

Continuing the Work: Mentoring and Care in the Peer Review Process

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In *portal*'s first editorial, "Through *portal*," then Editor Gloriana St. Clair outlined three strategic directions for the new journal, including the charge to "[p]rovide a more inviting, constructive, and productive environment for authors."¹

More than 25 years later, we continue to build on St. Clair's forward-thinking directive. Mentoring remains an essential element of *portal*'s editorial philosophy and mission and connects authors, reviewers, and editors in the goal of building a mutually supportive publication process. Mentoring helps new and emerging researchers navigate peer review while working toward their publishing goals. For *portal*, mentoring is not an optional enhancement to editorial work; it is fundamental to cultivating a healthy and caring scholarly community.

Mentoring at *portal* has taken many forms throughout our 25+ year history. We have always aimed to offer developmental editorial guidance, transparent and prompt communication with authors, and reviewer comments that are formative and aimed at strengthening an author's work. As the publishing landscape has evolved, with submissions from around the world sharing increasingly interdisciplinary and varied research methodologies, the need for a mentoring-centered approach has only grown.

One of the most powerful opportunities for mentoring is within the peer review process itself. Peer reviewers have multiple and simultaneous roles as evaluators, teachers, and fellow members of the scholarly community. Embedding a mentoring mindset in the peer review process can help reviewers develop their feedback with an eye toward sharing suggestions for improvement through a lens of empathy and care. In this editorial, we explore concrete strategies to integrate mentoring practices into *portal*'s peer review process. These strategies help reviewers cultivate constructive, inclusive and developmental feedback while upholding the high standards essential to rigorous scholarly publishing.

Through examining the ways mentoring values can be woven into the core practices of peer review, we continue to honor *portal*'s original commitment and demonstrate

how mentoring and care for *portal* authors will continue to shape the next 25 years of the journal's engagement in academic community.

Designing Clear and Consistent Peer Review Processes

Reviewers must consider which strategies and best practices can strengthen the foundations that support authors—especially emerging and early-career scholars in the profession—as they navigate the peer review process. Mentorship through the peer review process starts with an internal focus, with the editorial team collaborating with peer reviewers to shape how reviews are conducted and communicated. Guidance on providing peer review feedback underscores that the quality of reviewer comments has a direct impact on how authors can successfully revise and improve their submissions and ultimately learn from the process.² Without clear internal structures, the peer review process can become problematic.³

Clear and open communication between editors and reviewers forms the basis of a mentoring-focused peer review environment. Establishing shared expectations around timelines, the substance of review comments, and the pathways for revision helps create conditions in which fairness, transparency, and equity can thrive. Studies of peer review feedback suggest that clear expectations and editorial criteria help reviewers focus their comments, which, in turn, helps authors interpret and act on reviewer suggestions more effectively. Cultivating this kind of transparency strengthens editorial internal workflows while enhancing the developmental experience for authors.⁴ Strong and consistent communication with the editorial board also reinforces the journal's capacity to mentor across all stages of the publication process.

portal maximizes internal and external communications in several ways. First, *portal*'s Author Guidelines are revisited and revised on a regular basis to ensure that guidance is timely, clear, and comprehensive. Recent additions to the Author Guidelines include enhanced information on figure accessibility and the use of generative AI in manuscript submissions. In addition to the guidelines, the *portal* Editorial Board regularly revisits the standard reviewer rubric used in all manuscript reviews and updates it frequently to ensure it is in line with all guideline updates. *portal*'s manuscript submission management site, Clarivate ScholarOne, facilitates speedy external and internal communication and tracks all deadlines, ensuring the timely movement of manuscripts through the system.

Across the literature on peer review quality and practices, scholars broadly suggest that reviewer comments are most useful when they are clear, specific, and oriented toward helping authors improve their manuscripts.⁵ Research highlights the importance of feedback that is not only evaluative but also constructive and professional in tone. Reviewer training and developmental support grounded in these principles can encourage clearer language, focused comments, and deliver a written tone that is both honest and collegial. These efforts can benefit novice and veteran reviewers by aligning individual reviewing practices with shared understanding of the need for high-quality feedback. This foundational training to support reviewers enables greater mentorship to potential authors through clear language and guidance during the review process. *portal*'s Editorial Board is comprised of experienced LIS researchers from a wide range of disciplines and higher education institutions. The Board meets twice a year online to



discuss journal needs, answer Board members' questions about the review process, and to discuss strategies for providing supportive feedback that helps manuscripts move forward in the process.

