Why We Write

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This essay examines why scholars engage in the writing process and what is to be gained by this endeavor—not only by the reader but also by the author. We invited Dr. Geiger to write this essay, asking him simply: Why is the publication of academic research important and what purpose does it serve? Why should students engage in the publication process? As editors of this student journal we hope this essay, as a coda to the third volume of Higher Education in Review, will help students—even those who may not pursue an academic career—to better understand the role and importance of research and publication and to consider why we engage in the scholarly process.

– The Editors

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With this third volume, the *Higher Education in Review* furthers its avowed mission to provide opportunities for graduate students to participate in academic publishing. Although no definition of academic publishing is needed for such an endeavor, the editors have asked me to reflect on this subject from my perspective as an inveterate academic scribbler, journal editor, and mentor to neophyte scholars.

When this subject arises, I invariably recall the description given by a nineteenth-century college president: to contribute "some new discovery, however slight." The exhilarating promise of the first clause is completely deflated by the second. Yet, academic publishing is like that. Our "new discoveries," when placed in the larger perspective, represent incremental (I won't say "slight") additions to far larger bodies of academic knowledge. This stems from the nature of the enterprise.

We tend to take for granted the mountains of fact and interpretation embodied in scholarly books, articles, and conference presentations. Yet, they certainly represent one of humanity's most remarkable achievements. Ever since scientists began publishing their findings as scientific papers in the seventeenth century, certified knowledge has been accumulating into different fields and disciplines. The nature of this knowledge, especially when codified by German academics in the nineteenth century as *Wissenschaft*, was specialized, theoretical, and based on systematic inquiry. Specialized, because it derived from expertise over specific, delimited phenomena. Theoretical, because it sought knowledge generalized over classes of things rather than unique items. And, based on systematic inquiry to provide the transparency and replication essential for validation. Standards are naturally more rigorous in the hard, or strong-paradigm sciences, but the same principles operate with greater scope for interpretation in social science and humanistic disciplines. Thus, contributing an academic paper carries the obligation to meet the requirements of academic knowledge.

This first of all demands objectivity, which is achieved primarily through systematic inquiry. Interpretation or individual perspectives may be essential, and research may be employed to argue value-laden propositions, but the sources or data used should always be clearly identified and fairly presented so that other scholars can draw their own, hopefully similar, conclusions. It has been fashionable for some time to disparage objectivity as an unattainable ideal, but ideals by their very nature exist to orient our actions, not to be realized. Writings that do not strive to meet the ideal of objectivity are conspicuously tainted—and do not contribute to academic knowledge.

Second, because academic knowledge is cumulative, an incremental contribution should be grounded on previous work in the field. Of course, all past scholarship may not be valid, or may require reinterpretation—this is why Robert K. Merton insisted on "organized skepticism" as part of the scientific ethos. But, to offer anything new to the field, one must know what is already there. Hence, knowing the literature in a field is not a perfunctory exercise, but a fundamental feature of academic knowledge.

The third requirement is originality itself—contributing "some new discovery." This may be done by generating new data through systematic inquiry, analyzing existing data in fresh ways, or by investigating a new or neglected phenomenon. In any of these approaches, the significance of the "discovery" most likely will depend on its relevance to existing bodies of academic knowledge. Offering new interpretations of existing fields is inherently more challenging, since the aim then becomes disrupting rather than extending the consensus of normal science. Still, essays and reviews of this nature are part of the continual process of probing, refining, and questioning academic knowledge.

The rigorous constraints of academic knowledge may not appeal to everyone. Journalists may tackle larger issues, editorialists indulge their partisan spirits, and now bloggers have complete license for subjective viewpoints. Academic knowledge, moreover, has a substantial band of detractors, who condemn scholarly writings as irrelevant, unreadable, and best ignored. It may even be true that the modal academic paper receives zero citations. However, such external skepticism is irrelevant—academic knowledge is above all an internal communication system for a self-defined learning community. Those who have potential new discoveries to offer will benefit greatly by sharing them through formal publication.

The process of academic publication serves to transform new ideas and findings into certifiable knowledge—a part of the corpus of the field. This is accomplished through four phases—creation, review, editing, and publication.

Perhaps least obvious, the creative phase is undoubtedly the most crucial. The person who learns the most from any piece of scholarship is the author. Bringing a research project to fruition generates far more learning than can be distilled into a single article. Moreover, the act of writing forces an author to define and refine ideas far more rigorously than casual discussion. Writing is the creative act that transforms data or findings into meaningful interpretations of reality. One can always improve in this endeavor, so that practice, perseverance, and the capacity to revise will over time raise the quality of scholarship. Still, at some point an individual creation needs to be subjected to the judgment of others.

It is usually helpful to have friends and colleagues read and offer comments on papers. However, the peer review that follows submission for publication represents a much more exacting process. Editors of academic journals are for good reason called the "gatekeepers" of science: what they publish enters the certified corpus of academic knowledge. For proper certification they rely on experts in the field to read and offer judgment. Peer reviewers are generally asked to identify possible errors or unsupported assertions, make suggestions for improvement, and ultimately offer a summary judgment about including or rejecting a paper as certified academic knowledge.

Editors are ultimately responsible for the decisions to publish or not. Such judgments often require weighing the contradictory opinions of reviewers or even seeking additional reviews. However, once publication is confirmed, the goal of the editorial process is to produce the best possible paper. Editors work with authors to ensure that any errors or dubious statements are rectified, and they usually ask that authors at least address the reviewers' suggestions for strengthening their work. Some editors add their own two cents of advice, while others leave this process entirely to the specialists. The editorial process also includes efforts to improve the prose and expression of a piece. Very few academic papers do not have substantial room for stylistic improvement. One great benefit of publishing is to experience this kind of rigorous editing. When writing for large circulation magazines, in particular, normally clunky academic prose is subjected to severe amputation and reworking. Any author whose writing is not positively affected by this process is linguistically tone deaf. Nor is this simply a matter of mechanics; the end of an effective writing style is to convey meaning—to make the case for the author's contribution to knowledge.

A published scholarly article, then, should be considerably better than the draft originally submitted. As such, it enters the public domain and the corpus of academic knowledge. Does this corpus really encompass an in-house journal like *Higher Education in Review*? The answer is definitely yes. Especially given the existence of today's search engines, any publication is accessible to specialists interested in a particular topic. *HER* articles will find readers, and its authors will stake a claim to some new discovery, however small. But this "after life" of an academic publication, I have tried to suggest, is less important than the antecedents. The authors are the greatest beneficiaries through the creative act of writing and the systematic upgrading process that follows. Effective academic writing, like other forms of writing, can only be perfected through practice and feedback. We owe a debt of gratitude to all those who have organized and contributed to *Higher Education in Review* for creating a context in which this process can take place.

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