The reviewer speaks ...

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It's usually the end of a long day — perhaps the end of a long week — when that anonymous article is drawn from the pile of 'things to do'. And it seemed like a small task when I agreed to be a reviewer for that journal article. I was interested in the topic ... I *am* interested in the topic! I also support the aims and focus of the journal. After all, it's one that melds practice and theory, and creates dialogue and debate amongst a range of professionals working in the child, youth and family sector. But I'm a little weary and I'm hoping to find energy and passion in the paper I'm about to tackle — an energy that will carry me through the next few hours of reading, thinking and writing that review report.

I like to be captivated ... by the skill of the writing, by a new perspective, an in-depth focus or new information. This is probably a tall order and I'm painfully aware of my own early attempts at writing articles. It takes time to become familiar with the journal genre. However, I'm determined to listen for the voice of the author and to see what I can learn. Sometimes this is somewhat tricky, not the learning, but the author's voice; especially when several people write an article together. Each wants to make a contribution, but often writing styles differ and there's a risk of blandness developing as the pieces come together.

As I settle to the task and check the instructions for reviewers, I decide on where to start. It's not always at the beginning of the article, though usually I read the abstract first. The abstract should provide me with a clear and succinct outline of what I will find in the paper, define the topic and summarise the arguments to be made and/or the results of the author's study and thinking on the matter. Funnily enough, it's often the references I then peruse. Why, I wonder, as I write this piece? Probably because it gives some distinct impressions — about the attention to detail and consistency in using the author/date referencing style; about the way the author uses work preceding their own and acknowledges what's gone before; and about a commitment to pursuing the relevant knowledge base. When definitive or contemporary literature has been omitted in the reference list, I always wonder if the author is aware of its existence, chosen to ignore or omit it, or worse still, hasn't bothered to do a literature search at all! How frustrated I get when references are missing or scrappy! 'Send it back' is too often a first reaction!

Opening paragraphs of the body of the article usually set the scene in greater detail. I find myself looking for background information — for a demonstration of thorough and balanced knowledge of the topic; even if the author later disputes commonly held ideas. The context of theory and practice is important, particularly for newcomers to the sector who may not understand what came before or what has led to the current situation. It is also useful for those considering their working career; students who make judgements about the capacity of professionals in the field from what they read through those years of study. It is useful, as the author, to imagine the readership of the journal and the potential to be quoted out of context ... and build in early protection!

By halfway through the article, the linking of sentences and their ideas has become one of the considerations for publishing purposes. I ask myself: am I still following the logic of the author's points, or have I become lost or confused? It's always so easy when writing about a familiar topic to forget that the reader may not have the same level of knowledge on the subject; and to make assumptions about the depth of the reader's understanding. And it's the middle of the paper that usually contains the 'guts of the matter', so here I search for the evidence that supports the writer's arguments and later conclusions. The complexity of the situation being discussed can't be denied, but am I able to 'move with' the author through the points being made?

I always find the final paragraphs of my own articles the most difficult to write, though I'm not sure why. Perhaps it's because drawing a few succinct conclusions from complex situations is actually quite difficult or maybe, as a writer, it is too easily assumed that the reader has followed you to the same end point with the conclusions being self-evident. No doubt there are many reasons why this might occur, but it is noticeable that concluding paragraphs often tend to lack strength and impact.

There are many conventions to the written word and, as a writer myself, I am reluctant to squash creative approaches to conveying knowledge. Prose, poetry and first person narrative can be powerful in conveying meaning and changing our ideas. However, academic journals have their demands and traditions. Structure and adequate referencing are important as a means for demonstrating the writer's ability to convey information, provide evidence for what they say and sustain the arguments. And about those dot points; they're a double-edged sword. They can be so very useful to quickly list key elements to a description and so irritating when they are used to skip over important information that really needs to be discussed.

And so to the final report ... Most articles require some editing, most require a little revision and a few really need to be re-written. Common mistakes are in grammar and spelling with many writers not realising that Microsoft word processing uses American English. Files need to be changed to Australian English using the tools icon. This constitutes minor editing, often undertaken by the editor of the journal, but you can't depend on that — so don't risk it being another reason to reject! Then there are the clarifying questions that are directed to the author and usually lead to small revisions. Getting rid of lists of dot points fits in here too! More substantial revision involves attention to the content of the article and its evidence, referencing and arguments. Sometimes the structure and information of a paper is just too wide of the mark for publishing, or it might be on a topic that is not relevant to the readership of the journal.

And if you are interested in writing for journals ... become a reviewer. It is an enlightening experience and makes a strong impact on how you approach the business of making a journal submission.

And now back to that article that I settled myself to read ... How, as a reviewer, can I be encouraging, knowing this author has spent hours putting this paper together ...? ❖

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- Share good practice around transition services.
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