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How to write a good paper – An editors' guide to publishing in journals

Laura Galloway, Heriot-Watt University

Deema Refai and Alex Kevill, University of Leeds

Endrit Kromidha, University of Birmingham

Steven Pattinson, University of Sheffield

How to write a good paper – An editors' guide to publishing in journals

Academia and publishing

It has never been more true that to demonstrate your credentials as an academic – even to be employed as one – you have to have published. Your research, your experience, your reflections, all must be evidenced via some asserted objective quality process, most commonly the peer reviewed journal. This short article explores what makes a good submission, and identifies some of the common mistakes authors often make.

As editors, we see submissions every day and so we provide here some hints and tips to enhance the chances of first, getting your paper off the editor's desk and into the review process, and second, attracting positive, constructive reviews. We also include here some of the pitfalls and common errors to avoid when writing and submitting your paper for publication. If you have a good idea, a robust study and a good narrative, do not limit its chances of being published by what are often wholly avoidable issues.

Selecting a journal and getting off the desk

When you select a journal there may be various considerations, not the least of these is the constant pressure to 'aim high', whether that be trying for ABS high rankers or other good quality measures such as Scopus or Scimago or similar. Do not be guided entirely by rankings though. Instead, select the journal with which you think your paper has greatest fit. Do this by exploring the aims and scope of a variety of journals. Too often authors submit to a journal because of its rankings: either they aim for high rankings for CV purposes, or aim for low or no rankings to maximise the chances of being published. The purpose of a journal is to provide a platform for scholarly work so that we may develop and expand knowledge. Essentially therefore, a journal is the store window of your work. Rather than prioritise the stock value of the store, prioritise if it is the best store from which to showcase your paper. Rather than

focusing solely on rankings, take a considered view in terms of reflecting the quality of your work, but also good fit, which may facilitate more citations.

If your paper is original and makes a contribution, it will be read (and cited!) most if it is presented in a publication that is known for its quality and its engagement in this agenda. In short, explore which journal is most suitable for your work, explore the aims and scope carefully, engage with the debates, previous and current, both broadly and within that journal, and show how your contribution moves the debate on. This is a key way to pique the interest of editors and improve the chances of moving off the desk and into the review process.

Thereafter, a journal article has to achieve a number of key milestones. It must have a purpose, a rationale and a story to tell about some research or theory. This story must engage with current knowledge and understanding and it must be clear why it is interesting and important. The paper must make some contribution to the field – there must be development from what we knew before reading the paper to what we now know after reading it. An academic paper must present its theoretical or empirical contributions in a systematic and robust way, using credible approaches and methodologies that are validated and verifiable. These are critical elements to any paper, and if a submission cannot meet these initial requirements it will not go beyond the editor's desk to be tested in terms of clarity and quality by the peer review process. Some tips on how to meet these challenges are given next.

Critical inclusions

The Abstract

The importance of a paper's abstract cannot be overstated. It is the first thing an editor reads and so a bad one can make the difference between a reject and a 'go to review' decision. It is the first thing a reviewer reads – in fact reviewers are most often sent the abstract to help them

decide their willingness and suitability to review. Again, a weak abstract can be the difference between a positive and a negative review.

It is the first thing your audience reads. The choice to read your paper – and from there, potentially, to cite it – rests with whether the abstract draws the reader into exploring the full account of your work.

Some journals require a structured abstract, others just a short summary. Either way, clarity, brevity, but most importantly, a comprehensive summary of the work and its key contributions are required. Some say abstract writing is an art form. Whether that's the case or not, explore how others do it, develop your skills in this area, and practice this type of summation of your work.

The paper

Most good papers follow a tried and tested format. Just like you were taught in high school, an extended narrative should have an Introduction, a middle, and a Conclusion, and a scholarly article is no different. Within this broad framework, a paper must communicate. As scholars, as article writers, and as journal editors, we are all in the business of communicating. This certainly includes the communication of complex concepts and phenomena, but this makes it all the more important that we communicate well. Yet it is surprising how often we see submissions where these basic principles are missing. Sometimes it seems that authors feel their writing should be erudite, that they should present in an advanced, cerebral way because they are scholars. In fact, this is often entirely counterproductive.

While we can agree that readers of academic journals comprise a sophisticated, specialist audience, first principles of communication still apply. So the key question remains, as for all written work, have you expressed clearly so that the reader can understand, engage and

continue? Where structure, language and style are inaccessible, even the most determined may give up before the end.

