From the editor

Harvey S. James Jr.

Published online: 26 April 2013
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2013

There are a number of benefits that come from editing an academic journal. One is being able to read a lot of academic papers on a variety of subjects. However, there are also drawbacks, such as having to pass judgment on them.

Frankly, many papers submitted to *Agriculture and Human Values* are not very good. Some papers I see are so poorly written or are based on research that is so inadequately designed and executed that I do not need to wait for a reviewer to tell me the same. Having reviewed nearly 100 papers for nearly 50 academic journals myself, and having consulted hundreds of reports provided by reviewers during my tenure as editor-in-chief of *Agriculture and Human Values*, I have acquired a reasonably good intuition of what reviewers will say when I think a paper is low quality. Periodically, papers come in that are gems from the start. These are rare, but are a delight to see. Most papers submitted are somewhere between obvious rejection and clear acceptance. They could be interesting and important, but they require one or more rounds of revisions to bring them up to publishable quality.

Papers that are obvious rejections or are clearly acceptable are nice to work with, from an editorial perspective, because the editorial decision is easy to make and easy to justify. Papers that are in-between are more difficult to work with. The reason is that I have to make a subjective assessment of whether the paper is likely to advance the literature and attract the attention of scholars and policy-makers to this journal. Relying on the recommendations of reviewers helps, but not perfectly. If I were to move toward publication all papers that reviewers identified as

potentially interesting and important, then my publishing backlog (the time between acceptance and in-print publication) would be unacceptably long.

The reality of publishing an in-print academic journal is that publishing constraints make it impossible for me to accept all papers that probably should be published, but for deficiencies and problems that require revisions to clarify, elaborate, or correct theoretical and empirical arguments. Therefore, some papers, even potentially good ones, have to be rejected.

I expect to receive 250 or more submissions this year, but I can publish less than 40 of them. Simple math reveals that the odds a particular paper will be accepted are not very good. I think this is typical of high quality, top tier journals, like *Agriculture and Human Values*.¹

To be even more transparent, I desk-reject—meaning I reject without sending to reviewers—a lot of papers submitted to the journal, either because they do not fit within the aims and scope of the journal or because they are of poor quality (usually the latter). Of the remaining papers that enter the peer review process, I can only accept about one out of every five.

How, then, should I determine which one of these five papers I should invite for resubmission and eventually publish? This question is especially difficult to answer when reviewers tell me that a paper they reviewed addresses an interesting and important topic and hence should be published—perhaps after one or more rounds of revisions. What do I do? I cannot speak for other journal editors, but one strategy I employ is the following: I look

H. S. James Jr. (✉)
Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics, University
of Missouri, 146 Mumford Hall, Columbia, MO 65211, USA
e-mail: hjames@missouri.edu

¹ As reported in the previous issue's "From the Editor" column (James 2013), the Journal Citation Reports, which calculates impact factors for major scholarly journals, ranks *Agriculture and Human Values* in the top quartile in each of the three subject categories that it places the journal.

for reasons to reject a paper rather than reasons to accept it. If I have five papers on my desk, all of which are potentially interesting, important and valuable to the academic community, and all of which probably should (eventually) be published, but I can only publish one of them, then I look for reasons to eliminate the others. I am not an expert at everything relating to agriculture and human values, and I cannot predict the future, so it is not possible for me consistently to make editorial decisions solely by assessing which paper is likely to make the greatest scholarly impact. Therefore, if I struggle to select papers based on an assessment of likely benefits, then the next best way for me to make editorial decisions is to focus on removing the more problematic papers.

This approach reflects a principle of economic theory that states that a constrained optimization problem is a special case of a more general unconstrained optimization problem. It is a helpful concept because if you cannot perform an unconstrained optimization analysis, then falling back on the constrained problem will get you the same results.² For example, if a business firm wants to maximize profits, then the output level that produces maximum profit points toward a combination of inputs that have lower costs than any other potential combination of inputs that could have been used to produce the output. So in other words, profit maximization requires cost minimization. Now, suppose a business firm's output is constrained at a specific level (for instance, suppose there is a law that sets a cap on the amount of output a firm can produce each month). Then, according to the principle, the lowest cost combination of inputs needed to produce that output is the same combination of inputs that would have been selected had the firm not been constrained to that specific level of output, but selected that output because it was what they would have chosen if they were maximizing profits. In other words, when a business firm is constrained in its ability to select output to maximize profits, a strategy of minimizing costs would be an effective and appropriate substitute.

Although most readers of this journal probably did not expect or want a lecture in economic theory in this essay, the reason I mention this is because one could think of my strategy of looking for reasons to reject papers as a cost-minimization approach, given the difficulty of maximizing net scholarly benefits in my selection of papers to publish. Unless I have good reasons to believe one paper has a higher probability of being more important than another paper, I can do no worse by focusing on a cost minimization strategy (i.e., looking for reasons to reject papers)

than by using a strategy of maximizing net benefits (i.e., looking for reasons to accept one paper over others).

