Some Thoughts on Submitting Articles to the *French Review*

by Edward Ousselin

As I mentioned in my editorial, this is my next-to-last issue as Editor in Chief of the *French Review*. Over the past twelve years, I have received more than 1,600 submitted articles, and I have edited and published nearly 600 of them (including occasional shorter articles and *Dossiers pédagogiques*). Before I started serving as Editor in Chief, I also had a fairly long history of submitting articles (a total of fifteen) to the *French Review*. I have therefore learned quite a lot about submitting articles—and about the mistakes many of us can make in the process. The purpose of this short text is to share some of the results of my experiences (in terms of both submitting and editing) with colleagues, especially younger colleagues and graduate students, who seek to publish in our journal. What follows will mainly consist of advice and reminders about some of the crucial factors that authors should keep in mind when preparing and submitting an article. Much of what follows might seem self-evident to more experienced colleagues who have already seen one or more of their articles published in the *French Review*. Nevertheless, as I have had ample opportunity to observe: *Ce qui va sans dire va encore mieux en le disant*.

First of all, a few words about the broader professional context. The "publish or perish" mantra with which we are all familiar is still relevant. It is true that, for many colleagues, the pandemic has temporarily eased (as of this writing) the pressure to publish. Due to such factors as the need to adapt to distance learning, the closure of university libraries, and the cancellation of conferences (or their switch to an online format, which entails yet more time spent on Zoom), many universities have reduced or suspended their research and publication requirements for tenure and promotion. However, this unexpected hiatus is unlikely to last much longer. The publication imperative—and therefore the continuous process of preparing and submitting articles—will no doubt soon be restored to its central role in our careers.

At the *French Review* (as well as at other scholarly journals), the Editor in Chief is the "interface" between the authors who submit articles and the Assistant Editors who evaluate them. Since the evaluation process is "double-blind" (the authors do not know the identities of the evaluators and the evaluators do not

know the identities of the articles' authors), it is the Editor in Chief who sends to each author the outcome, positive or negative, of each evaluation process. While I take no pleasure at all in sending a message that begins with the phrase—"I regret to inform you that your article has not been accepted for publication..."—that is what I have been doing over the past twelve years for nearly two out three submitted articles. Readers should note in passing that this rate of rejection is, in comparative terms, not especially high: Some journals reject up to nine out of ten submitted articles.

My hope in writing this short text is that a certain number of colleagues and graduate students will find it to be a concise and useful resource that will help them improve their articles at all levels—content, organization, format, and style—and thereby diminish the likelihood of receiving a message with the dreaded rejective phrase. To those readers who might say—*Mais vous enfoncez des portes ouvertes!*— I can only respond that, from my vantage point, many of the recommendations listed below do not appear to be commonly known—or at least followed. Nor do they seem to be emphasized or even mentioned at some of the graduate schools that train future teacher-scholars.

As regards the content, I have frequently been surprised and frustrated, when first reading a submitted article, by the fact that many of them do not include a clearly stated research objective, which ought to be found within the first couple of pages. Due to the absence of such a statement, the reader must progressively discern, sometimes when reaching the last few pages of the article, what the author intends to demonstrate. While this may be a suspenseful technique when writing fiction, it is extremely counterproductive in the case of a scholarly article. At the risk of sounding trite: The author should clearly indicate, at an early stage, the focus and objective(s) of their article. This is not merely a question of organization within the text. An evaluator who has to guess about an author's research objective will not have a positive initial impression of the submitted article.

Another vitally important element regarding the content is the literature review. While this component of the article does not have to be exhaustive, the author should demonstrate familiarity with the relevant body of critical work. Also, the works cited within the article ought to include more recent texts, not just established or "canonical" references. As in the case of a missing or delayed research objective, an insufficient level of authorial engagement with pertinent critical texts will not contribute to a favorable evaluation.

The organization of the text matters almost as much as the content. Just as the introductory section of an article must include a clearly stated research objective, the overall flow of the text should follow a logical sequence of reasoned argumentation, supported by appropriate references, and leading to a well-formulated conclusion. Too often, what should be the concluding section is incongruously found early in the text, sometimes before the research objective. Too often also,

the conclusion is insufficiently developed and does not adequately recapitulate the article's main points.

When it comes to formatting, first and foremost: Authors should not only read, but actually adhere to the general guidelines found in our online Guide for Authors: <http://frenchreview.frenchteachers.org/GuideForAuthors.html>. There is nothing nitpicky or pedantic about the formatting requirements of the *French Review* (or of any other scholarly journal). Evaluators and editors are tasked with reading and annotating large numbers of submitted articles on a regular basis. Regularity and predictability in terms of formatting allow them to concentrate on the analytical content and scholarly focus of each article, instead of being distracted by unfamiliar layout, line spacing, font size, etc.