So for each broad section of a paper, Introduction, middle and Conclusion, clarity is key. Thereafter, for each broad section we offer a few further tips:

Introduction. This needs to draw your reader in and contextualise the paper. It should do the following:

- Explain what the paper is about,
- Clarify any terms of reference, definitions or conceptualisations
- State why the content and context of the paper are interesting and important. It is not enough to say here that the content and/or context have not been researched before. The discussion needs to go beyond that and establish a strong rationale.
- Specify the contribution it will be making in terms of knowledge and/or theory.

Middle. The middle varies by type of paper and topic covered. We present here a typical empirical structure.

Extant literature

- This must engage with current conversations about your research topic, including those in the target journal
- Your paper should contribute to this narrative
- It should explain the gap or limitation to knowledge that your work will address
    - Present the conceptual framework, hypotheses or questions your paper will engage with to do this

Methodology (for empirical papers using either primary or secondary research)

- Provide a rationale justifying methodological choices in the following areas (as appropriate)
    - Approach, sampling, fieldwork/method, analysis, ethical considerations, trustworthiness and rigour
- Each element of the methodology must be robust and refer to appropriate citation and validated methods

Findings/Analysis/Argument

- Must be clear and credible
- Should refer to the conceptual framework, hypotheses or questions
- Should ultimately engage with the research gap

Conclusion.

- Should summarise the key outcomes of the paper
- Should clarify the contribution
    - A contribution to theory is essential in an academic work. In some cases, there can also be specific contributions for policy and/or practice, context, methodology and philosophy.

Common errors

As suggested above, one of the most common errors editors see is that authors have not considered their paper in the context of the journal. Regardless of the externally verified quality, a paper has to 'fit' a journal. Every journal has an asserted set of foci, all summarised online in an easily accessible 'aims and scope' statement on their website. Yet 72 The International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation 22(2) authors consistently submit papers to journals without checking this. Following that, are the papers that have been written to

contribute to the conversations current in another journal. This is where an author writes a paper for one journal and, upon rejection, just resubmits to another without changes. That is never a good move – first, it is always obvious, and second, it is very unlikely to be a good fit for the 'second choice', because it was never written for it. Whether an original draft, or redeveloped post-rejection, it is critical that authors take the time to (re)position the paper so that is an appropriate fit with the (new) target journal's aims, scope and focus.

Another common problem is a lack of critical engagement with extant knowledge. Without critique of what has gone before, a paper can lack credible argumentation. The body of knowledge is imperfect. Uncritical endorsement and reproduction will not develop it. Indeed, business and entrepreneurship studies have a long tradition of positioning entrepreneurship as normatively western, male and economic, and while this has not been without challenge, recent work in the field is increasingly, and encouragingly, diverse in its perspectives. Do not shy away from the 'uncommon'! Be bold and challenge current wisdom, develop new perspectives, and introduce new and different ways of studying and understanding the world. This is how knowledge moves on, indeed, this defines the purpose of scholarship.

Publishing and prevailing

A paper is always a labour. Underpinned by planning, secondary research, fieldwork, data gathering, drafting and redrafting and redrafting again, it is not inconsiderable time and work. Despite your best efforts though, when you submit to your journal of choice it may not be accepted. It may not get off the editors desk, or it may be rejected by reviewers. While always a blow, it is actually quite normal. This is the world we inhabit. Writing academic papers is an exercise in perseverance and lifelong learning. Even the most celebrated professors in the field are rejected. It happens to everyone – and everyone hates it. But it is normal – rejection rates are higher than acceptance rates in most journals.

The quality journals will not reject you without some feedback though. An editor should tell you why he or she did not send your paper through the review process. Reviewers should give you feedback on your paper. Use that information and advice. It should be (and most of the time it is) constructive and helpful. It should inform you about how you might reshape and refit the paper for an alternative, more suitable publication, and it will certainly inform you about if and how to draft papers in the future for the rejecting journal. The intention is not to destroy your morale and hopes of an academic career, though sometimes it feels that way. The intention is to be constructive and critical, yet without giving false hopes. That said, it is just sadly true that some reviewers are, frankly, mean. A good editor should not let a reviewer disparage an author – they should edit out anything that is unnecessarily confrontational. Even so, sometimes reviews come to you and they are just mean. Our advice here is to take the constructive, but dismiss the mean. A quick nod to pop psychology: if someone is mean within an anonymised process, the misery belongs squarely to them. If there is a key lesson from receipt of a review that is wounding and harsh, it is to reflect, and as your career develops choose never to descend that far. Perhaps then the community of scholarship in entrepreneurship studies can be a more welcoming place for new ideas and new participants.

We wish you well in all your writings.