

“What I look for in an article”

Advice to authors hoping to publish an article in *Social Analysis*

By Martin Holbraad, the journal’s editor.

In a nutshell:

The field: *Social Analysis* is a journal of social and cultural anthropology. While we welcome submissions written by colleagues in other fields, the articles we publish contribute to anthropological approaches and debates.

The topic: We welcome submissions on all topics and regions – what matters is the article’s anthropological contribution.

The idea: Good articles are sharply focused on a single central idea, clearly stated in the abstract and introduction, and developed concertedly through the appropriate empirical materials, with explicit reference to relevant literature in anthropology and, where appropriate, related fields.

The contribution: The bottom line for deciding whether an article will be of interest to readers of *Social Analysis* is whether it makes an original and important contribution to anthropological debate.

The ethnography: Journal articles are not vehicles for the publication of ethnography or other empirical materials for their own sake, but only for the anthropological argument they help to make.

The abstract: Abstracts are as important to articles as shop-windows are to shops, and therefore require serious attention.

The article (itself): In the writing, everything should flow from the central requirement, namely, conveying clearly a driving idea that makes an important contribution to a well-articulated set of debates within anthropology and related fields. (See below for more details!)

The writing: It’s all about clarity!

The language: A high standard of academic English throughout is *sine qua non*.

The review: *Social Analysis* practices double-blind review. Submissions that are ready for review are typically sent to two reviewers, and we aim

to have the first round of review completed within two months. Articles accepted for publication will then typically go through a number of further revisions in dialogue with myself as editor, designed to bring out the article's anthropological contribution as powerfully as possible.

In more detail:

The field

While its title does not convey this explicitly, *Social Analysis* is a journal of social and cultural anthropology. It was set up by an anthropologist, has anthropologists on its Editorial Board, is edited by an anthropologist and, crucially, is read primarily by anthropologists and colleagues in related disciplines who are interested in anthropology. This means that when I receive articles that are essentially meant as contributions to, say, sociology, political science or area studies (and this happens a lot), I am unlikely to accept them – typically I would not send them to review at all. That's not to say that *Social Analysis* is not interested in articles written by non-anthropologists who, for whatever reason, wish to make a contribution to debates developed in anthropology, and are well versed in anthropological approaches with which they seek to engage. Similarly, we are very interested in articles that are anthropological in their approach, but manage also to speak out of anthropology to debates in related fields or, say, social theory more broadly. But socio-cultural anthropology is the journal's common denominator.

The topic

Social Analysis welcomes submissions on any topic or region whatsoever, as long as they are treated anthropologically, and with explicit reference to current debates within the discipline and related fields. What matters to me, when it comes to deciding whether to send an article to review (and ultimately whether to accept it), is how far the article's anthropological contribution is important, original, and, not least, clearly articulated and demonstrated.

The idea

Note the singular of my title. All good articles use original empirical materials to make a series of important points in relation to relevant debates and bodies of literature (see below). But these points are

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hierarchical in their importance. That is to say, a good article has *one* central point it wants to make, while in doing so it may make a series of subsidiary points and arguments along the way. The skill with which these are woven together, in a way that enhances the central idea rather than muddling it, is what makes an article really good. My rule of thumb is: if the author is unable in the abstract, as well as in the introduction and conclusion, to articulate the central idea of the article in just a few crisp sentences, then he or she is not yet clear what that central idea is, and therefore is not ready to publish the article. When confronted with lack of clarity on this score, the judgement I have to make as editor is whether such a core idea might actually be there to be found. If I sense that there is one and that it might even be good (i.e. original and anthropologically important), then I'll try to aid the author to get there through the review process. But if I am in doubt about whether there actually is a clear enough idea at the heart of the article I'll be inclined to reject it.

The contribution

Social Analysis does not publish the results of authors' research just for the sake of it. We publish articles that mobilise original empirical research to say something new and worth listening to. I see articles as critical interventions in ongoing conversations taking place within anthropology (and related fields, as I always add).

