Hew! You just finished your honors thesis/senior project and presented the largest paper you have ever written to your advisor. Every time you thought you had covered “all the bases,” your advisor had one more person’s research to include in your paper or one more table or graph that could explain a marginally significant statistical effect. Thirty pages and 16 tables and graphs later, you are on your way to celebrate. At your celebration, you run into your advisor who informs you that after reading through your paper, the department is convinced you should submit it to a journal for possible publication. They assure you that this piece of work is the best they have seen (and it is, of course!) and that chances are good it is publishable. Now your friends are impressed and you are excited. You select a journal that publishes undergraduate student research papers and send off your honors thesis/senior project.

What happens next? Your project arrives at the journal office. The journal editors know that what has been received is a “documentary.” Every piece of information that relates to the topic in any way has been included within the paper. This format is appropriate for your honors thesis/senior project, and your advisor was correct in demanding that you trace the historical events that lead up to the hypothesis of your project. So why isn’t a documentary the correct format for a journal article?

Journal articles are much more like a “sitcom.” You need to make every second and every word count, and you have to attract an audience to your project or you can’t market (publish) the piece. Your advisor must read your honors thesis/senior project, but journal reviewers and readers of the journal are under no such mandate. Therefore, you need to tighten up your documentary and eliminate parts and pieces that are nice but not necessary for your new audience. Sitcoms must move forward at a rapid pace to attract an audience that is “channel surfing” and so must your project if it is to become a published journal article. So, how do I turn my documentary into a sitcom?

Just as there are many types of sitcoms, there are many ways to convert your honors thesis/senior project into a journal article. The first thing to realize is that because your audiences are different for the two pieces, you do need to revise the original project. Several components of the documentary are not needed in the sitcom. The historical review must be tightened up. Only include past research that specifically addresses your research hypotheses. Earlier research is often cited in a sentence like, “Prior research has shown that . . . relevant literature).”

Think about a story line for your sitcom. What are the lines that will open your show, set the stage, move the plot, and conclude the program? Be aware that each line and each word must convey concise meaning as your “producers” need to get the most

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for their “investment.” Look at the “dialogue”; is it repetitive? Repetitive lines can be eliminated. Is a line boring?; how can you rephrase it to maintain the interest of your reader? Have you used words repeatedly?; try to utilize synonyms. Save the abstract for the last, and then give it your best effort. Your opening line in the abstract is the most important sentence in your entire manuscript. Think of the abstract as the “promo clip” used to attract the attention of a potential audience.

Prior to sending your manuscript to the journal, have it read critically by friends and colleagues. (Notice that we have transformed an honors thesis/senior project into a manuscript at this point.) Colleagues (i.e., professors) can work with you on style and content, but friends that say “I’m sure it’s good, but I don’t understand it” also give you vital information. Your manuscript should be readable by an educated person, even if they are not immersed in the same field. Ask these individuals what they do not understand, and you will have insight into how to fine-tune your manuscript. You do not have to agree with the specific comments these critical readers make, but you need to address the areas of the manuscript that cause them difficulty.

One final transformation. Which tables and graphs do you keep, and which ones do you take out of your final manuscript? Tables and graphs are costly in a manuscript unless they save space in the text. Think about using one graphic to show several important pieces of data. Decide what types of information are best presented in a visual form and which ones are best presented in a verbal form. In this way your text and graphics complement each other and facilitate understanding your article. (Notice that now we are describing an article, a piece ready for final formatting and publication.)

Is my project worth all of this transformation and the effort it will require on my part? The answer to this question is complicated. If your project is an original piece of work with significant results, yes, the effort is worth it. If it is only a pilot study and needs further research to “tell the story,” then you need to consider what the effort will produce for you. Am I planning on graduate school? Will this effort help me get into graduate school? Is there any possibility of this piece being accepted by the journal to which I plan on submitting the manuscript? It might be worth your time and trouble to discuss these issues with members of your faculty. Additionally, it is always possible to call the editor of the journal and briefly ask if your project has the potential for publication in the journal you have selected.

Good luck with your project on its journey to becoming an article. The adventure is an exciting one, even if it is frustrating at times!