

A Philosophy of Reviewing: Taking Cues From Henry James

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More than a century ago, Henry James authored *The Golden Bowl*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, and *The Wings of the Dove*—said to be the finest American prose fiction ever written (Bloom 2002:748). These novels are enthusiastically read and appreciated to this day, reflecting not only James's innate artistry but also his development as a writer in response to critiques of his work. He once commented about the indispensable and unique role of critics in this way:

The critical sense is so far from frequent that it is absolutely rare, and the possession of the cluster of qualities that minister to it is one of the highest distinction. It is a gift inestimably precious and beautiful. . . . In this light, one sees the critic as the real helper of the artist, a torchbearing outrider, the interpreter, the brother. . . . For there is something sacrificial in his function, inasmuch as he offers himself as a general touchstone . . . to be infinitely curious and incorrigibly patient, and yet plastic and inflammable and determinable, stooping to conquer and serving to direct. . . . Just in proportion as he is sentient and restless, just in proportion as he reacts and reciprocates and penetrates, is the critic a valuable instrument. (James 1984:98)

Novels and literary criticism seem remote from marketing research and the scholarly review process. However, a closer look reveals that these realms operate in parallel: writing fiction and producing research are both demanding, creative enterprises requiring high levels of skill and considerable insight into the subject matter; and literary criticism and scholarly reviews are instrumental in shepherding works toward publication, helping to shape their ideas, techniques, and intellectual or social contributions. In this commentary, I describe a philosophy of reviewing marketing research articles that connects the seemingly disparate worlds of fiction and marketing research. The approach

takes cues from Henry James and has evolved from personal and shared experiences in reviewing as well as receiving reviews from academic journals and conferences.

The first aspect, or assumption, of this philosophy is respect. Just as James describes a high regard for the critic and presumably the critic for the writer, so must respect characterize the relationship between marketing researcher and reviewer. Under time pressures, a reviewer can be tempted to dash off a terse, superficial commentary on a paper that crosses the desk. However, doing so conveys a rather low opinion of others—simply put, it says the researcher does not deserve a day or two of thoughtful reading of, and carefully written remarks on, his or her study, which involved months, perhaps years, of effort. I have received cryptic reviews of two sentences. It goes without saying that I learned little from such feedback about how to improve my research. Every article, regardless of quality, should be given a comprehensive, hopefully insightful, set of comments. Equally problematic are reviews using phrases such as “fatal flaw,” “no value whatsoever,” and “the inexperienced and inadequate efforts of a doctoral student.” These words may not be intended as disparaging but are inevitably interpreted as such. It is best to avoid such extreme phrases, along with judgments of an author's character, particularly his or her intellect. Criticisms can always be conveyed through a careful choice of words. Moreover, in keeping with the developmental role of a reviewer, remarks presented courteously are better received and responded to by the author. Thus, as much as an author respects a reviewer—and to some degree without choice since the latter wields considerable power—a reviewer should respect the author by providing thoughtful, sufficiently detailed evaluations using a measured tone.

A related aspect of this reviewing approach is generosity, not in the sense of overlooking an article's weaknesses and disregarding standards of scholarship. Unquestionably, weaknesses must be pointed out and standards maintained. By generosity, I mean in spirit: giving praise when due and help where possible. James (1984) described the critic as the “real helper of the artist, a torchbearing

outrider, the interpreter, the brother” and as offering “something sacrificial in his function . . . a general touchstone.” This is not a picture of an implacable, miserly judge; rather, it is of a discerning, giving partner. In the case of a reviewer of marketing research articles, this role materializes by pointing out not only ways a study is deficient but also how it succeeds. One positive comment can go far to sustain an author through the grueling process of revision. When weaknesses are noted, the reviewer should carefully explain why these limit the study’s contributions. Doing so aids the author’s overall learning and reworking of the article. However, generosity comes into play most clearly through sharing substantive ideas to resolve critical dilemmas. I will always be grateful to a reviewer who did this in response to one of my submissions, even drawing an alternative figure for my theory. It was the pivotal suggestion that moved the article toward acceptance—the epitome of noblesse oblige. Admittedly, there is little credit for writing a penetrating, constructive set of comments. Good reviewing is largely a hidden enterprise due to its anonymous nature. Yet where would the marketing discipline be without it? The field’s accumulated knowledge is very much a product of the *community* of scholars who have assisted one another—known and unknown—in the hard task of generating new learning.

The third component of this approach is balance. As James notes in the latter part of the quote, the critic resides on no extreme but straddles between opposing pulls: curious yet patient, plastic and determinable, conquering as well as serving, reactive but penetrating, sentient and restless. This suggests that a critic, and a reviewer of marketing studies, does best to avoid highly entrenched views. Again, this does not mean compromising research standards such as construct clarity and method appropriateness. Yet where there is room for interpretation, the reviewer should be amenable to a perspective that may not be his or her own. For instance, if a researcher is proposing a new theory or an extension to a current theory, the reviewer should openly consider it, objectively weighing its merits and detractors. Our discipline seems to move glacially at times, especially in the domain of theory, by focusing on incremental improvements to widely accepted

frameworks. In other words, we are drawn to well-circumscribed concepts and discourage the messy, provocative, and envelope pushing. As reviewers and researchers, we should have a high regard for extant knowledge but not be concomitantly imprisoned by it. Journals devoted exclusively to theoretical discourse may help us in this stead.

The need for balance and openness applies not just to theory. It is relevant to examining articles as wholes. All aspects of a marketing study, not just one or two, should be considered in order to fairly assess the overall quality and contributions. Emphasizing method or hypotheses alone, for instance, results in a distorted understanding. A reviewer does better by attending more or less equally to all major components of an article, including organization, justification, conceptual soundness, methodological rigor, analytic technique, theoretical implication, and managerial relevance. This approach underscores the integrated nature of the research enterprise, that is, that the best articles are excellent in all these regards.

I have learned a great deal about research in the process of reading and thinking about articles not my own. Bonuses have been the pleasure and awe of examining well-crafted, yes I daresay elegant, studies. In reflection, I am humbled by the realization that these opportunities to review, and thereby grow professionally, would not have come if others senior to me had not believed in and lived out the generous, developmental philosophy that Henry James eloquently described. The philosophy is therefore not confined to critiquing literary or research pieces—it applies more broadly, characterizes more fundamentally the very nature of scholarship and the academy. Our efforts are highly interwoven, the fruits of our labors shared, and to one another deeply indebted.

REFERENCES

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