Balls, Strikes, and Collisions on the Base Path

RUMINATIONS OF A VETERAN REVIEWER

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The story goes that three umpires disagreed about the task of calling balls and strikes. The first one said, "I calls them as they is." The second one said, "I calls them as I sees them." The third and cleverest umpire said, "They ain't nothin 'till I calls them."

Simons, 1976, quoted in Weick, 1979

The task of reviewing papers submitted for publication in scholarly journals has often been likened to the task of officiating in an athletic competition. Reviewers are termed "referees," and the leading academic journals that employ them are known colloquially as "referred journals." Publishing is the principal "game" played in academic circles, and analogies to baseball are especially popular. Editors and reviewers make "judgment calls" (McGrath, 1982). When authors submit their work, those fortunate enough to avoid "striking out" often talk about getting a journal "hit."

In the big leagues of academic publication, the umpire squad consists of a journal's editorial board and ad hoc reviewers. While serving two terms on the boards of Administrative Science Quarterly and the Academy of Management Journal, I have made well over 200 judgment calls about papers submitted for possible publication. I have learned that the editorial review process is largely a process of sensemaking (Weick, 1979), the primary outputs of which are suggestions about how papers might be improved and explanations about why they cannot be published.

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The three different approaches to sensemaking taken by Simons's apocryphal umpires provide a useful framework for thinking about how a reviewer might approach the task of evaluating manuscripts:

1. The first umpire treats each ball pitched toward home plate as an unequivocal event. A pitch lies either within or outside the strike zone when it passes the plate. The umpire is an objective observer, and his or her task is limited to making the appropriate call. The umpire has no part in creating the event; indeed, any capable umpire would have made the same call.

2. The second umpire sees pitches as ambiguous events and umpiring as an exercise in judgment. Pitches near the boundaries of the strike zone are sufficiently equivocal that an umpire's eyesight, values, and idiosyncratic biases influence the call. The second umpire understands that the role played by sensory perceptions makes the umpire a participant in the event.

3. The third umpire maintains that a pitch has no fixed ontological identity. It becomes a ball or a strike only through the pronouncement of the umpire—as influenced by the ball's trajectory, the batter's behavior, and the umpire's beliefs. Note that the umpire now has become a coproducer of the event.

“I Calls Them as They Is”

When I was asked in 1981 to review my first manuscript for an academic journal, I approached the task somewhat as the first umpire handles pitches. I set out to determine whether the paper's arguments were logical enough and the methods rigorous enough to justify publication. I saw the reviewer as a gatekeeper charged with enforcing high standards, ensuring fairness, protecting readers from fraud, and generally guarding the profession's status and the scholarly journal's reputation (Nord, 1985). The comments that I wrote to the author of that first manuscript reflect three characteristics common to reviewers who follow in the first umpire's footsteps:

1. The tone of my commentary was highly impersonal. Although the feedback form instructed me to write "comments for the author(s)," I consistently referred to him/her/them in the third person: "On page 6, the author claims that . . ." In fact, in several passages I wrote as though the paper had no author: "This manuscript argues that . . ."

2. Most of my comments were evaluative and critical. I listed earlier studies "with which the author is apparently unfamiliar," I identified "problems in how this study was designed," and I characterized certain interpretations as "going beyond the data."

3. Most of my verbs were passive. Using passive phrasing in discussing the manuscript suggests that instead of seeing the paper as at an intermediate stage in an ongoing process, I saw it as a final product. Passive verbs gave my commentary a static quality. (I may have adopted passive phrasing partly because I was an assistant professor trying to emulate an academic writing style. But whatever the reason, the effect was to cast the research report under review as a fixed product rather than an evolving process.)

For the next year or so, I continued reviewing papers using the first umpire's model. I saw the peer review process as a cornerstone of the scientific process. Reviewing seemed a great honor and a grave responsibility. Gaining confidence in my own judgment, I enlarged my focus from simply evaluating a paper's logical and technical rigor to judging its overall contribution to the field. I worked hard on reviews, and when I ran into unfamiliar methods or incomprehensible concepts, I had feelings of inadequacy and guilt. After reviewing about 20 manuscripts on an ad hoc basis, I was invited to join the editorial boards of ASQ and AMJ.

