

REPORTS

Avoiding Rejection: A Practical Primer on Submitting Articles to Social Science Journals

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Academic journals serve a number of different functions. Through journals, researchers and theorists disseminate findings, advance new theories, and generate ideas, which in turn foster scientific inquiry and debate (Christenson & Albrecht, 1984; and Lacy & Busch, 1982). Reviewers and editors of journals also serve as "gatekeepers," screening the information that professionals routinely rely on to keep abreast of current developments in their respective fields (Lacy & Bush, 1982). From an academic perspective, publications in scholarly journals serve as a major criterion for faculty promotion and tenure decisions. Without a significant number of publications neither promotion nor tenure is likely within a university that stresses scholarly productivity.

Developing the necessary skills for a successful publication record tends to be based on oral tradition. Professors pass knowledge and experience down to graduate students through lectures, course related activities, anecdotes, and collaborative research efforts. Although books and articles about how to write abound in the literacy world, they remain relatively scarce in academic circles. The principal reason for this is probably due to the distinct criteria used to evaluate the two types of publications. Specifically, academic professionals evaluate publications on the basis of their contributions to existing bodies of knowledge associated with their respective disciplines or professional area. Appropriate methodologies and expertise to accomplish research tasks are the subject matter of programs of study, but the mechanics of preparing scholarly papers and reporting the contributions are somewhat field-specific and tend to be self-taught.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to present guidelines for authors submitting articles to refereed scholarly journals in the social sciences. The recommendations are based on the collective experience of three editors of such journals¹ and were delivered at a

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session of the Southeastern Regional Family Economics/Home Management 17th Annual Conference in Athens, Georgia held in February, 1988. The theme of the session was to present guidelines to assist faculty in preparing manuscripts for scholarly journal review. The panel presentation and discussion led to the points outlined below.

GUIDELINES

Choose the Right Journal

Although obvious and seemingly simplistic, if the paper being submitted does not fit the journal's intended audience, chances are that it will be rejected no matter how well the paper is written. Having a paper rejected is not enjoyable, but rejection because it does not fit the journal is not only unpleasant but time consuming. Turnaround time can be from three months to a year. In order to save time, it is important to give considerable thought to selecting the appropriate journal or targeting the topic in such a way that it fits the journal.

Research the Journal

Authors research topics with great care yet give too little attention to researching journals. Researching journals is important for three reasons. First, in certain instances some research topics become extremely popular, and journals can get literally swamped with manuscripts covering similar topics. This, unfortunately, diminishes their chances of being published. Second, editorial policy statements contained in journals can provide valuable information about the focus a paper should take. For example, some scholarly journals have methodological orientations, whereas others are more concerned with the policy implications of the research. Third, recent issues of journals may contain articles or editorial statements suggesting the types of manuscripts likely to be accepted in the future.

Read the Instructions to Authors

Among the things typically required of the author are a cover letter, specified number of copies, a self-addressed stamped postcard, a submission fee, and a statement that the article has not been previously published or is not being considered for publication in another journal. Some journals may have a page charge. The cover letter should identify the section for which the manuscript is targeted. It should also include name, title, address and phone number. It is generally considered inappropriate to indicate to the editor why the topic is important, or that some influential person has recommended it for publication.

Many journals have several sections that publish different types of articles in different formats. Short papers, viewpoints, speculative articles, and commentaries all may be published in the same journal. Other crucial information, such as page length and required sections, may be contained in the instructions. Failure to follow instructions causes unnecessary time delays.

Tailor the Style of the Article to Fit the Journal

Tailoring the article to fit the journal is important because the layout, design, footnote and reference formats are different among journals. Some journals encourage the use of side headings although others do not. Pay close attention to the standard article length. If it is 20 pages, then a 10 page or 40 page paper stands a greater chance

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of being rejected. Some journals emphasize theoretical and methodological issues. Papers submitted to these journals have rather detailed and somewhat longer sections emphasizing theory and methods. On the other hand, policy oriented and applied journals tend to have shorter theoretical and methodological sections, generally use appendices for these discussions, and contain more detailed implications.

Popular vs Academic Style

Popular styles are probably more readable, but frequently do not meet professional standards. Scholarly journals assume readers are knowledgeable about the topics addressed. Consequently, authors should use conventional terminology, notations, and data presentation techniques found in the journal to which the manuscript is submitted.

Most refereed journals use a professional style, and authors must follow the prescribed form without error. Avoid contractions, personal pronouns and slang. Keep jargon to a minimum in multidisciplinary and policy oriented journals. Remember that a \$2 word is always more appropriate than a \$20 word. Pay attention to detail. Follow the specifications of the journal with regard to such things as use of numbers and percentages. Refrain from using etcetera; spell out the ideas to be communicated in detail. Do not assume that the reader has detailed knowledge about the topic.

Format

Many journals publishing research typically require some or all of the following sections; an abstract, introduction, literature review, methods (models and hypotheses), results, and implications and conclusion sections. These are time honored formats and most journals tend to use them in one form or another.

ABSTRACT. Keep the abstract short, informative and interesting. Briefly discuss the methods, highlight the findings, and present the important implications of the study. Most journals have abstracts, and there are usually rigid word limits. Many writers have found it better to write the abstract after the paper is completed, not before.