So, just to illustrate: how rubbish is collected in Southern Spain, how people there understand that and feel about it, and whether there are ways in which the local refuse collection could be improved, even, are not in themselves questions that are of interest to the journal and its readership. But someone who has studied this process ethnographically, say, and then uses their analysis of it to say something new about how practices of sanitation can be conceptualised, engaging critically with contemporary anthropological debates about how to understand waste in relation to, say, personhood and class: *that* is the kind of question that will be of interest to *Social Analysis* readers (depending on how cogently and persuasively it is done, of course). In short, we are not interested in research results for their own sake, but only for the way in which their analysis can address larger anthropological (and related) questions in new ways, developing new approaches to them, new ideas, and even raising new questions altogether.

In this connection, I also make a distinction between the two 'directions' in which the connection between empirical research and anthropological debate can run. Some articles that are submitted for publication essentially deploy anthropological approaches (methods, concepts,

theories, analytical frameworks etc.) in order to shed light on the empirical material with which they are concerned. An article might take, say, the recent anthropological literature on 'mobility' and 'immobility', and use it to analyse how immigrant carers in the US use social media to stay in touch with their families at home. That's fine, but not in itself enough to justify publication in a journal of wide anthropological readership such as *Social Analysis*. What I'm looking for when making that judgement is the extent to which the analysis of the empirical material makes a clear, explicit and important contribution to the anthropological debates on which it is brought to bear. In terms of my example, the question is what contribution this study of the uses of social media by migrants in the US makes to the anthropological debate about mobility and immobility – that's ultimately what makes the article interesting to readers of *Social Analysis*, who may not be particularly concerned with the specifics of the empirical case for its own sake.

In short, while I assume that all good articles will deploy anthropological approaches to shed light on the particular empirical materials on which they focus, what makes the article worth publishing in a general anthropology journal such as *Social Analysis* is the way the argument moves in the opposite direction, deploying the analysis of the empirical materials to intervene in the broader anthropological debates to which the author seeks to contribute.

The ethnography (or other empirical materials)

Ethnographic monographs are vehicles for presenting ethnography for its own sake (though even there, of course, the ethnography must make a point). Journal articles, at least for journals like *Social Analysis*, are not. The empirical materials presented are there to support the main point and anthropological contribution of the article (see above) – nothing more, nothing less. The catchphrase would be: put in *just enough* ethnography (or other empirical materials) to make your argument work.

The abstract

The article's abstract is much more important than people think. It is what I read first as an editor, and if after reading it I don't have a crystal clear idea of what the submission's contribution (as per above) is meant to be, I become immediately doubtful as to whether the article itself will be suited for the journal or, at any rate, whether it is ready to go out to review. So, above all, an abstract should convey as clearly and explicitly as possible the central idea of the article, the kinds of materials on which

it is based, what anthropological (and related) debates it speaks to, and, above all, as I have explained already, what its contribution to those debates is meant to be. Spend time crafting your abstract – it's as important to your article as a shop window is to a shop. Don't do it in the last minute by copy-pasting parts of your introduction – even if it works, it looks sloppy and puts a question-mark over your article from the start.

The article (itself)

There's no recipe for writing an article, and I wouldn't presume to invent one. But I would just emphasise that articles are most successful when they reflect the rationale I have explained above, namely having a single driving idea which makes a clear contribution to a well-articulated set of debates within anthropology and related disciplines. In the writing of an article everything should flow from that, and I'd single out three points in this connection:

- Make the overall point and contribution of the paper explicit, and do it fast. For example, an article which spends five pages describing its topic (perhaps by way of a long and involved ethnographic vignette) and then ends its introduction with just a short paragraph stating its main point and contribution will fail to do itself justice. As a reader, I want to know fast, clearly and explicitly why I am reading an article – don't make me have to guess for pages on end.
- Think of the whole article as a single, sustained line of argument, designed to develop the main point and bring it to bear on broader anthropological debates so as to move them forward (aka contribute to them). So, for example, one sometimes reads articles in which, after having stated the overall aims, the author devotes 10-15 pages in the main body of the article to presenting and analysing the empirical material in a way that barely connects to the overall aims stated in the introduction. Again, the reader is kept guessing throughout that part as to how or whether what she or he is reading has any bearing on the stated objectives of the article. Even if at the end of the paper all is revealed, this doesn't work. The reader needs to be taken by the hand and shown, at every turn of the presentation and analysis of the material, how everything that is discussed is moving the central agenda of the article forward. This involves at least two things:
 - First, providing clear 'sign-posting' of the argument's development: tell the reader explicitly what you are up to as you unfold your argument.
 - Second, sustaining throughout the article an explicit dialogue between the empirical material and the broader

anthropological approaches and debates it speaks to. The success of the argument depends on the degree and skill with which the specifics of the material discussed are woven together with the anthropological (and related) literature to which this material is brought to bear. Think of the article as a technology for establishing a relationship between these two levels (indeed, experimenting with that relationship and different ways of establishing it is really at the heart of what *Social Analysis* is all about, as we explain in our [mission statement](#)).