“I Calls Them as I Sees Them”

As an editorial board member, my reviewing workload grew rapidly, and my approach gravitated toward that of the second umpire. I changed my approach for several reasons. One impetus was a growing interest in the philosophy and sociology of social science. My faith in positivistic inquiry was shaken when I read Schutz
(1967), Husserl (1931), Habermas (1971, 1973), and Burrell and Morgan (1979); the implications of their ideas for academic publication are spelled out in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn, 1962) and *Publishing in the Organizational Sciences* (Cummings & Frost, 1985). Rather than serving exclusively as forums for scientific communication, academic journals are apparently used by some authors as vehicles for building their reputations, castigated by others as bastions of elitism, and usurped by university personnel committees as tools for evaluation.

Another impetus for change came from the direct feedback set up by journal editors' practice of mailing me copies of commentaries written by each of a manuscript's anonymous reviewers, along with a copy of the editor's decision letter to the author. I was surprised to see how often we reviewers disagreed, focused on entirely different issues, and offered inconsistent recommendations to authors. I found this feedback most enlightening, for, as Pondy (1985) has noted, "the norms of reviewing are passed down from generation to generation in a subterranean exchange between author and reviewers, almost entirely hidden from public view" (p. 211).

I came to recognize that the review process in the social sciences is more subjective and political than that in the physical sciences (Pfeffer, Leong, & Strehl, 1977), and that actors' positions in social networks play a far greater role. I saw that any differences between "enforcing high standards" and "screening out innovation" were subtle and ideological. I was unsettled by Morgan's (1985) suggestion that publication decisions may be "dominated by the interests and subjective decisions of editors and reviewers who are involved in an elaborate and sometimes unconscious game of control conducted under the guise of objectivity" (p. 63).

A third reason I changed my approach to reviewing was that I too was an aspiring author. Reviewers' overreactions to what I saw as insignificant errors in my own papers made me angry, and some of their criticisms stung bitterly. Sometimes I felt discouraged and disillusioned, and it was unsettling to realize that my reviews of others' work were undoubtedly evoking similar waves of doubt, anger, and disappointment.

As my perspective on reviewing moved toward the second umpire's approach to umpiring, I adopted different criteria in evaluating manuscripts and changed my approach in writing comments to authors:

1. Instead of representing my comments as the output of some mechanical metering device set to register ratings of a paper's rigor and significance, I decided to write like a human reader responding to a human author. To personalize my comments, I started writing exclusively in the first and second person: "On page 4 you say that resource scarcities motivate vertical integration . . ."

2. To acknowledge my role in interpreting manuscripts, I began reporting my own feelings and reactions to the arguments offered: "I liked your explanation of prospect theory, but your discussion of commitment confused me." (Back when I made "objective" calls, like the first umpire, I would have attributed any confusion experienced to a lack of clarity inherent in the manuscript.)

3. I approached manuscripts as processes in which I participated. To one author I wrote, "In revising, you need to convince me that these two constructs are different." To another I said, "Before I can recommend your paper to my colleagues, you must . . ."

4. Recalling my own overreactions to reviewers' criticisms, I tried to curtail authors' defensive reactions to my criticisms by invoking readers' needs instead of listing authors' shortcomings and failures: "ASQ readers have come to expect authors to ground their arguments in theory and tie them into the current social science literature." To another author I wrote, "Readers who are unfamiliar with institutional theory may have trouble following this discussion."

Making minor adjustments of this sort probably made me a better reviewer. At least these changes let me feel that my behavior was reasonably consistent with my changing beliefs about social science research. But they didn't address a more basic problem. To this point, I had reviewed only a few manuscripts displaying careful scholarship, developing innovative methods, or offering creative interpretations. I was getting tired of plodding through turgid prose, illogical arguments, and poorly described methods. I tried not to think about how few of the manuscripts I was working on would be published, and not to dwell on authors' likely
reactions to my recommendations. Reviewing was turning into a thankless, joyless task.

