

JUST DO IT!

Pointers to Get Your Work Published in the Academic Literature (... and why you should, no pressure)

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I hate writing, I love having written.

– Dorothy Parker

You are not alone in coming to the realization that writing is hard work. Don't believe anyone who says otherwise, but also don't let it dissuade you from giving it a shot. You may not know it, and someone early in his or her career may not believe it, but the fact is that someone wants to read *your* work, and there is a home for it. Only one thing is for certain: if you don't get started and give it a real try, then your work will never be published. Writing is hard work, but it is also a skill you can learn and one that gets better with practice and time. I hope to persuade you that there are steps you can take to make the process more efficient, more hopeful, more likely to succeed, and, if nothing else, more bearable.

Have a Good Story to Tell

Whether you are writing up completed research, sharing an interesting clinical observation, or reviewing a book for the first time, there is no substitute for having good content and a compelling story. But what makes a story worth reading? As it pertains to the scientific literature, there are four main considerations: Is it *new*, *true*, *clear*, and *ethical*?

Producing something truly *new* may seem foreboding. Novelty may lie in a fresh hypothesis or a singular idea, but keep in mind that the novelty of a manuscript may also be that it is a good replication: nothing to be ashamed of there – science is based on the reproducibility of findings. How a submission is new will vary, but what makes the novelty important, as opposed to merely novel, is that it must pass the ultimate litmus test: it must push us forward.

In science, much of what is *true* comes from models (statistical models, models based on population samples, etc.), which are always approximations of truth, and are best at relegating untrue ideas to the dustbin. One model for truth in science is “validity,” both internal (Do the methods hold up and are they able to do what they claim?), and external (Do findings apply outside of the sample they are based on? Are they generalizable?). But even if you are not conducting a study where conventional

models of validity are applicable, you can still ask a similar question: How do you know that what you are saying is true and that it is true outside of the story you are telling? This can be a matter of the integrity of your citations (How well are you basing your claims on empirical evidence, and how strong are the empirical claims themselves?), or of understanding the limits of your story (as with, for example, a case study).

Clarity is straightforward: Can your story, no matter how good, be conveyed in a manner that will be understood by your reader? Strive to be straightforward, simple, and direct; don't “eschew obfuscation” when you can “avoid confusion” instead. Become a peer reviewer: editors will get to know you, and you will become a better critic of your own work. As a better critic, you will preempt and beat others to finding the weaknesses in your manuscripts and correcting them. Indeed, explicitly pointing out the limitations of your study will only strengthen your submission, and few things will prepare you for the task as well as serving as a reviewer.

Ethical principles are important enough to deserve separate mention.

Always Adhere to Ethical Principles

Ethical principles are not cautionary tales intended for unsavory and disreputable characters, and, as such, easily dismissed. They are core values that we must adhere to at all times, but which can be easily overlooked and infringed upon. Prevention is worth more than cure, which is why institutional review boards (IRBs) are so important. Make sure that you are well versed in the ethical principles of research and publication. You are responsible for knowing, understanding, and abiding by these standards. There are far too many aspects and nuances to numerate and attend to here, but they are practically summarized elsewhere (see resources listed below). A few core principles are key: treat patients and family as you would like to be treated (this includes using thoughtful and sensitive language when referring to them. Always use person-first language: ‘the child with autism,’ rather than ‘the autistic child’); don't do or say anything that feels uncomfortable and that you cannot own up to with

pride; be mindful of potential conflicts of interest (and not only financial ones); don't copy without attribution (even from your own past work); and attend to authorship order and attribution early on.

Never Worry Alone

Academic writing is rarely a solo act. It is usually a fruitful collaboration. If you are not part of a team, identify one that suits your needs. This could mean becoming part of a larger research group and taking the lead in writing a specific project, or writing something on your own and asking for input from a respected colleague. When approaching someone to look over your work, always "play up" – ask for the advice of someone more senior or experienced than you, someone who will take the time to engage with you and your writing and critique it thoughtfully, and someone who will help push your work forward and not just rubberstamp it. Ask for help, and not just in areas where you consider yourself inadequately prepared (statistics is a common weakness), but also where you may already feel confident. Writing in collaboration or under close supervision is where the mentorship rubber meets the road. Embrace the challenge posed by your mentor's red ink.

Think Like an Editor

Most early rejections are based on a summary assessment of an article's abstract. With some luck, the initial evaluation gets as far as the Method and Results. At least early in the peer review process, it is rare for an editor to spend much time going over the Introduction or Discussion sections. And yet, most authors spend the bulk of their writing time refining and making their arguments in these areas. The practical corollary is simple: don't let your abstract be an afterthought. From the beginning, pay close attention to the 250 words of your abstract, polish them as you go along, and make sure they do justice to the overall article. An effective abstract should open the door for your paper to be sent out for peer review. It is your 'elevator pitch,' and with so much of your submission's fate riding on it, it cannot be overlooked. You should not underestimate the inherent difficulty in writing so succinctly. Blaise Pascal alerted us to the challenge back in 1656: "I would have written a shorter letter, but I did not have the time."

