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Why and how to write a review essay¹

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Hello, my name is Mike Bradshaw and I am Editor-in-Chief for Human Geography at Geography Compass. I have been with Geography Compass since its inception and have played almost every role in the production process, author, referee and editor.

As such, I have tended to take for granted that review essays are worth writing, however, I know from experience, that writing a good review essay is not easy. But, I also know that writing a good article for a Compass journal can be very rewarding.

In this short presentation I want to offer some suggestions: first, on why one should consider writing a review essay, and second, on how one might go about doing it.

So...why write a review essay?

If you take a moment to think about it, we have all benefited from access to good review essays to support our own research and teaching. We can all probably cite key review papers that have become citation classics in our field, papers that are constantly referred to because they provide a rigorous assessment of the state of our understanding in a particular field at a particular moment in time.

¹ This pod-cast and the associated text is based on a short article written by Michael Bradshaw and Rochelle Lieber in 2008 for a publication entitled *Publishing in Geography: A Guide for New Researchers*, which was produced by the Royal Geographical Society (with the IBG) and is available online at:
<http://www.rgs.org/OurWork/Research+and+Higher+Education/Publishing+in+Geography.htm>.

In my own field of human geography, we have a long-standing journal dedicated to publishing review papers at the research frontier. This journal, *Progress in Human Geography*, is constantly in the top ranks of the citation index and publishing a good agenda-setting 'progress' review paper is seen as being as good as a research paper.

The target audience for a Compass article is somewhat different, but the benefits are just the same:

- A review essay is a good way for new researchers to get published for the first time;
- a good review essay can establish you as a specialist in your chosen field; and
- there is plenty of evidence that shows that good review papers attract high levels of citation;
- while they may not get you promotion or tenure, a good review essay may encourage people to read your research papers (which, of course, you will have cited in your essay);
- review papers may also provide an entrée for scholars from other institutions and disciplines to access work on a common topic, and might form the basis for future collaboration;
- writing a review essay helps with the development of your own research agenda as it may identify gaps in the literature, equally, such reviews are often a necessary part of writing a grant application;
- writing a review essay will undoubtedly help you with your own teaching and having your students read your own, highly-cited, work can only but help in the classroom.
- finally, by sharing your knowledge of the literature in your chosen field you are doing your peers and your students a service by providing them access to an informed assessment written by a specialist.

In short, writing a good review essay should be a win-win situation; but how do you write a good review essay?

How to write a good review essay

As you are probably aware, not all journals accept review essays. Compass journals are somewhat unusual in that they only publish reviews essays. If you are listening to this podcast or reading the text, you are probably interested in writing for Compass.

It is important to understand that Compass essays are aimed at a particular readership: the novice reader, a senior undergraduate or Masters student, as well as academic staff looking for an introduction to the literature in a new area or looking for support for their teaching.

This means that getting the level right is of critical importance. You need to decide how much background knowledge you can take for granted, at the same time, if you pitch the level too high you will quickly lose the readership.

With the target audience in mind, the next task is choosing a topic. You may have come to a Compass journal with a topic already identified, perhaps the literature review from a thesis or a grant application, or the reading list for a course that you teach.

If you haven't already done so, check the Compass archives to see if there are already essays in the area. Even if there are, maybe they need updating, or maybe you have a new angle.

The next step is to contact the most relevant section editor of your chosen Compass journal. They can be identified on the journal website. If you are not sure who to send it to, contact the Editor-in-Chief and they will pass your message on.

We would prefer not to have review essays submitted cold without prior discussion with a Section Editor. Experience suggests that this does not produce good articles; however, we are always on the look out for authors with good ideas. So don't be shy.

Having agreed a general topic for your review, your essay must have a clear purpose and structure to be successful. Simply using it as a vehicle to demonstrate how much you have read is not a recipe for success! Choose a simple title that makes it clear what the essay is about, this will help ensure that it is picked up in electronic searches (Wiley-Blackwell have a guide on how to optimize your title and abstract).

A good review essay should give the reader the foundation to go out and read the current scholarly literature with the appropriate background and context. One way of thinking of the role of the review is as a bridge between the undergraduate textbook and the research literature. The review takes the reader beyond the basics provided in the text and equips them with the knowledge and understanding to start to interrogate the specialist research literature, which is not written for a student audience

A review essay can have a number of purposes.

It can be a survey of:

- recent debates;
- areas where there has been a recent surge of interest, or substantial new developments;
- areas where developments in one corner of the field might speak to (or lead to) developments in another corner of the field;
- areas that have been neglected, but need to be revived (and the reasons for that);
- areas where there has been recent interest from the popular media and that might serve as the basis of debate in the classroom;
- comparisons of topics across different schools of thought; or
- developments in other disciplines on a particular topic that might be of interest to your discipline.

A clear sense of purpose will help you to define the scope of your essay. In other words, how broad or narrow should a topic be? Cast the net too wide and you will struggle to deal with the key issues in sufficient depth, cast it too narrowly and you will not attract sufficient readership to merit publication. That said, topics can be fairly specialized, as long as they are presented with appropriate background and attention to different perspectives on the topic.

Word length does matter in online publishing, not just because papers still have to be typeset; but also because the readership has come to expect Compass reviews to be concise. As the specialist, you have to determine what level of detail to strike. I know from personal experience that problems with word length usually arise when the topic is too big, or there is too much

detail. Getting it right is not easy, but it is not the job of the referees or the editor to suggest how you might cut the length of your paper. Again, experience suggests that referees usually ask authors to add more material!

To succeed, a good review essay needs a clear structure. There is no single way of structuring your essay. Each of the purposes identified above demands a different structure. A good review is organized around themes and not individual publications (unless it is an extended book review).

Review essays that demand attention are those that build on an authoritative review of the existing literature to present a new argument. In other words, they add value beyond a summary of the literature. The author need not be utterly neutral, but should be sure to do justice to the different approaches to the problem. An article that dismisses one or more current approaches to a problem or issue in a sentence or two and concentrates on a single approach is less valuable to the reader than one that gives reasonable attention to a wide range of alternatives, even if the author ultimately draws the conclusion that one alternative is the most promising, and gives more weight to that approach.

For the reader, the purpose of a review essay is to survey a particular issue, gain understanding and identify the key authors and outputs to pursue if they want to find out more. Thus, the bibliography is a critical component of any review essay and also a measure of how comprehensive and up-to-date it is.

How wide-ranging should the bibliography be? Here, it's safe to say that more is better. The more you can include, the easier it will be for your reader to enter the debate or to figure out where to go next.

A comprehensive bibliography is an important way of getting your article networked, be sure to include the URLs of web-based publications. Your article could also include links to key websites and digital projects related to your topic, but make sure that these sites are stable. You could also consider producing a 'Teaching and Learning Guide' to support your review article, once it is published.

Finally, the written essay is just the start of your Compass experience. You are also encouraged to make the most of digital materials to support your article: colour images, data sets, sound files, video, animation maps and anything else that will add a new dimension to your article. To quote 'The Online Author's Survival Guide' prepared by Kivmars Bowling, Senior Managing Editor for Compass Journals at Wiley-Blackwell: 'Use your imagination, and

your article will be better for it, in terms of readership and usage.' Put another way, producing the written manuscript is just the beginning, not the end!

Thank you.