- Use the conclusion to really 'deliver' the contribution of your article to broader debates. While this will typically involve some form of summary of the arguments already developed, it rarely works well if it simply repeats them. Rather, conclusions tend to work best when they act to shift the 'scale' of the argument, drawing out its consequences in a way that brings the argument to bear on broader anthropological concerns, and signalling explicitly the ways in which what has been developed in the article will make a difference to them. Again, it's all about making your anthropological contribution explicit.

The writing

It's all about clarity. The way I see it, an unclear sentence or paragraph is a symptom of an unclear thought. So, crafting good sentences and paragraphs is not an added extra – a bonus you give to the reader if you have time and inclination to do it – but an integral part of developing a cogent article. A poorly written submission is likely to bounce back to you with a request you hone the writing (which is to say, the thinking) before the article is sent to the reviewers.

One of the real killers in this connection is undue abstraction. "The recursive relationship between power constructs and embodied dispositions, which can be conjured or, oftentimes, triggered in a variety of circumstantial assemblages, is an efficacious conduit for the expression – indeed, the acting forth – of particular regimes of truth and their critical affordances." I just made this up, a propos nothing, but we've all seen this kind of thing, and it's simply awful – meaningless! It's your job as an author to digest your own thoughts, in order to be able to present them in a direct, simple and crisp way that the reader can understand.

The language

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Social Analysis publishes only in English and is unable to fund translations of articles written in other languages. I am very aware of the political problems with this, and regret the way it reinforces the Anglo-Saxon hegemony in global academic publishing. Alas, *Social Analysis* does not have the power to change this on its own, although I am keen to participate in initiatives and discussions that may help to do so.

In the meantime, my advice to authors not accustomed to writing in English is that they put great effort in ensuring that their submission meets the standards of academic writing in English. Submissions that do not meet these standards will be bounced back to authors before they can be sent out to review, with a request that the writing be improved.

The review

Social Analysis practices double-blind peer-review. Submissions are typically sent to two reviewers, who are asked to provide their review within 4 weeks. Sometimes it takes a number of weeks of asking before someone appropriate agrees to do the review, while on other occasions reviewers accept the task but ask for more time in which to do it. Our expectation, however, is that most articles will receive their initial review within 2 months from submission.

Typically, I read all articles myself within 10 days of receiving them, and tend to reject more than half without sending them to review, if I feel that they are either not appropriate for the journal, with reference to the considerations outlined above, or not yet ready. Authors sometimes knowingly send half-baked articles in the hope that the review process will help them improve their standard. My line is to reject such submissions out of hand: in order to ask someone in good faith to provide a review I need to be convinced that the author of the article in question has made every effort to produce a draft that is as good as she or he can get it.

If that is the case, however, and the submission has the makings of a substantial and original contribution to anthropology (NB: regardless of topic, region, approach or theoretical hue – this is supremely important for the editorial integrity of the journal), I put every effort on my part as editor to help the author hone the article in a way that fully brings out its intellectual impact, and generally make it as good as it can possibly be. This typically involves three or more iterations of my own editorial review, in which I ask the author to work on particular passages, cut parts that don't work, develop and/or clarify ideas where

necessary, and so on. I enjoy this editing task immensely, and, while I hope I'm not too picky, you can expect full engagement from me if we get to that stage of the process. But again, to avoid any misunderstanding: the aim of the exercise is not for me to influence the nature of your analysis, but rather to help you to enhance its power.

So, in short...

...if you have an article in the making that you think fits the bill I have been describing in these pages, and are up for engaging in the editorial process as I have outlined it, then do send us your work – we'll be truly delighted to receive it!