

Notes On Writing Reviews and Blogging for Public Historians

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W7. From Project to Print: Academic Writing and Publishing for Public Historians

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WRITING REVIEWS

In the public history field, we usually review books, exhibitions, or other media such as interpretive web sites, dramatic films or documentaries, podcasts, etc. If you're not sure how to start, it's OK to ask yourself, "did I like this? Why or why not?" Or, what kind of story is this? Triumphant or tragic? Answering these questions can help get the creative juices flowing.

Why write reviews? Writing reviews...

- Helps your colleagues get their work recognized beyond their region or subfield.
- Helps academics with tenure and promotion.
- Demonstrates your ability to write for a variety of audiences and in a variety of styles.
- Develops a written record of what we do as professionals.

What goes into an effective review?

- Critical evaluation.
- Reflection on best practices in the field and whether the thing you are reviewing establishes them, challenges them, or neither.
- Your own experience and perspective (if style allows).
- Links to recent or contemporary public life.

- Summary, but you also need to evaluate the item or put it into context.
- A thesis statement/argument.
- Details. Support broad statements or evaluations.
- Accessibility. Consider whether the thing you are reviewing is accessible.

How Can You Become a Review Author?

Most peer-reviewed journals will contact you to solicit a review based on your expertise.

BLOGGING

There are many opportunities to write for blogs or other short-form, online essays. They are typically peer-edited (as opposed to peer-reviewed). Some pay, most do not.

Why Write for Blogs? Writing for blogs...

- Takes much less time to write than a longer essay for a peer-reviewed journal.
- Gets your work out there quickly and helps people in the field learn from you.
- Demonstrates your ability to write for a variety of audiences and in a variety of styles.

Tips for Submitting Pitches to Blogs

- Follow instructions for sending pitches carefully.
- Consider whether your pitch is really for a 1000-word essay or a several-thousand-word article like report from the field for a journal like *The Public Historian*.
- Familiarize yourself with the venue before submitting a pitch.
- Follow instructions. If you have a suggestion about making the submission process work more smoothly for you or if you have a question, let the editors know.
- Remember that like all publications, it about the right fit, so don't feel badly if they suggest another publication venue.

TIPS FOR EDITING YOUR OWN WRITING

Ideally, you'll be working with editors who take the time to offer line-edits, developmental editing, and copy editing, but there are things you can do before submitting drafts to improve your work. Here are some things I like to do with my own writing, and I also do this when editing others' work:

- Edit your essay backwards. Start with the last paragraph, and work back to the beginning. Helps me focus on each paragraph's structure and effectiveness.
- Read your essay out loud. You'll often catch typos and long sentences that way.

- Take out words long connector words like “although” and “while.” They usually result in sentences that are way too long. Once you remove them, you’ll find ways to make your writing a big snappier.

TIPS ON WRITING WITH IMAGES

Images are just as important as words in writing, but I often see authors paying less attention to them than to the words or other evidence. Here are some thoughts on making your use of images stronger in your writing.

Things to keep in mind if you use images:

- Check with the editors about their capabilities (practically and economically) for publishing images.
- Relate images directly to the text and/or the argument.
- Reference images in the text even if they are illustrative only.
- Use a caption and credit per the house style.
- Work on permissions sooner rather than later.
- Tell editors where you want your images.
- Footnote or link to artifacts and images, including linking to online or printed versions of images that you cannot include in your piece due to cost, space, or for another reason.
- Ask whether you image will be enhanced and how/whether that will be noted.
- Ask if you will be provided with proofs.
- If you use an abstract image, explain them in the text, caption, and/or alt text.
- Avoid using memes as illustrations unless they are the subject of the blog.
- Keep in mind accessible design principles if you use a graphic as an illustration. Provide Alt text (or alternative text) for your images.

Writing takes time and energy, particularly when it is unpaid, but it is an important part of being a public historian. Thank you for taking the time to contribute to the field in this way. If you have any questions about publishing, please don’t hesitate to get in touch.