

# Publishing your work: An editor's perspective

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## Abstract

N/A

Academic journal publication is the currency of University faculty. It can go without saying that publications play an important role in securing an academic appointment and research grants, achieving promotion within the University, and more importantly, advancing knowledge, which is to me the primary purpose of any academic pursuit. Despite its importance, academics seem to receive little or no formal training in how to prepare a manuscript for publication or how to respond to reviewer criticism<sup>1</sup>. Quite often, such skills are acquired through mentorship during graduate training. Unfortunately, it is often the case that graduate students do not produce enough manuscripts during their training to develop expertise in how to translate completed research or scholarship into a published report. As an editor, I often see manuscripts that are diminished by how they are written, which often causes confusion in the reviewer, resulting in a recommendation for rejection. I do not profess to be an expert on writing for an academic audience. I have no idea exactly how I learned to get my work published (I assume it was through practice and good mentorship), nor do I have any idea if I am skilled at it – I am left to assume my level of expertise from my successes and failures. However, from reading several manuscripts each day, I have picked up on some common errors and have developed an appreciation for what editors and reviewers expect in a published manuscript. In what follows, I present a bit of what I have learned in my, albeit it short, time as an editor.<sup>2</sup>

## Adherence to Author Guidelines

Some errors may seem trivial. Unfortunately, such errors are all too common and impact the suitability (perceived or real) of a manuscript for publication in a particular journal. For example, manuscripts are often rejected because of a failure to understand or follow the Author Guidelines. I often reject manuscript simply because its subject does not fit the journal's mandate. Consider the Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice (JECPC), which caters primarily to a health services research readership. Manuscripts that present a clinical case study or a clinical issue that informs only to a very specialized group of clinicians are often rejected, as are reports regarding laboratory studies and/or animal research, because they are not appropriate for the JECPC audience. It is likely that if the editor considers those manuscripts further the author will not get a high quality review (which may result in not catching important errors prior to publication), and the work will have a reduced chance of reaching the community that can most benefit from the research. One strategy I find that helps in choosing which journal to submit my work is looking at where the literature I am citing is published – journals that have a track record of publishing on the subject are more likely to have the appropriate readership and reviewer base. Another reason a manuscript is rejected outright is that it has not been formatted according to the journal's instructions or does not fit one of the listed manuscript categories. Manuscripts not formatted according to the journal's requirements give the editor the impression that the author does not care about the quality of the work, and/or that the work has been rejected from another journal, the latter of which raises a red flag as to what is the problem that led to the rejection. It seems to me a bad idea to prime the reader to assume there is an important flaw in the submitted work.

Likewise, submitting a commentary to a journal that states in the author guidelines that such is reserved for invited authors, or substantially exceeding the stated maximum length give the impression that the author lacks attention to detail; some might consider attention to detail a virtue of a competent scientist and good scholarship.

### **The message is not clear**

One criticism I often see from reviewers is the manuscript does not clearly articulate its contribution to advancing knowledge. A simple statement of purpose is often not enough to convey that contribution to the reader. The manuscript should provide the reader with information about 1) context; i.e. what is the general issue and what is already known about the topic that is being examined, 2) the knowledge gap; i.e. what is not known about the topic, and 3) how the proposed study relates to that knowledge gap. Such information is best presented in the introduction. I have read introductions to manuscripts that list a series of facts on a topic, but do not relate that information to the knowledge gap or the purpose of the study. Listing “everything you know” about a topic can be a distraction for the reader – one should only provide information that is needed to understand why the study was developed and executed or to follow the argument presented. Linking the findings of the study back to that knowledge gap and relating those findings to what is already known is also helpful in articulating the contribution of the work to advancing knowledge. Reviewers of healthcare research journals have come to expect the first paragraph of the discussion section will present a review of the major findings of the study. It is also common practice that subsequent paragraphs will be used to contextualize the findings within the previous literature. I will address what counts as a contribution in a later section.

How the material within the manuscript is organized also impacts how it will be received by the reviewer (which again, impacts the probability of success). There is little chance the manuscript will be published if the reviewers and editor cannot follow the argument. I have too often received manuscripts that (as discussed in the previous paragraph) have no clear statement of purpose, offer substantial (and often distracting) editorial content in the introduction, present some of the methods in the results section, present information that is pertinent to the analysis or important findings in the discussion section (or fail to present that at all, as I will discuss in the next section), etc. Conventional approaches to the organization of reporting empirical research findings have primed experienced scientific audiences to expect specific kinds of information in specific sections. Such conventions also help orient the reader who may not have deep familiarity with some aspects of the research. Misplaced information can confuse the reviewer and may lead to a misinterpretation of the intended message. Anyone who has a large volume of publications has experienced receiving a review from someone who appears to completely miss the point of the manuscript. Often that is a problem with how the information was presented and the message communicated and not with some characteristic of the reviewer.