INTRODUCTION. The introduction contains the theoretical framework or sets the stage for what is to follow. The importance of the topic, how the project got started or was funded, and the paper's overall significance should be discussed in this section. This is the author's opportunity to convince reviewers of the relevance of the topic being addressed; that a contribution is presented, and there are important implications. State the case very carefully, because many authors make the mistake of not following through with what they introduce. The introduction serves as an outline, and the points raised in this section should be addressed in the literature review and conclusion sections.

Try to keep from making broad sweeping statements without proper documentation. If the paper points out that 60% of all rural housing is substandard or that the American family is experiencing fundamental changes, provide the proper documentation. Authors should be careful not to make fundamental, critically important statements without documentation. For example, if an author states that "there is a lack of research about the social implications of hot tubs," tell the reader why there is a lack of research and why it is important that more research is needed. Try not to leave the reader wondering why something is important or critical to the topic being discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW. The literature review is a critical part of a research paper, but many authors spend far too much time and space reviewing past studies. Get to the point, introduce the topic, summarize the relevant literature and get on with the

topic under consideration. Readers of scholarly journals are expected to be familiar with the literature.

METHODS. The methods section needs to be informative and concise. Clearly state the rationale for all hypotheses and assumed relationships. In the same section, describe the data collection technique, report the population or sample size and the reliability and validity of the instruments and findings. Discussions about the operationalization of the variables should be made concisely. Occasionally, if a lengthy methodological explanation is required, consideration should be given to presenting it in a footnote. Provide a rationale for the use of statistical tests, including the justifications for the applications of the tests and conditions for drawing inferences.

RESULTS. Tables, graphs, and figures often help an author make a particular point, but they must be able to stand alone. Sample size, significance levels, and information sources are vital to all tables. Titles should be informative but short. The results section should integrate information supplied in the introduction and literature review section, but should not go into great detail because the conclusion section is where this takes place.

CONCLUSIONS. In this section the author has the opportunity to discuss the implications of the research and set forth original ideas, and to present an explanation of the study in terms of its contribution. Issues set forth in the abstract, introduction, literature review, and results sections should be addressed. Clear statements as to the ways in which the paper has provided new insights need to be presented. Depending on the nature of the journal, implications for theory, methods, and/or policy should be explained. Limitations and directions for further research can be spelled out in this section.

REFERENCES. References should be viewed as the author's perception of the relevant literature. Citations are made to identify the existing theory and methods and to support hypotheses and inferences. These are crucial roles and are generally evaluated critically by reviewers. The absence of relevant literature is often taken as a reflection of limited knowledge, so reviewers tend to consider this as a serious flaw.

References are a great source of frustration for authors and editors alike. Several points are important to remember: If an author is cited in the text, he/she should be in the references, should be cited in the text. Good papers have good references which are error free and consistent with the style of that journal before they are submitted.

MISCELLANEOUS

Scholarly journals vary in their use of acronyms. Some use them extensively to conserve space. Readers are assumed to be familiar with the most common terms. In many instances, however, the author may make reading the manuscript needlessly difficult. Consequently, when a journal is considered as a potential outlet, some attention should be given to the use of acronyms. Avoid the use of one or two sentence paragraphs. They typically represent incomplete arguments or explanations. Tie paragraphs together with transitional statements to achieve greater continuity. Avoid awkwardness in the use of language. Refrain from endowing an object with the quality of life. For example, never say, "Table 1 presents" or "the literature shows." Obviously, such form involves awkward usage of language and should be avoided.

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Before sending the manuscript to a journal, have several colleagues review and evaluate the paper for conceptual and technical weakness. In-house reviews are a good way to seek constructive criticism. Few manuscripts are without error and colleague review is a good way to find stylistic, theoretical and methodological errors. After the paper has been reviewed and the necessary corrections have been made, sit down with someone and have them read the paper out loud. When someone else reads the manuscript aloud, their voice provides clues to points where the meaning is unclear, where the antecedent references are ambiguous, where the language usage is verbose, and where the explanations are so obvious that they sound silly. This process is time-consuming and awkward, yet it can provide a measure of readability for the writer who is genuinely interested in excellence.

An important point to remember while developing a manuscript is that many professionals are casual readers of scholarly journals. They scan articles dropping in and out of discussions. If they have to "work" to read something by looking back and forth through the manuscript to find out what something means, they stop reading.

Professional writing is characterized by restraint and formality. Writing that deviates from these standards, because it deviates from custom, is not acceptable to editors or reviewers. Improved writing skills is the secret of success, especially since reviewers and editors can frequently be cruel. This is an arduous process, necessitating discipline, dedication to the task of rewriting, and having talented friends with patience. One of the biggest mistakes many writers make is submitting drafts to editors rather than finished manuscripts. Only when the paper can no longer be improved should the investment in postage for mailing be made. It is a sober thought, but one that is well worth remembering.

FOOTNOTES

1. Douglas C. Bachtel is currently the editor of *The Journal of the Community Development Society*. James Walters is the former editor of *Family Relations*. David B. Eastwood is the current editor of *The Journal of Consumer Affairs*.

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