing conversations by email, phone, or Skype when needed, or by reviewing new drafts of individual chapters, etc. However, no press regards its editors as co-authors on a project.

What do press boards do?

Press boards review recommendations about book projects and authorize the issuing of contracts.

- ◆ Press boards do not usually see the manuscripts per se,* but are provided with a summary, the author's CV, readers' reports, readers' CVs, preliminary marketing information and cost projections, and the author's response to readers' reports.
 - *There are exceptions to this practice. For example, at the University of Michigan Press the press board is given electronic access to the full manuscript, along with the readers' reports.
- ◆ Press boards represent a range of specialties so offer a wide spectrum of disciplinary perspectives on proposals and the evaluative materials that accompany them.
- ◆ Because press boards see scholarship in all fields that the press publishes, the credibility of the field of theatre scholarship relative to all other fields becomes apparent through readers' reports. There is a collective onus on theatre scholars to uphold the integrity of our field. Reports should always demonstrate rigorous scholarly evaluation.

Readers' responsibilities:

Readers are chosen from the leaders in the field, experts known to the commissioning editor or series editor, and key figures in the book's bibliography with whom the project is in dialogue.

- ◆ Before accepting an invitation to review, readers must ensure that they have no conflict of interest. Conflicts are anything that could impede impartiality (such as familial relationships, the reader and author being colleagues in graduate school or from the same undergraduate cohort, the reader serving on the author's dissertation committee, or being in some other hierarchical relationship to the author). Avoiding conflicts may be more challenging in very small and specialized subject areas. If the reader has seniority relative to the author, s/he may feel a responsibility to foster that field, and indeed the press may be contacting the reader for that reason. If there is a conflict, or the possibility of a conflict, disclose it to the press before proceeding with the review. Disclosure not only clarifies if there is a conflict, it can also abnegate the conflict. The press will work with the reader to determine the best course of action.
- ◆ Readers are generally provided with a questionnaire about the rigorousness of the research, quality of the writing, and contribution to the field. The last question is always "Should it be published?": Editors and press board appreciate an explicit recommendation and justification.
- ◆ The commissioning editor may add questions specific to the project. For example, for a collection of interviews, the editor may ask questions about adding biographical headnotes. There may be questions about copy editing of the MS, how to trim length, or specific marketing concerns.

Tips for writing a good report:

Helpful reports aid everyone to envision how the manuscript might become publishable.

- ◆ Reports should make a clear and sustained argument about the MS's purpose and importance; advise on how it fits into the disciplinary landscape; and explain what the problems are.
- ◆ Reports should be objective, rigorous, and use a tone that can help the author imagine how to push the work in a more productive direction. Even if the ultimate recommendation is that the manuscript should not be published, the reader's report is an opportunity to extend mentorship by helping to move the author's scholarship and thinking forward.
- ◆ Readers must be clear in critique: explain reasoning and locate the problem(s).
- ◆ One effective practice is for the reader to mirror back to the author what has been gleaned from the reading so that the author can gauge how successfully the MS achieves their goals. Seeing readers explain "this is what the book is about" helps authors know whether their book is understood.

Regarding style, Marc Robinson notes: “I strongly believe that the argument is only as persuasive as the writing is clear, detailed, and aligned with the qualities of an ephemeral art.”

- ◆ The reader should help the author see positive and negative tendencies and give advice on how to deal with them. For example, pose suggestions for further elaboration and strategies for untying knots in an argument. Identify holes in need of filling, blunt passages in need of nuance, critical turns that distort the art under discussion, errors in need of correction, stylistic infelicities, and specific bibliographic suggestions, as warranted. Note any tendencies in writing or organization that could be optimized.
- ◆ Readers should respond to the MS that is before them, not frame the book they would write themselves.
- ◆ Readers give expert advice specific to the discipline. This includes evaluating an author’s acuity in reconstructing performance, handling musicology, describing choreography, interpreting images of the *mise en scène*, etc.
- ◆ If a reader notices a number of typos, one comment to the press is usually sufficient. While lists of errata can be useful to the author and the press, it is not the reader’s responsibility to proofread the manuscript. If there is a typo specific to the area of expertise, or that would not be easily caught, mention it.
- ◆ A lack of pristineness is sometimes because the author’s first language is not English. If that is the case, the reader may recommend the publisher provide support to help the author rigorously copy edit the manuscript.
- ◆ Editors hope for a report with positive and negative comments that concludes with a recommendation to publish as is, publish with revisions, or advise author to rework then resubmit.