The question of style would seem to be of only slight importance when it comes to scholarly writing, in which clarity normally takes precedence over linguistic virtuosity. As I have nonetheless learned from experience, some authors apparently pay little or no attention to the stylistic dimension of their articles, while others appear to devote more care and effort to style than to content. In an article, as in any text, good writing does matter, and no doubt all the more so for scholars who are conducting research in the fields of language, literature, and culture. Conversely, readers should not be more impressed (positively or negatively) by an article's style than by its content.

The issue of style is all the more fundamental in the case of authors who, in spite of the recommendation (#3) found in our Guide for Authors, choose *not* to write in the language in which they are most comfortable and can express themselves most effectively. Native French-speakers who opt to write in English and native English-speakers who decide to write in French may well be motivated by the laudable desire to reinforce their bilingual or code-switching skills. Unfortunately, such an undertaking adds a new level of difficulty (e.g., unpredictable encounters with *faux amis* at the level of both simple vocabulary and complex turns of phrase) to the already elaborate task of writing a scholarly article. It is therefore preferable to find another forum in which to expand one's non-native language writing skills. In all cases, an article should be reviewed for linguistic accuracy by a native speaker before submission.

A few straightforward reminders regarding basic stylistic (and other) issues:

- Avoid annoying language tics. For instance, do not repeatedly start sentences with the same word or expression: "In fact," "Subsequently," "Thus," "*Par conséquent,*" "*D'ailleurs,*" "*En effet,*" etc. Also to be avoided is the excessive use of (often redundant) adverbs: "clearly," "aptly," "*effectivement,*" "*particulièrement,*" etc. This is where the "Find" function of Word can be helpful.

- If the submitted article was originally a conference paper, be sure to eliminate any stylistic leftovers of an oral presentation (as well as anything that could identify the author and/or the author's institutional affiliation). On a related topic: Unless it is based on personal experience, a scholarly article should normally not be characterized by the abundant utilization of "I/me" and "my/mine" (once again, the "Find" function of Word is necessary and useful).

- Resist the temptation to produce overly long, convoluted, or run-on sentences. Tortuously constructed sentences, in and of themselves, are rarely an indication of intellectual profundity. When it comes to scholarly writing, one thing should be added to Boileau's dictum: "Ce que l'on conçoit bien s'énonce clairement [et sans fioritures]." Authors of submitted articles may well admire the literary elegance or profusion of novelists such as Victor Hugo or Marcel Proust, but they should certainly not attempt to match the length of some of their sentences (for an extreme example, see: <https://proust-personnages.fr/extraits-2/phrase-la-plus-longue>). Simply put: Concise sentences enhance clarity and readability.

- Quotes are expected, and are frequently valuable, in a scholarly article. However, they should be used carefully and thoughtfully, for the purpose of illustrating, reinforcing, or rebutting a line of reasoning, and not at the cost of crowding out the analytical or rhetorical voice of the article's author. A needlessly high number of quotes, or quotes that are unreasonably long, will usually be seen as *remplissage*.

- What applies to quotes is equally valid regarding the number and the length of notes. When used sparingly, notes can enhance the scholarly value of an article. However, articles submitted to a journal such as the *French Review* should not contain as many notes as, by way of example, each chapter in the critical edition of a sixteenth-century text.

- The *Références* or Works Cited section should be double-checked for consistency (and, as always, formatting). All entries must be referenced in the Notes or the body of the text. Similarly, all quotes within the text must correspond to an entry in the *Références* or Works Cited. Evaluators who have to wonder about the origin of a quote will not be favorably impressed.

- While this may, yet again, seem obvious: Do not submit an article without having run the spellchecker. Although no article is rejected simply on the basis of spelling mistakes, the presence of multiple errors creates an impression of sloppy or lazy writing.

None of the recommendations listed above can be considered as a substitute for thorough research and insightful analysis. A submitted article is ultimately accepted for publication—almost always after revisions—because it provides a worthy

contribution (in terms of subject matter, methodology, theoretical approach, etc.) to the critical dialogue within a given field. That said, an article that is consistently well organized, well formatted, and well written will have an extra advantage (or fewer hurdles to clear) during the evaluation process.

In closing, a few words about how best (or least badly) to react after an article has not been accepted, something we all have experienced. A scholarly article is generally the result of months of research, reflection, and writing. It represents a considerable investment in terms of time and effort. It is therefore quite normal to feel disappointed, sometimes even depressed, when the result of that time and effort is not accepted for publication. As I have heard more than once, the feeling is not unlike that resulting from unrequited love. However, just as one should not excessively wallow in *dépit amoureux* (see Molière's 1656 play for a comic antidote), it is not advisable to dwell at length on a negative outcome. As all experienced authors know, an article often goes through several permutations (yes, the word can be understood as a euphemism for the cycle of rejection and rewriting) before finding a "home" for publication. The best thing to do when an article is not accepted for publication: Start *immediately* working on a revised version of the article—after having taken into account the comments and suggestions of our journal's evaluators—and submit it elsewhere. *Bon courage et bonne chance*.

Western Washington University