

An Editor's Open Letter to Scholarly Authors

Gerhard van den Heever*

Dear author, Thank you for your interest in the journal, N.N., and for submitting your article to the journal to be considered for publication. I would like to believe that you elected to submit to this journal because you have been impressed by the quality articles that regularly appear here, and because you have identified this journal as the best venue in which to publish as it communicates with your envisaged academic audience, where your work will achieve the exposure and interest that you believe it deserves.

Permit me, then, to ask you in some exasperation, why it is that you did not bother to read the stated aims and focus of the journal as published on the website. Alternatively, a perusal of a number of past issues would also have told you what kind of discourse it is that this journal promotes and publishes. Instead, you submitted an article that falls outside the scope of the journal, which I still have to read before deciding whether to reject it out of hand or to send it on to reviewers (for I must protect their time too).

More than that, you also did not bother to read the instructions for authors, also published on the submission portal. And so, I regularly receive submissions, such as yours, that do not adhere to our journal style, and sometimes clearly betray signs of having been written for another journal (in one case, the accompanying cover letter even addressed the previous journal to which the article was obviously first submitted). If you did not take this journal seriously enough, you create the impression that your article is just doing the rounds with any and every journal to see where it gets accepted, as if any other journal would also do. You might feel aggrieved when the article is rejected out of hand if it does not conform to the journal style, but who did you think is supposed to rewrite your article into the correct style?

The solution is so simple: bibliographic management software would have taken care of such issues. Unfortunately, I have been in the position far too many times for my academic sanity where I had to rewrite your references and bibliography. I no longer do that because I, too, must protect my time and workspace – I have done that too numerous times in the past without getting any thank you recognition from authors (OK, it happened three times over almost thirty years that someone explicitly thanked me for quality editorial work), and I wonder if you actually read the finished, copy edited, and published

version to see how it differs from what you submitted. I have a sneaky feeling you do not.

And speaking of rewriting references, I check every reference because I have learnt from painful experience that authors are actually irresponsibly sloppy with their data (and, mind, your bibliographic references are your data), which if you get it wrong (page numbers, mis-citations, bibliographic information) not only undermines the credibility of your research and makes it kind of worthless, but also tells me that you probably did not consult the sources yourself.

Maybe it is not a thing to you, but I still believe in scholarship as the pursuit of accuracy, veracity, accurate curating of data, truth and truthfulness, and justified reasoned argument, and not the mere peddling of opinions – research is not the impressionistic stitching together of references, citations, reports, and opinions. Does it really not bother you that I, in effect, have done your research for you?

But there is more: Too often I get articles, like yours, where in spite of you confirming on the submission portal that the article was language checked by a native English speaker, the text contains whole paragraphs that do not make sense, or uncorrected typos, other grammatical mistakes, sentences without clear subjects, objects, verbs, or my pet peeve, the sentence that ends in ... mid-sentence (yes, they do occur). The only thing I can then conclude is that your article was a rush job that you now throw to the hapless editor with some disdain as if to say: There, see that it gets published!

I can perfectly well imagine that you get aggrieved when I unpack like this. But then permit me some exasperation and aggravement too. You may not think much of me nor take me seriously, but when your article is selected for publication, I take your work seriously enough to spend long hours panel beating it into publishable shape, often into the very late hours of the night (because I, too, work against deadlines). So, I will let you in on the secret of what I do: I run three or four online dictionaries plus some online grammar tools to check spelling and grammar, an online library catalogue to check publication information (for the correct edition – since for some reason authors do not think it matters when there are different editions of a work), two browsers (at least) with in total around four hundred open tabs where I have checked the correct text of citations in your sources, obtained the URLs or DOI numbers of your online sources.

Oh, and when I come across a sentence or paragraph of which I cannot make heads or tails (and if I can't, other readers will most probably also not), I copy that offending piece of text to a new document and spend an hour or so trying to understand what it says, changing punctuation, word order, and so on, until

continues on page 10:

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Academic Writing Requires Better Preparation by Authors

continued from page 9:

I am satisfied that I understand what you meant and what makes sense in the context. By the time your article appears in print, I will have read it at least three times: when received it gets the initial reading, when I copy edit it, and I also do the proofing. So, during those late-night sessions, when I realise how unfinished your article is, I often wonder, if you don't take your own work seriously to finish it off in the best possible shape for submission, why should anyone else take you seriously?