Nevertheless, I knew that the reviewing process sometimes takes a more positive turn. Two senior colleagues, Paul Nystrom and Bill Starbuck, were editing the Handbook of Organizational Design, and I found that they were using a more active, interventionist, and developmental approach than mine. Of course, editing invited chapters and reviewing blind submissions are different tasks. However, when I submitted a paper of my own to ASQ, it was assigned to an associate editor, Jerry Salancik, who also took an interventionist approach. Jerry saw in my paper a more ambitious article and a more important contribution than I did. With the reviewers’ help, he pushed me to find that paper and write it (Meyer, 1982). The prospect of offering this sort of assistance to other authors revived my fading enthusiasm for reviewing.

“'They Ain’t Nothin’ 
'Till I Calls Them”

The third umpire is probably singled out as “the cleverest umpire” because only he or she fully appreciated an umpire’s potentially pivotal role in controlling the flow of a ball game. A reviewer who sees similar potential in the game of publishing can create opportunities to move beyond the gatekeeper role to become a coach, mentor, advocate, or even “defense attorney” representing an author’s interests (Pondy, 1985). From my backstage vantage point as a board member, I started studying reviewers whom I call “activists,” hoping to learn how they go about helping authors flesh out promising insights, remediate seemingly “fatal” flaws, and exploit serendipitous findings.

My observations of activist reviewers suggest that they enact a more humane, emotionally satisfying, and intellectually challenging role than reviewers who follow the approach of the first and second umpires. They enact this role by building reputations with journal editors for doing constructive, developmental reviews. Editors often start sending activist reviewers papers that seem especially likely to benefit from their efforts. When this happens, activist reviewers find themselves working on papers that improve more during the review process, that these papers are more likely to be published, and, that, irrespective of the ultimate publication decisions, authors get more valuable feedback.

However, as a reviewer assumes an activist role, the time and energy he or she devotes to each manuscript are almost certain to increase. Working with authors, particularly less experienced ones, to develop their work into publishable papers is time-consuming and emotionally involving. One must be careful to invest effort where it is most apt to yield a return. I would estimate that about 1 manuscript in 10 has substantial unrealized potential for development. Manuscripts especially likely to benefit include those that try to build theory, combine different perspectives, open up new lines of inquiry, or develop innovative methodologies.

Even the third umpire probably would acknowledge that not every pitch has the same chance of being called a strike—some go into the dirt and bounce across the plate. Likewise, not every submission has the same chance of being called a publishable paper. Some research questions just aren’t worth asking, some data sets contain no useful information, and some papers are so far off the mark that no amount of developmental work can save them. Developmental reviewing is necessarily a joint venture among author, reviewer, and editor. However, some authors seem to be more interested in publishing than in what gets published. They see little value in developmental reviews and are not responsive to them.

Activist reviewing also places additional demands on journal editors by requiring them to become more deeply involved in the evaluation of manuscripts. One reason for this is that activist reviewers can fall victim to escalating commitment (Staw, 1981). Advocacy often comes at the expense of objectivity, and the editor may need to intervene to sort things out. Some journal editors consciously assign beginning authors’ manuscripts to developmentally inclined reviewers. In fact, certain manuscripts were identified in one editor’s cover letters to activist reviewers as possible “diamonds in the rough.”

Developmental reviewing is not widespread. Cummings, Frost, and Vakil (1985) identify two dimensions of reviewing style: the “coach” and the “critic.” Coaches are reviewers who offer encouragement, identify strengths, instruct authors about how to improve, and explain reasons for their recommendations. Critics are reviewers who evaluate merits, identify flaws,
and censure improper methods. Cummings and his colleagues content analyzed 162 reviews of manuscripts sent to AMJ and found that "clearly, most reviewers score relatively high on the critic dimension while scoring relatively low on the coach dimension" (p. 479). Pondly (1985) explains the predominance of the critical approach as follows: "Our present corps of reviewers have been trained and conditioned in a prosecution mentality, a large part through observing how their own manuscripts have been treated by an earlier generation of reviewers" (p. 211).