A practical way to embody values related to feedback is to use a peer review rubric, which can help peer reviewers systematically approach key aspects of a manuscript. The structure of a rubric can guide a reviewer toward more organized, balanced, and specific comments across categories, enabling both the reviewer and the author to visualize areas of strength and places for improvement within the article. Literature on feedback quality shows that structured assessment around article criteria can lead to improvements in the quality and consistency of the feedback given. The rubric may help remove sources of bias or subjectivity in the process and center reviews around constructive critique for article improvement.⁶ For authors, particularly those less familiar with the publication process, transparent rubrics can clarify criteria, remove barriers around expectations, and make the pathway from submission to revision more understandable.

Pre-submission, *portal* authors are encouraged to explore the journal's reviewer rubric, which is linked within the online Author Guidelines.⁷ The rubric guides the reviewer through questions addressing each aspect of the manuscript, including appropriateness for readership, originality, and writing clarity. Further, the rubric states at the outset, "Reviewers are encouraged to provide constructive, developmental feedback that not only evaluates the manuscript's quality and suitability for publication in *portal* but also supports the author's growth as a scholar. Comments should highlight both strengths and areas for improvement, offering specific, actionable suggestions where possible."

Anonymized reviews add another layer to the conversation around author mentorship. The double-anonymized process affords the opportunity and safety for reviewers to provide open and candid feedback. While encouraging candor and reducing bias, anonymity can also affect the tone reflected to authors. Shashok notes that communication issues, including vague, harsh, or poorly focused comments, can limit the usefulness of peer review feedback, even when the intent is to improve the manuscript.⁸ Recognizing the benefits and potential pitfalls of anonymity creates space for editorial teams to model and encourage feedback that is both frank and respectful, reinforcing the role of peer review as a developmental, mentoring-oriented practice rather than as gatekeeping.

When considered together, feedback quality and structure, clarity of expectations, and thoughtful communication serve as central elements of an effective peer review ecosystem that contribute to a journal's culture of mentorship. Building on these foundational practices, *portal* can continue to refine its internal practices to sustain a community-building culture of care that mentors authors, supports reviewers, and advances scholarship in the field of librarianship.

Next Steps for Enhancing *portal* Mentoring and Outreach

Over the past three years, *portal's* Board meetings have laid important groundwork for strengthening our mentoring initiatives. During these discussions, Board members identified ways to make *portal's* editorial processes more understandable and supportive for authors. The Editors followed the discussions with a Board survey that helped highlight and prioritize concrete, author-centered improvements and clarify the Board's

collective commitment to implementing them. Throughout 2024 and 2025, the Editors introduced several key initiatives focused on increasing transparency around reviewing practices, developing clearer accessibility guidelines, and designing an author survey to gather individual feedback on authors' experiences with the *portal* publishing process. Each of these enhancements has been rooted in communication, clarity, and empathy in order to build an environment where authors feel welcomed, guided, and supported throughout their publication process.

Under the leadership of Managing Editor Anne Behler, we have also continued to revise and strengthen *portal*'s Author Guidelines. Because the guidelines are often part of a prospective author's first interaction with the journal, they play a critical role in setting expectations and explaining the specifics of manuscript preparation and submission. Our revised guidelines, which remain a perpetually developing work, now more explicitly walk authors through the submission process and address common questions. A subgroup of our Editorial Board has also developed and published expanded accessibility guidelines, building toward our ongoing goal of ensuring that all *portal* content is as inclusive, understandable, and usable as possible.⁹

The *portal* author survey, now in its second year, gathers systematic feedback from authors after they complete the publishing process. The survey also provides an opportunity for the editorial team to reach out directly to authors, congratulate them on their published article, and invite them to reflect on their experience. While we have always responded personally to author suggestions, this survey allows us to understand author experiences at a broader level and refine our processes in ways that are informed by their perspectives. To date, authors have, in general, responded very positively, often noting their appreciation for *portal*'s consistent communication and for our social media presence that highlights and celebrates *portal* authors and their work. The survey has also become another meaningful way for mentoring values to guide and inform our editorial practices.

Building on these efforts, at our Summer 2025 Editorial Board meeting, members endorsed the inclusion of a new statement in the Author Guidelines that explains *portal*'s mentoring focus and identifies helpful resources for novice authors, including a link to the Library Writing Cooperative. The Board also suggested further initiatives to support authors, including creating a video series that explains the *portal* publishing process and offers information for prospective authors. These new initiatives are forthcoming in 2026–2027.

Taken together, *portal*'s continuing efforts illustrate our commitment to supporting every author who considers *portal* a potential home for their scholarship. As we move beyond our 25th anniversary, this is an ideal moment to reflect and embrace new opportunities to build upon *portal*'s longstanding mentoring mission.

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Notes

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