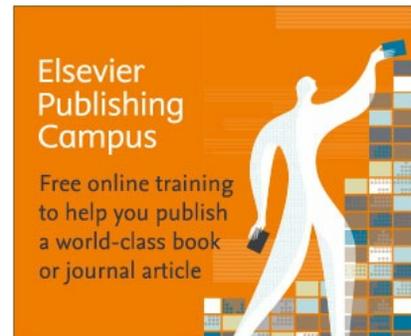


7 steps to publishing in a scientific journal

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As scholars, we strive to do high-quality research that will advance science. We come up with what we believe are unique hypotheses, base our work on robust data and use an appropriate research methodology. As we write up our findings, we aim to provide theoretical insight, and share theoretical and practical implications about our work. Then we submit our manuscript for publication in a peer-reviewed journal.

For many, this is the hardest part of research.

In my seven years of research and teaching, I have observed several shortcomings in the manuscript preparation and submission process that often lead to research being rejected for publication. Being aware of these shortcomings will increase your chances of having your manuscript published and also boost your research profile and career progression.

In this article, intended for doctoral students and other young scholars, I identify common pitfalls and offer helpful solutions to prepare more impactful papers. While there are several types of research articles, such as short communications, review papers and so forth, these guidelines focus on preparing a full article (including a literature review), whether based on qualitative or quantitative methodology, from the perspective of the management, education, information sciences and social sciences disciplines.

Writing for academic journals is a highly competitive activity, and it's important to understand that there could be several reasons behind a rejection. Furthermore, the journal peer-review process is an essential element of publication because no writer could identify and address all potential issues with a manuscript.

1. Do not rush submitting your article for publication.

In my first article for Elsevier Connect – 'Five secrets to surviving (and thriving in) a PhD program' – I emphasized that scholars should start writing during the early stages of your research or doctoral study career. This secret does not entail submitting your manuscript for publication the moment you have crafted its conclusion. Authors sometimes rely on the fact that they will always have an opportunity to address their work's shortcomings after the feedback received from the journal editor and reviewers has identified them.

A proactive approach and attitude will reduce the chance of rejection and disappointment. In my opinion, a logical flow of activities dominates every research activity and should be followed for preparing a manuscript as well. Such activities include carefully re-reading your manuscript at different times and perhaps at different places. Re-reading is essential in the research field and helps identify the most common problems and shortcomings in the manuscript, which might otherwise be overlooked. Second, I find it very helpful to share my manuscripts with my colleagues and other researchers in my network and to request their feedback. In doing so, I highlight any sections of the manuscript that I would like reviewers to be absolutely clear on.

2. Select an appropriate publication outlet.

I also ask colleagues about the most appropriate journal to submit my manuscript to; finding the right journal for your article can dramatically improve the chances of acceptance and ensure it reaches your target audience.

Elsevier provides an innovative [Journal Finder](#) search facility on its website. Authors enter the article title, a brief abstract and the field of research to get a list of the most appropriate journals for their article. For a full discussion of how to select an appropriate journal see Knight and Steinbach (2008).

Less experienced scholars sometimes choose to submit their research work to two or more journals at the same time. Research ethics and policies of all scholarly journals suggest that authors should submit a manuscript to only one journal at a time. Doing otherwise can cause embarrassment and lead to copyright problems for the author, the university employer and the journals involved.

3. Read the aims and scope and author guidelines of your target journal carefully.

Once you have read and re-read your manuscript carefully several times, received feedback from your colleagues, and identified a target journal, the next important step is to read the aims and scope of the journals in your target research area. Doing so will improve the chances of having your manuscript accepted for publishing. Another important step is to download and absorb the author guidelines and ensure your manuscript conforms to them. Some publishers report that one paper in five does not follow the style and format requirements of the target journal, which might specify requirements for figures, tables and references.

Rejection can come at different times and in different formats. For instance, if your research objective is not in line with the aims and scope of the target journal, or if your manuscript is not structured and formatted according to the target journal layout, or if your manuscript does not have a reasonable chance of being able to satisfy the target journal's publishing expectations, the manuscript can receive a desk rejection from the editor without being sent out for peer review. Desk rejections can be disheartening for authors, making them feel they have wasted valuable time and might even cause them to lose enthusiasm for their research topic. Sun and Linton (2014), Hierons (2016) and Craig (2010) offer useful discussions on the subject of "desk rejections."