The activist reviewers that I admire are not afflicted with Pollyannism. They are not uncritical optimists who invariably recommend inviting authors to revise and resubmit. Indeed, to be genuinely constructive, developmental comments must be based upon an incisive critique of the work. The best activist reviewers don't pull their punches. But after telling an author that they don't see his or her work as ready for publication, they go on to spell out specific changes that could close the gap. The feasibility of combining critical and developmental roles is supported by Cummings et al.'s (1985) finding that the coach and critic dimensions are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they report that in writing comments to authors, reviewers scoring highest on the sum of both dimensions were significantly more thorough, attentive to technical detail, methodologically oriented, and substantive.

My observations of activist reviewers' comments to authors point to several common characteristics:

1. Activist reviewers' comments are candid and lengthy. They start with forthright criticism and proceed to recommend changes. Their stance is interventionist. Activist reviewers often refer authors to exemplars in the published literature. Sometimes they propose alternative strategies for revision for authors to consider.

2. Activist reviewers challenge authors to specify the purposes, outcomes, and contributions of their research. "Why did you write this paper?" they ask. "What did you learn, and what does it mean?"

3. Activist reviewers coach authors in expository writing. They think about how papers are structured, asking, "Does the argument unfold in a logical way?" and "Does it carry the naive reader along?" They often suggest consolidating related concepts, recommend resequencing of ideas, and offer specific plans for reorganizing arguments.

4. Activist reviewers tend to be champions of theoretical and methodological pluralism. They can see value in different perspectives, and they often urge authors to combine methods.

5. Activist reviewers are particularly sensitive to the alignment between stages in the research process. They ask, "Does the literature review adequately justify the hypotheses? Is the analytic model consistent with the conceptual model? Do the results as interpreted inform the underlying research question?"

I think my observations of activist reviewers have started to pay off. Some of my attempts to emulate this approach have had positive results. I hope I've helped a few authors express their ideas more clearly, educe more robust measures from their data, and see more interesting implications in their results. On several occasions, I have suggested wholesale reorganization that authors then used to salvage incoherent arguments or to lay to rest another reviewer's seemingly insurmountable objections.

Now and then—out of the tedium of routinized, ritualized manuscript review cycles—a bona fide high-performing system emerges. On five occasions, I have seen a seriously deficient or highly preliminary paper somehow pique the reviewers' interest and trigger a set of especially thoughtful and constructive comments. Usually the reviewers' objections appear irreconcilable and their demands seem impossible, but instead of giving up, the author rises to the occasion—perhaps by inventing a brilliant analytic strategy that answers a reviewer's concern or by laboriously collecting new data that remedy a fatal flaw. When the revision is resubmitted, the author's unexpected improvements delight and energize the reviewers, eliciting creative ideas for further sharpening the analyses, extending the argument, and enlarging the contribution.

It is an exhilarating and oddly aesthetically pleasing experience when a distributed network made up of blind reviewers linked to an anonymous author by a harried journal editor jells in this way. The review process becomes self-reinforcing and takes on the feel of a peak
experience. I have noticed that the authors who elicit these unusually constructive review processes are generally young researchers. Among my personal sample of five "peak" reviewing processes, two were studies reporting the authors' doctoral dissertations. Two others were the work of recently hired assistant professors. The articles that resulted often won prizes and established their authors' reputations. Weick (1992) remarks that young ethnographers seem to get better data than older ones, and he speculates that this may be because they are less threatening to informants. My observations suggest that inexperience may also confer advantages in the review process. Perhaps new authors' manuscripts evoke constructive reviews by subtly signaling their creators' naïveté.

How Authors Can Turn Umpires Into Coaches

My ruminations on reviewing suggest that authors can take steps to encourage developmental reviews and, at the same time, increase the odds that their work will be accepted for publication. I offer these recommendations to authors interested in doing so:

1. Do not submit your paper prematurely. Use your colleagues as a sounding board. Volunteer to give a colloquium, listen to people's reactions, and use them to sharpen your thinking. When you finish a first draft, circulate it and invite criticism. Treat each and every misinterpretation of your writing as evidence that you've failed to communicate clearly. A good rule of thumb is to push your paper through at least two major revisions before submitting it. (When I've followed this rule, my publication "batting average" has been 1,000—when I haven't, I've been far less successful.)