You will realise, of course, that if I spend this amount of effort and time on your article, that the editorial process is slow. This is simply because in my particular case, I get no support from the university where I teach – no teaching reduction, no appointed editorial assistant, so that I am in effect chef, cook, and bottle washer as editor. I manage the online editorial portal, the assignment of handling editors and reviewers (and checking up on them; often struggling to find willing reviewers; why is it that no-one wants to review submissions but expects everyone else to drop their work to review your article to get it published?), the copy editing, the proofing – handling the whole process from beginning to end. I do this while I am in the exact same position as you are. I teach three undergraduate courses (and co-teach one other) per semester, plus two honours year courses, plus I have committee work and other academic citizenship responsibilities, plus academic society responsibilities, plus graduate students to supervise, plus the pressure to publish research and obtain external grants (in our case, if you are a professor you have been instructed to publish three research articles per annum in subsidy-accredited journals, because the institution regards research output subsidies as an income stream), all this in the context of an overly bureaucratised institution (I am sure you know this, too) with heavy burdens of paperwork to see to; and then I also edit this journal. Why? Because I have a vision and I believe in what I do, and it gives me immense satisfaction to play my small part in helping shape an academic discourse.

Academic work is, among other things, also a social process which we all labour in collectively, and you are part of it, for you also contribute to the continued functioning of the industry (or so I hope you see it too). Next time, if I ask you to help with the reviewing of someone else's article (isn't it good manners to return the favour when someone else did it for you?), please do not say you are too busy.

I realise full well you are also under pressure to perform in the area of research publication, and getting published may have a real impact on your career progression. I am not insensitive to that. But you have to realise also that managing and editing a journal is not a simple box-ticking exercise, it demands deep involvement, and when it means managing theme issues (with all the attendant personal issues of authors impacting on their ability to deliver in time – when life happens to them – that you also have to deal with), it just so happens that it will take time for your article to get the attention you want it to receive. So please, next time, before you fire off angry letters of demand to know when you can expect publication of your submitted

article (which may or may not be out of scope for this journal, which may or may not conform to the journal style, which may or may not have been carefully finished for publication), just spare a moment to think of the immense amount of work that goes into the making of each issue of this journal, and it is just a human who stands at the other end working long hours to make the journal issue happen. At which end, if your article gets published, eventually, in this journal, it is as close to perfect as I could possibly get it.

Let me also add, in case you get the idea I am a curmudgeon only venting my spleen, I have deep appreciation for those authors who take care to submit well-written, well-finished work, written for this journal, and from whom I have had the intense pleasure to learn a lot, been inspired with new ideas and insights, and whose work enriched my own continual intellectual formation no end.

Yours sincerely,

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Executive editor: Religion & Theology (Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands)

Notes of Exasperation

PS. I am not alone. Here is a list of articles written by another exasperated editor (Keyan G Tomaselli) that make similar points:

Journals editing, editor recognition, and impacting disciplines, *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* <https://letterkunde.africa/article/view/12820>

Performance, profit or productivity: Why do we publish? *University World news (UWN)* <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20220517090500504>

Publishing should be a big deal – for the right reasons. *UWN* <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210405052016972>

Publish, profit, predate, perish and peer review. *UWN* (By Patrick Fish) <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20201005070134522>

Publishing should be for social and disciplinary impact. *UWN*. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=2021050314203745>

Peer Review is Academic Citizenship, *SA Journal of Science*, <https://sajs.co.za/article/view/8728>

And for a wonderful and empowering story on how to get it right, see Dudu Zwane's: A word to the wise: Publishing in international journals. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210322193800461>

And all back issues of the ANFASA Magazine: <https://www.anfasa.org.za/category/anfasa-magazine/>