Present Your Work in an Engaging Way

Scholarly writing need not be sleep-inducing. This state-

ment is not intended to encourage frivolous prose or cutesy affectations. Rather, it is an invitation to be proactive, direct, and bold in approaching academic journals.

For starters, make good use of your salutation. Cover letters are generally underappreciated or overlooked altogether – a bureaucratic box to be checked – but prospective authors should not pass up the opportunity to make a good first impression. A brief letter that makes the case for your submission belonging in *this particular journal* can go a long way. If a submission is not a periodical's 'usual fare,' consider approaching the editor in advance and making an inquiry – or a pitch. Editors are human, and as such, approachable. You may find that your idea is in fact of interest and welcome, or you may be steered in a more promising direction and avoid wasted effort.

Don't irritate the editor or dismiss the obvious: read the instructions for authors and prepare your submission accordingly. When in doubt, ask the editorial office for clarification. Simple oversights and typos may be inconsequential to the overall science in question, but superficial sloppiness raises concerns about a study's underlying integrity and attention to detail. Missing pieces or overlooked requirements can delay processing of your manuscript. Be wary of spell-check and rely instead on a careful read by a keen-eyed colleague (or three) before pressing the 'submit' button. Don't let simple formalities doom your hard-earned efforts.

Do Not Despair if English Is Not Your Native Language

Practically speaking, English has become the universal language of scientific writing. This should not dissuade would-be authors from contributing to periodicals in their native languages, nor pose a significant hurdle to most speakers of English as a second language. The charge is not to write great prose so much as to write understandably and clearly. Can a reader outside of your specific field of interest understand what you are trying to convey? Is there a fluent English speaker on your team, or someone else you can approach to go over your draft? There are a number of professional 'polishing' services available online to improve the written quality of scientific submissions. These may be a useful resource, but one that should be used sparingly, and perhaps are most helpful late in the submission process, after the scientific bar has been cleared.

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Learn From Rejections – Especially Quick Ones

Rejection is an inevitable byproduct of the submission process. Having no rejections is no badge of honor. In fact, having few rejections is likely to mean one of two things (neither one to be emulated): submitting insufficiently or submitting to less desirable outlets.

If you receive a decision letter inviting you to revise and resubmit, celebrate the occasion, for you are well on your way. There is an art to responding to reviewers' comments, and since you are already halfway to publication, you don't want to miss out on the opportunity by responding inadequately. Most comments from peer reviewers are likely to be helpful, and if properly incorporated, will strengthen your work. Responding to a reviewer does not mean that you always have to concur; you can respectfully disagree with a given point, so long as you can make an objective case to justify your decision. Be polite, civil, and transparent. Don't become argumentative or defensive – stick to substance and facts.

If your manuscript is rejected following peer review, resist the temptation to resubmit the paper, unchanged, to another journal. It is all too easy to do so in the electronic age, but you are missing out on an opportunity for growth. Your initial impulse may be to argue with the decision, to state that your work was not properly understood or appreciated. Even if that is the case, it is still best to give yourself some distance and a few days before going back to the decision letter, at which time you can start objectively considering the feedback and incorporating pertinent aspects of it to improve your work before moving on to the next journal. Bear in mind that ours is a relatively small field and your manuscript may end up being assessed by the same reviewer at another journal. For this reason, and for the opportunity to improve on your submission, don't dismiss potentially valuable feedback just because it is part of a rejection letter.

A quick rejection letter should also be welcome: an indication that you are engaged in the process and looking for the right venue for your submission. When a manuscript is rejected outright, before being sent out for peer review, the reason is likely one of fit rather than content. We are fortunate to have thousands of medical journals available at our electronic fingertips and identifying the right one can pose no small challenge. An objective approach is to consult not only with electronic libraries, but their very human and universally helpful librarians as well. Newly available online services offer journal profiles, statistics, and reviews to help you identify potential matches for your submission. In making use of the many resources

available, you can narrow your list down to relevant journals based on topic and scope, and ranked according to impact factor (IF), turnaround time, and other metrics that may be relevant to your goals. Senior colleagues can then help you refine that list, especially if they are experienced and successful in their own submission efforts. As a rule of thumb, try to submit slightly 'above' your target: you may gain access to a more visible or prestigious venue, or come away with useful feedback to incorporate. It is true that aiming for the sure target may yield fewer rejection slips, but it will not challenge and advance your efforts sufficiently.