2. Make your paper user-friendly. The introduction should answer a first-time reader's questions (What's the central research problem? Why is it important?), foreshadow the paper's outcome and contribution (If I keep reading, what will I learn?), provide enough information about your sample, measures, and instruments to enable the reviewer to understand exactly what you did and found. Having to guess irritates reviewers and distracts their attention from your argument.

3. Be compulsive about craftsmanship. Your manuscript is the reviewer's only contact with your study. If it is not well crafted, reviewers are likely to make attributions about the integrity of the whole research project. Typos, missing citations, and errors in calculations all suggest that you may not care about quality.

4. No reviewer is ever wrong. Reviewers may be careless, bullheaded, or mean-spirited, but not wrong. It is self-destructive to assume otherwise. Never go one-on-one with a reviewer. (If you are amazed by how often authors defend their manuscripts by lashing out at reviewers.) Ben Schneider (1985) comments, "Trying to publish in refereed journals is not a path to positive feedback" (p. 239). (If you want positive feedback, I recommend getting a dog—my golden retriever neutralized reviewers' unkind bars for more than 13 years, and he also forced me to get regular exercise.)

5. The best way to appreciate the preceding recommendation is to become a reviewer yourself. The program chairs of the Academy of Management's national and regional meetings are constantly on the lookout for reviewers. Journal editors routinely use ad hoc reviewers. Write and volunteer to review, identifying your areas of expertise.

Journal editors also can help turn umpires into coaches. Editors can encourage developmental reviewing by recruiting activist reviewers, assigning them promising manuscripts, and monitoring the ensuing exchanges. Editorial policies can also help institutionalize development. For instance, Organization Science now requires each author submitting a paper to include a 50-word statement justifying how and why the paper is appropriate for publication. This statement is forwarded to reviewers. Should the manuscript be published, the journal requires the editor who accepted it to introduce the paper to readers personally, explaining why he or she recommends it to them. These are small interventions, but they encourage authors, reviewers, and editors alike to focus their attention on the contributions of the research. This is an important cognitive shift, because the established norms of reviewing direct everyone's attention to
shortcomings and flaws. Attending to what's right about a paper instead of what's wrong is an important first step toward development.

Conclusion

I have taken a controversial stance in this essay by advocating an activist style of reviewing. Some editors discourage activism. Some reviewers see it as unseemly interference. Some authors regard it as highhanded meddling in their intellectual property. Some radicals may see activist reviewing as a means of exeracting social and professional control.

Activist reviewing certainly carries risks. H. G. Wells once remarked, "No passion in the world is equal to the passion to alter someone else's draft." I once got carried away and offended a respected colleague. Envisioning a "far better paper" than the manuscript he had submitted, I suggested a complete recasting of the theory and data. I could hardly wait to see the revision. My enthusiasm for the project was dashed, however, when the author abruptly withdrew his paper from further consideration at that journal. My colleague later explained that although he found my ideas for revising "insightful and most interesting," that was not the paper he had set out to write. He felt that I had tried to "hijack" his research.

Since then, I have taken pains to present any recommendations for significant changes as ideas offered for an author's consideration, not as conditions for a favorable recommendation. Authors invest their egos in their writing, and reviewers need to remember this. When an editor once asked Henry James to cut just three lines from a 5,000-word article, he did so and then noted, "I have performed the necessary butchery. Here is the bleeding corpse."

Not every manuscript is a candidate for activist reviewing. In some cases, the potential contribution is well developed. In others, the potential is absent or minimal. But when the conditions are right, activist reviewing can catalyze significant advances in social scientific theory and research.

Peter Vail once said, "A .350 hitter isn't just a .350 hitter. Typically, he's a .350 hitter in context." Reviewers who know when to move beyond their roles as critics and gatekeepers to become coaches help create a context that can make the difference between a home run and just another long foul ball.

References


Rhythms of Academic Life

Personal Accounts of Careers in Academia