I mention this in order to help authors understand how they can increase the likelihood that their paper will be published in *Agriculture and Human Values* or explain why their paper got rejected even though reviewers might have said the paper has promise. Simply, don't give me a reason to reject your paper. If I can read a submission and find no good reason to reject it, then there is a good chance I will end up publishing it. So, here are 10 principles or ideas to consider before submitting an article to this journal.

1. Make sure your paper is clearly written and impeccably organized. Don't submit a paper that has not been proofread for spelling, grammar and other problems with basic writing. If English is not your first language, then have the paper reviewed by a scholar competent in English-language academic writing.
2. Write an introduction that is interesting and informative, that plainly states what your research problem is, and that adequately motivates the paper. Include an actual research question in the introduction. I like research questions that are in the form of a question (and hence end in a question mark). Asking a question gives you a target to aim at. When you have completed the paper, make sure you have answered the research question.
3. Thoroughly review existing literature, stating clearly what we know and what we don't know, and how your paper fills the gap. I can't tell you how many papers I see that do not adequately review existing literature. There are too many, and most of them get rejected.
4. Provide a conceptual or theoretical framework that is appropriate to the research problem and that is a fitting guide for understanding the rest of the paper, especially if yours is an empirical paper. The conceptual framework answers your research question conceptually and informs you as well as readers of the data to use and what to look for in the data.
5. Use data that will answer your research questions, and conduct an appropriate analysis competently. If facts and figures are not relevant to answering your research question, then don't present them.
6. State in plain words what your data are describing. Point out the important insights you present in tables and figures. Don't assume that your tables and figures are obvious to readers. Tell readers what you want them to learn from them. That said, make sure your tables and figures are obvious and can stand alone—that is, be understandable without someone having to read the article to know what they mean. Don't have too many tables and figures.

² To demonstrate this requires that I use calculus and employ terms such as “duality” and the “Envelope Theorem,” including a possible appeal to the “Shephard's Lemma,” which I would rather not do. Any interested reader could consult a doctoral student in economics or Google the terms.

7. Explain what new knowledge your study creates and how it informs on existing scholarship.
8. Don't state conclusions that are not supported by evidence. I repeat, don't state conclusions that are not supported by evidence.
9. Don't plagiarize. Adequately cite scholars whose work you use. There is no shame in acknowledging that you are using ideas or statements from others.
10. If it is the first time you have submitted to this journal, then read papers already published in *Agriculture and Human Values* before submitting, so that you know what a publishable paper should look like.

Because I send many so many editorial decisions to authors each year, it is inevitable that I hear from some of them. I enjoy receiving a "thank you" from authors whose papers I accept. I am also impressed by the professionalism of authors who acknowledge receipt of a letter of rejection and express appreciation for the advice and direction given on improving the paper for eventually submission to another journal. I have a lot of respect for authors who write these letters.

Occasionally, however, I receive a letter from an author whose paper I rejected, who wants to complain vigorously about the rejection and the reasons given. Although I acknowledge that there might be times when I have erred—an admission I have made only twice out of more than a thousand editorial decisions—it is safe to say that once I have made an editorial decision, it is final. Therefore, if you receive a letter of rejection, understand that the reason for the rejection is not personal. I know you believe that your research is important and that it ought to be published and widely cited. I certainly do in the case of my own scholarly endeavors. However, if your paper was rejected, then it is probably because you gave me reasons to reject it.

This issue of *Agriculture and Human Values* contains papers by scholars who adequately followed the 10

principles presented above. In particular, there are three regular papers, a discussion article, a special symposium, and book reviews. In the first article, Parker studies rural communities in the Midwest United States in order to determine how farm scale and the cultural traditions of communities interact to affect water conservation and management practices of farming households. Spilková et al. examine the distribution of farmers markets in Prague, noting in particular how they conform to a rural-urban rather than socio-spatial divide that is typical in western countries. Saja argues that a proper assessment of the morality of consuming animal products requires a consideration not only of animal well-being and rights but also of the specific features of animals, such as their weight, as well as farm production factors. In his discussion article, Kuehne contributes to the literature on farm succession planning and farmer retirement by presenting an autoethnographic discussion of why he decided to join the family farm business but then eventually sell it. The symposium, on the changing role of supermarkets in global supply chains, was organized by David Burch, Jane Dixon, and Geoffrey Lawrence. It consists of seven papers and an introduction by the symposium editors. The papers originated from a study funded by the Australian Research Council to examine how supermarket power is affecting agrifood supply chains. Important for readers of this journal is the geographic scope of papers contained in this symposium, which are not limited just to Australia but focus on a variety of countries around the world.

Reference

- James Jr, H.S. 2013. From the editor. *Agriculture and Human Values* 30(1): 1–3.