

[An Anti-Racist Reviewing Heuristic](#)

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Guest post from [Feeding the Elephant: A Forum for Scholarly Communications](#).

A guest post by Lauren E. Cagle & Emma J. Rose.

In this post, two technical communication scholars describe the creation of a heuristic for anti-racist reviewing. Though it comes from a specific discipline, it offers tools every editor, reviewer, and author can use.

Imagine this scenario:

An untenured BIPOC scholar receives a review of their chapter manuscript that includes racist and oppressive language and that is passed on, unedited and unmitigated, by the editor of the edited collection, who is a senior scholar in the field. The BIPOC author recognizes that it is a risk to point out to a senior scholar that the review they passed on includes racist and oppressive language, because it might lead not only to losing this publication opportunity, but also to further negative impacts on external tenure reviews.

Unfortunately, this experience—and others like it—is common for marginalized scholars and scholars of color. Racism permeates all aspects of society and scholarly publishing is no exception.

In June 2020, as the news of George Floyd’s murder gained international prominence, and as the United States continues to grapple with the legacy of anti-Black violence and systemic racism, leaders in our field of Technical Communication specifically called on non-Black membership to mobilize “white privilege and use our rhetoric and technical communication skills to redress anti-Blackness in our spheres of influence” ([Hass, 2020](#)) and to employ a just use of imagination to “support the deconstruction and abolishment of oppressive practices, systems, and institution” ([Jones and Williams, 2020](#)).

Taking this call as a directive, a coalition of scholars looked at how we might have an impact on our spheres of influence. Bearing witness to the significant and sometimes unrelenting violence our colleagues of color experience during the anonymous peer review process in academic publishing, we decided to focus our energy and efforts to redress these issues.

In doing so, we generated this guiding question:

How might we dismantle the existing exclusionary and oppressive philosophies and practices of reviewing in the field of technical and professional communication and replace them with philosophies and practices that are explicitly anti-racist and inclusive?

Using this question as a guide, we created the [Anti-Racist Scholarly Reviewing Practices: A Heuristic for Editors, Reviewers, and Authors](#). You can read more about the process of creating the heuristic, which was coalitional, iterative, and designed to be an open process to produce a living document, in this [experience report](#).

The heuristic presents six basic precepts:

1. Recognize a range of expertise and encourage citation practices that represent diverse canons, epistemological foundations, and ways of knowing.
2. Recognize, intervene in and/or prevent harmful scholarly work—both in publication processes and in published scholarship.
3. Establish and state clear but flexible contingency plans for review processes that prioritize humanity over production.
4. Make the review process transparent.
5. Value the labor of those involved in the review process.
6. Editors commit to inclusivity among reviewers and in editorial board makeup.

The heuristic is especially helpful for reviewers and editors as they engage in scholarly publishing. Here's an example of the first heuristic and two of the several ways that it can be implemented:

A. Recognize a range of expertise and encourage citation practices that represent diverse canons, epistemological foundations, and ways of knowing.

- Reviewers and editors recognize that citation practices are political. We form communities of practice/discourse communities in how we cite, excluding and including particular ways of knowing. We give particular ideas power and visibility in how we cite. We decide whose work matters, who should be tenured and promoted, who belongs.
- Reviewers recommend pieces to cite; lack of certain 'canonical' citations is not automatically grounds for rejection.

While we name reviewers and editors as the main actors to implement the heuristic, we also see it as a tool for action by other individuals and coalitions. For example, as an author, if you receive a racist review, you can use the heuristic as a tool for self-advocacy with editors. You may also want to use the heuristic as an example when considering which journals you'll submit your work to. You can ask an editor prior to submission if the journal or publisher has their own standards for inclusive or anti-racist reviewing.

We especially call on white allies to push for adoption of this heuristic or others like it to improve the publishing process for multiply marginalized and scholars of color, as its primary purpose is to eliminate anti-Black and other forms of racism in scholarly publishing.

To demonstrate the breadth of commitment to anti-racist practices among the scholarly publishing community, we invited (and continue to invite) scholars to publicly signal their endorsement of these practices by adding their information to a "Commitment Page." As of this writing, [we've received 315 personal commitments](#) through [the form linked at the end of the heuristic document](#). That same form has also been used to collect endorsements from organizations and journals including the Association

of Computing Machinery (ACM) Special Interest Group on Design of Communication (SIGDOC), the Council of Editors of Learned Journals, College English, and others.

We've also heard informally about ways this heuristic has begun shaping scholarly publishing and reviewing. For example:

- Utah State University Press took inspiration from its calls for transparent processes to develop [a clear and explicit guide for prospective authors that lays out publication processes and timelines](#).
- The annual conference held by ACM SIGDOC used the heuristic in 2021 and 2022 to guide the proposal review process and instruct reviewers on how to engage with submissions.
- In addition to endorsing the heuristic, some journals, such as [WPA: Writing Program Administrators](#), have incorporated the heuristic directly into their guidelines for reviewers.
- Guest editors Neil Baird and Bradley Dilger used the heuristic to guide peer review for [the special issue of Composition Forum on the discourse-based interview](#) published in summer 2022.
- Instructors have been using the heuristic as a teaching tool in a variety of ways:
 - Allison Hitt, Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and Composition at Ball State University, assigns the heuristic in an undergraduate Editing & Style course.
 - Emma Bloomfield, Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, assigns the heuristic in a graduate rhetorical criticism course.
 - R. W. Monty, Associate Professor of Writing and Language Studies at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, assigns the heuristic as a preliminary reading across courses for students to “understand where your teacher is coming from.”
 - Heather Falconer, Assistant Professor of Professional and Technical Writing at the University of Maine, assigns the heuristic to her Perspectives on Editing students.
 - Luke Thominet, Assistant Professor of English at Florida International University, uses the heuristic to inform in-class peer review.

These are just a few ways you can incorporate the heuristic into your scholarly work, whether as an editor, reviewer, conference organizer, teacher, or author. We hope to see this and other anti-racist tools continue informing how we move in the world and what structures we build—and dismantle—together to make that world more just. Join us.

Acknowledgments

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Thank you to the many people who have endorsed and implemented the heuristic, especially those who consented to having their work included as examples in this blog post.

Have something to say on this topic? Reply to this post! Or [email the Elephant](#) about writing for us. We welcome submissions from stakeholders on all sides of scholarly publishing. Find us on Twitter [@HNetBookChannel](#) and use the hashtag #FeedingTheElephant.