The Author’s response to readers’ reports:

Press boards receive the author’s response to the readers’ reports and carefully weigh this in their determination. Does the author understand the advice, and can they act upon it appropriately? Are there disciplinary debates that the book needs to take a stand on in a manner contrary to the reports? Does the author have a realistic plan for revision?

- ◆ The readers will not see the author’s response to their reports. Instead, it is utilized by the series editor, acquisitions editor, press staff, and the press board.
- ◆ It is important that the author own what the book needs, rather than writing a response that is defensive to the readers’ reports.

When readers’ reports praised parts of Paige McGinley’s book, she asked herself “How can I bring what worked really well here to the rest of the book, especially to the parts that are weaker?”

- ◆ Authors should read the reports for the key points, figure out what they are being asked to do, and ascertain whether this is consistent with their own vision for the project. It is much better to read criticism that comes in this private form prior to publication than in a published book review, so authors should assume that the readers are trying to make the project as strong as possible.
- ◆ Authors should process the advice in readers’ reports with the commissioning editor (and/or series editor if applicable). It is important that the editor help the author – especially first-time authors –

understand reports, as tone and message can be difficult to discern correctly. When reports get into the criticism of minutia, the author may need the editor to point out that they are indeed positive overall. If the reports are mixed, the author may consult the editor to help resolve contradictory advice for rewrites. Authors should ask how to interpret idiosyncrasies, prioritize recommendations, and develop a plan of action for implementing advice, before writing their letter of response.

- ◆ Interdisciplinary manuscripts present challenges in how to deal with the intellectual biases and perspectives of readers from different fields. A report can reveal the reader's intellectual biases and perspectives, however the author can find this useful when deciding how to incorporate comments and/or suggestions and reach different kinds of intended readers.
- ◆ Authors and commissioning editors need to decide timelines for submitting the response and for undertaking the MS revisions. It is not helpful to have unrealistic deadlines. Revision may take a while: a year is not unusual (depending upon the author's leave time, if additional travel to archives or field work is warranted, and the extent of proposed revisions).
- ◆ It may be useful to rephrase readers' recommendations into actions to be taken. The process of revision can be lengthy and many editors recognize that. It is important that the author take the time that is necessary to truly engage the feedback, even if feeling rushed by external forces.
- ◆ Do not simply agree to make every suggested change without question. Weigh the advice, work with the editor to determine if there are changes you should resist, and justify alternative fixes. The tone of the author's response should be professional, confident, and courteous, but never obsequious. Editors and press boards value authors' collegiality, and this is an important way to display it.

Contracts

After receiving an author's response and the press board's positive recommendation, the press is able to make a decision regarding a contract.

- A conditional contract means that the MS will be sent back to one or two of the readers so that those readers can ensure their concerns were addressed.
- A standard contract means that the manuscript only needs minor revisions and will not be sent for additional expert review.
- Advance contracts are given by some presses when they are very confident in the author or a project. It may be because of previous experience with that author and is usually after a conversation with another expert in the field. Once the final manuscript is received, it requires the customary peer review and formal acceptance by the press board.

*"An insightful review can help transform mediocrity into
brilliance."*

(Gary Alan Fine, to the American Sociological Association)¹

¹ Quoted by Rebecca Schuman, "[The Peer-Review Jerk-Survival Guide](#)" *Chronicle of Higher Education* 15 August 2014: A30.