Balance Ambition With Realism

IF and similar metrics should not be the main guiding principle in deciding where to submit your work. Determine your optimal target readership and pitch accordingly. This may lead to a more modest publication, but one better suited to your goals. Think globally and set high expectations for your work, but don't dismiss more proximal venues that may be more appropriate. Regional publications may not have the cachet you had hoped for but may be better conduits to put the information into the hands of those who can most benefit from it. Particularly if you are early in your career trajectory, it is important to determine how long your curriculum, your promotion, or you yourself can wait to be published. A modest publication early in your career can prove pivotal, insofar as it can imbue you with a sense of possibility: seeing your name in print can validate your efforts and spur you on to the next level.

Never Take Rejection Personally

As authors, we place our work – and a certain amount of personal vulnerability – in the hands of an editor and the 'black box' of the editorial process. At some fundamental level, it is hard *not* to take rejection personally. And yet soldier on we must. Good editorial practice aims for objective and supportive feedback with no personal attacks or *ad hominem* comments slipping through to decision letters. That having been said, as an editor, I have been humbled on more than one occasion when an author has brought to my attention comments that did not adhere to these guidelines. As a result, I have redoubled my efforts to ensure editorial etiquette and minimize these unfortunate occurrences. In the process I gained respect for those authors and their direct, constructive, and proactive approach to the values of the peer review process itself.

There Are Alternative Doors Into a Journal

Keep writing: writing begets writing. Not every submis-

sion needs to fit the mold of a classic scientific paper. In fact, there are often many pathways into a journal, some of which are especially relevant to novice authors. Letters to the editor can give voice to a new observation or engage with the substance of an earlier publication in a thoughtful way. Book reviews distill the essence of a new resource and place it into a larger intellectual context. There may be venues like this, *JAACAP Connect*, where you can hone ideas and writing skills, as well as clinical essays (such as those in *JAACAP's Clinical Perspectives*), and sometimes editorials and reviews. If you have read this far, this piece serves to exemplify that writing for a newsletter or bulletin can serve an educational function – and help its author remain limber in the writing domain. And do not forget that becoming a peer reviewer not only allows you to participate in one of the most important facets in scientific publications and to practice critical skills, but introduces you to journal editors, journal styles, and often excellent writing.

Just Do It!

Life is filled with compelling reasons to procrastinate. I know of what I speak: guilty as charged. Seek to be polished, not perfect. The perfect is the enemy of the good. You have a story to tell and someone out there wants to hear it. So get started and down to business. Roll up your sleeves. Just do it!

Selected Resources for Would-Be Authors, Reviewers, and Editors

1. This five-part series of short, practical articles published in the Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine covers the critical aspects necessary to get a scholarly article into print.
 - a. Rivara FP. Writing for publication in Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine. Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine 2001;155:1090-1092.
 - b. Cummings P, Rivara FP, Koepsell TD. Writing informative abstracts for journal articles. Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine 2004;158:1086-1088.
 - c. Cummings P. Reporting statistical information in medical journal articles. Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine 2003;157:321-321.
 - d. Cummings P, Rivara FP. Reviewing articles for Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine. Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine 2002;156:11-13.
 - e. Cummings P, Rivara FP. Responding to reviewer comments on submitted articles. Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine 2002;156:105-107.

2. Resources addressing ethical aspects of scholarly publication.

- a. Walter G, Rey JM, Soh N, Bloch S. Publishing ethics in child and adolescent psychiatry: essentials for authors and readers. Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America 2008;17:149-163.
- b. Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). Guidelines (various). Committee on Publication Ethics. <http://publicationethics.org/resources/guidelines>. Accessed September 2, 2014.
- c. Scott-Lichter D and the Editorial Policy Committee, Council of Science Editors. CSE's White Paper on Promoting Integrity in Scientific Journal Publications, 2012 Update. 3rd Revised Edition. Wheat Ridge, CO: Council of Science Editors; 2012.

3. General resources.

- a. Benson PJ, Silver SC. What Editors Want: An Author's Guide to Scientific Journal Publishing. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; 2013.
- b. Hames I. Peer Review and Manuscript Management in Scientific Journals: Guidelines for Good Practice. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing; 2007.

4. For would-be editors.

- a. Martin A. World of wordcraft: on scientific editing. Academic Psychiatry 2014;38:86-89.
- b. Committee on Publication Ethics. COPE Code of Conduct and Best Practice Guidelines for Journal Editors. Committee on Publication Ethics. <http://publicationethics.org/files/Code%20of%20Conduct.pdf>. Accessed September 2, 2014.

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