4. Make a good first impression with your title and abstract.

The title and abstract are incredibly important components of a manuscript as they are the first elements a journal editor sees. I have been fortunate to receive advice from editors and reviewers on my submissions, and feedback from many colleagues at academic conferences, and this is what I've learned:

- **The title** should summarize the main theme of the article and reflect your contribution to the theory.
- **The abstract** should be crafted carefully and encompass the aim and scope of the study; the key problem to be addressed and theory; the method used; the data set; key findings; limitations; and implications for theory and practice.

Dr. Angel Borja goes into detail about these components in ["11 steps to structuring a science paper editors will take seriously."](#)

5. Have a professional editing firm copy-edit (not just proofread) your manuscript, including the main text, list of references, tables and figures.

The key characteristic of scientific writing is clarity. Before submitting a manuscript for publication, it is highly advisable to have a professional editing firm copy-edit your manuscript. An article submitted to a peer-reviewed journal will be scrutinized critically by the editorial board before it is selected for peer review. According to a [statistic shared by Elsevier](#), between 30 percent and 50 percent of articles submitted to Elsevier journals are rejected before they even reach the peer-review stage, and one of the top reasons for rejection is poor language. A properly written, edited and presented text will be error free and understandable and will project a professional image that will help ensure your work is taken seriously in the world of publishing. On occasion, the major revisions conducted at the request of a reviewer will necessitate another round of editing.

Authors can facilitate the editing of their manuscripts by taking precautions at their end. These include proofreading their own manuscript for accuracy and wordiness (avoid unnecessary or normative descriptions like "it should be noted here" and "the authors believe) and sending it for editing only when it is complete in all respects and ready for publishing. Professional editing companies charge hefty fees, and it is simply not financially viable to have them conduct multiple rounds of editing on your article. Applications like the spelling and grammar checker in Microsoft Word or Grammarly are certainly worth applying to your article, but the benefits of proper editing are undeniable. For more on the difference between proofreading and editing, see the [description in Elsevier's WebShop](#).

6. Submit a cover letter with the manuscript.

Never underestimate the importance of a cover letter addressed to the editor or editor-in-chief of the target journal. Last year, I attended a conference in Boston. A "meet the editors" session revealed that many submissions do not include a covering letter, but the editors-in-chief present, who represented renewed and ISI-indexed Elsevier journals, argued that the cover letter gives authors an important opportunity to convince them that their research work is worth reviewing.

Accordingly, the content of the cover letter is also worth spending time on. Some inexperienced scholars paste the article's abstract into their letter thinking it will be sufficient to make the case for publication; it is a practice best avoided. A good cover letter first outlines the main theme of the paper; second, argues the novelty of the paper; and third, justifies the relevance of the manuscript to the target journal. I would suggest limiting the cover letter to half a page. More importantly, peers and colleagues who read the article and provided feedback before the manuscript's submission should be acknowledged in the cover letter.

7. Address reviewer comments very carefully.

Editors and editors-in-chief usually couch the acceptance of a manuscript as subject to a "revise and resubmit" based on the recommendations provided by the reviewer or reviewers. These revisions may necessitate either major or minor changes in the manuscript. Inexperienced scholars should understand a few key aspects of the revision process. First, it is important to address the revisions diligently; second, it is imperative to address all the comments received from the reviewers and avoid oversights; third, the resubmission of the revised manuscript must happen by the deadline provided by the journal; fourth, the revision process might comprise multiple rounds.

The revision process requires two major documents. The first is the revised manuscript highlighting all the modifications made following the recommendations received from the reviewers. The second is a letter listing the authors' responses illustrating they have addressed all the concerns of the reviewers and editors. These two documents should be drafted carefully. The authors of the manuscript can agree or disagree with the comments of the reviewers (typically agreement is encouraged) and are not always obliged to implement their recommendations, but they should in all cases provide a well-argued justification for their course of action.

Conclusion

Given the ever increasing number of manuscripts submitted for publication, the process of preparing a manuscript well enough to have it accepted by a journal can be daunting. High-impact journals accept less than 10 percent of the articles submitted to them, although the acceptance ratio for special issues or special topics sections is normally over 40 percent. Scholars might have to resign themselves to having their articles rejected and then reworking them to submit them to a different journal before the manuscript is accepted.

The advice offered here is not exhaustive but it's also not difficult to implement. These recommendations require proper attention, planning and careful implementation; however, following this advice could help doctoral students and other scholars improve the likelihood of getting their work published, and that is key to having a productive, exciting and rewarding academic career.

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