

JIS and Peer Review: A Co-Editorial Perspective

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The Journal of Integrated Studies (JIS) is an online, peer-reviewed student journal sponsored by the Master of Arts—Integrated Studies (MAIS) program at Athabasca University. JIS provides opportunities for MAIS and other Athabasca University graduate students and recent alumni to learn about and participate in the peer-reviewed publishing process, by taking on roles as reviewers, editors, and proofreaders, for example. While MAIS and other Athabasca University students are strongly encouraged to submit their work, JIS also accepts submissions—articles, poetry, artwork, and other submissions with an interdisciplinary, integrated studies focus—from graduate-level students at other institutions.

In September 2014, JIS' three co-editors—Heather von Stackelberg, Nicole Hill, and Adrienne Munro—sat down to discuss the benefits of involvement with JIS and peer-reviewed publishing.

What are the benefits of being part of JIS and the peer-review process?

Nicole: I joined JIS for a number of reasons. I joined to engage with the university community, to expand my own skills, and to be a part of something that adds value to the MAIS experience. As an assistant editor, I learned first-hand about the peer-review process. Now, as a co-editor, I've learned more about overseeing that process and supporting others as they learn those peer-review ropes.

As a co-editor, I participate in both the first-hand peer-review process and also in supporting assistant editors as they learn their role in peer review. When dealing with reviewers and authors, I very much enjoy reading an article myself and then reading what reviewers have to add to my understanding of the piece. It's also a fantastic learning experience to then synthesize the reviewer feedback into something digestible for the author to work with.

Adrienne: There are a lot of perks for students who are involved with JIS, both those who submit their work and those who volunteer as editors, peer reviewers, layout editors, etc. JIS attracts remarkably diverse and talented volunteers, writers, poets, and artists who are fantastic to work with. There are endless opportunities to work together and learn from one another in the process. Because of the journal's integrated, interdisciplinary focus, every issue is completely different, which gives JIS an eclectic edge and makes it a lot of fun to be involved with.

Students who submit to JIS have the opportunity to improve their work based on feedback from their peers, and also to have their work published. Students who volunteer with JIS learn about the peer-reviewed publishing process, gain work experience they can add to their CVs, join a network of skilled and dedicated volunteers, and get to read and evaluate an incredible variety of submissions. Assistant editors and co-editors also get to see how different reviewers respond to the same submission, which is another great learning opportunity.

Nicole: I have learned so much while being a part of JIS. Being a part of peer review at any stage is incredibly useful in developing writing skills, reading skills, editing skills, and even just organizational skills. I have been lucky to work with great reviewers, authors, copyeditors, assistant editors, and others on my JIS journey. Peer review is an incredible opportunity to grow and practice budding skills, especially for graduate students who are honing and tweaking their skills as academics and professionals. When writing a paper and completing courses, opportunities to collaborate and read and edit others' works may arise, but generally, not often. Peer review allows

students to see what (and how) their peers are working, as well as what they're working on. That alone can inspire writers to expand their horizons and give them ideas on how to do things differently.

Heather: I've very much enjoyed reading the submissions to JIS, and the huge range of topics that they have covered. I always liked it when, in my MAIS courses, we posted papers to the discussion board as well as handing them in to the professor so that our classmates could read them. As often as not, I learned as much or more from my classmates' papers as I did from the readings for the course. Being an editor for JIS has felt like that opportunity all the time. And as Nicole says, it's also the opportunity to look closely at other authors' work, what they did, why they did it, what works and what doesn't. It's a great learning experience.

How do you suggest students approach harsh feedback to their work?

Nicole: Not all of those providing feedback do so in a gentle way (and not all authors require that gentle hand). Personally, when feedback comes to me that I have a strong reaction to, I generally read it and take a break from it before really responding. Now, if I have a really strong reaction, I don't always follow my advice and take that break. When I inevitably realize that I'm not getting anywhere by rushing and permit myself some time to digest, I make an effort to apply the feedback objectively. Once I've thought about the feedback, I start to think about where the feedback strengthens the piece and question if there are any places where it may be less appropriate. Feedback doesn't have to be unpleasant, but when it is, I still try to see if there is something to be gained from it.

Adrienne: The peer-review process is a great lesson in humility: we can believe every word we write is sacrosanct, or accept that we can only benefit from the feedback of others, who are more likely to be objective about our work. Still, no one enjoys harsh criticism, and it can take some effort (and, as Nicole suggests, time) to reflect on and absorb highly critical feedback without emotion. That said, a reviewer who sincerely wants to help an author improve need not be heavy-handed. The most useful feedback will clearly identify areas in need of improvement, but will also point out what an author is doing *well*. That balance is important if we want to help students learn and grow through the peer-review process.

Heather: One of the big lessons for me actually came before my involvement with JIS. Several years before starting my MAIS degree, I was involved with Toastmasters International, which I whole-heartedly recommend to anyone who wants to improve their speaking and presentation skills. The group I was involved with (The Sundowners group in Spruce Grove, Alberta) was an excellent group with some amazing people. They were able to very effectively teach and apply the Toastmasters process for constructive criticism, and I learned a great deal about how to give and take criticism of my work. I also saw such huge improvements in skill in both myself and the others in the group once we had learned to take and apply the constructive criticism that is intended as part of the learning process. Since then, I apply this approach to both JIS and other aspects of my life; I tell people what they have done right, but also what they can improve upon, and gently encourage them to do so. It works wonders.

What's your best piece of advice for writers who want to improve?

Heather: Be yourself in your writing. Nothing irks me more than to read a piece where the writer uses unnecessary jargon and big words, and overly complicates phrases and sentence structure. Writing like that makes the author look insecure and pretentious. Clarity and eloquence come from being yourself and writing down what you think, with supporting arguments, instead of trying to be or say what other people expect.

Nicole: Heather provides a great answer to this question. To add to it, I would simply say: edit.

Reread your piece (maybe after a little time away from it) and try to gauge if it still makes sense. Ask yourself if you could say the same thing with fewer words, and alternatively, if any areas require more fleshing out. Writing for an audience inevitably involves assessing how familiar your audience is with your topic and how well they will be able to grasp your points. It's important that you provide enough background so that readers understand why you're saying what you are. Different disciplines and styles will have differences in writing and presentation, but the bottom line will always be conveying some message to some audience.

Adrienne: Practice. Write. I once had a professor who said that "95 per cent of writing is bum-in-chair," and that really stuck with me. Read everything you can, and consider the ways different writers choose to express themselves. As Nicole says, it's all about communication, and how well the information you want to convey comes through in your writing. Having people read your work and give you feedback can be enormously helpful, especially if you're willing to give that feedback the consideration it deserves. In "Take it Like a Real Writer," the guest editorial in this issue, JIS faculty coordinator Reinekke Lengelle offers some excellent insights into the peer-review process and how to use reviewer feedback to improve your work.

—Heather von Stackelberg, Nicole Hill, and Adrienne Munro, JIS Journal Co-Editors

If you are interested in getting involved with JIS or would like to submit your work for consideration, please visit <http://jis.athabascau.ca> for more information or contact Reinekke Lengelle at reinekke@athabascau.ca.