Clear communication of the message is often blurred by poor use of language and grammar. When submitting a manuscript, the author is confident that the writing is sufficient to communicate to the reader the intended message. If not, why would the author be under any impression that it is appropriate for publication?<sup>3</sup> Proofreading one’s own work to ensure the message is being conveyed in a clear manner cannot be relied upon because the author is already familiar with what the manuscript is about, as are the co-authors. In some cases, the message is lost simply because the prose is poor. It may be that the paper is full of jargon, several acronyms that are not intuitive, or terms that are vague in meaning or are unfamiliar to the reader. In his essay “How I write”, Bertrand Russell offers some simple advice, acquired through his brother-in-law, on how to communicate effectively in academic contexts. His maxims are: 1) “never use a long word if a short word will do”, 2) “if you want to make a statement with a great many qualifications, put some of the qualifications in separate sentences”, and 3) “do not let the beginning of your sentence lead the reader to an expectation which is contradicted by the end” [1; p.65]. In many cases, the use of complex terms and nuanced language cannot be avoided. However, the use of complicated language as an affectation (i.e. using difficult language so as to give the impression that you know what you are talking about) is unhelpful in getting a point across to the editor and reviewers – making the reader work hard to understand what the

manuscript was written to communicate is counterproductive.

### **The manuscript is not comprehensive in its presentation of methods and results**

When Robert Boyle was performing experiments with the air pump in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, his discoveries were communicated to other “natural philosophers”<sup>4</sup> using live demonstration. Where that was not possible, scientific findings and discourse were generally communicated through personal letters. When the scientific paper became popular, its purpose was to give readers the impression that they were there with the author in witnessing the experiment. Detail was important. Today, we are often taught that the purpose of a report is not just to communicate the findings, but also to provide the reader with the information needed to repeat the study. In my experience as an editor (and reviewer), I have reviewed several manuscripts that inadequately describe the methods of study or omit important information required to adequately interpret the presented results, much less repeat the study. It may be unclear as to how participants were selected, how the data acquired, the experimental procedures (e.g. randomization and blinding), and the validity and reliability of the approach to measurement. Statistical analyses are often poorly described. It is not enough to say which test were used – one must also state what is being compared and how. In addition, important metrics related to the quality of the analyses are often not reported (e.g. what are the assumptions of the statistical tests used and were those assumptions met). Likewise, the results might not include important information (e.g. characteristics of study participants, number who dropped out, statistical data, including standard errors and confidence intervals, etc.). I suspect that much of the under-reporting on methods and results is due to concern about maximum word count. If so, it is recommended that the author prioritize the justification for the study, and the methods and results over discussion of findings and editorializing.

### **Overstated findings and overreaching conclusions**

Very few studies provide definitive findings. Hence the cliché “more studies are needed”. I have found that authors tend to position their findings as definitively solving an issue or closing the book on a line of inquiry. I suspect that is a rhetorical device aimed at conveying the importance of publishing the manuscript. Unfortunately, from an editor and reviewer’s point of view, that is a bad strategy. Overstated findings or drawing conclusions that are beyond the scope of the data or analysis give the impression of arrogance and/or ignorance. Very few studies by themselves provide information that will (or even should) revolutionize clinical practice or the organization and/or provision of healthcare services (or even have an immediate impact on any aspect of healthcare). That is the rule in science, not the exception. A recent report by the International Association of Scientific, Technical and Medical Publishers notes approximately 2.5 million articles published in academic and scientific journals in 2018 (as per Scopus) [2]. A substantial proportion of those articles are in areas related to medicine and healthcare. The United States National Library of Medicine notes nine hundred thousand citations added to MEDLINE in 2018<sup>5</sup>. Despite these impressive numbers, clinical practice and the organization/provision of healthcare services seems to change little from year-to-year. One might blame poor knowledge translation, but a more reasonable explanation is that very few of those studies provide more than preliminary findings or something that can be generalized across patient populations. Given that it is unlikely that a study will revolutionize practice, it seems odd to make any claim about how practice ought to change when stating the manuscript’s conclusion. Such statements should be reserved for studies with highly robust findings (however that is defined by the community).

It is convention that authors explicitly acknowledge the limitations of their studies. Despite that acknowledgement in the manuscript, there seems to be a fondness among some authors for drawing conclusions from the data as if those limitations were not present! Reviewers and editors pick up on that and often ask the authors to temper their conclusions. I suppose such enthusiasm for the findings is an attempt to elevate the perception of the contribution of the manuscript to advancing knowledge. I find that it can have the opposite effect – academics are skeptical people and are uncomfortable with hyperbole, or at least that has been my experience.

Perhaps the reason for overstating findings and drawing conclusions that go beyond what the data can support is the author does not have a clear idea as to what counts as a contribution worth publishing. What

matters is that the manuscript presents information that has done something to advance the community's understanding of a subject or phenomenon. The strength of the contribution is contingent on the importance of what is being examined (i.e. the question asked, or issue raised) and how good the study or argument is in supporting that examination (i.e. answering that question or addressing that issue). Thus, the emphasis in the manuscript should be on carefully articulating the importance of what is being examined and showing how the methods used and results obtained address the concern raised by the author (e.g. the knowledge gap), rather than the conclusion. A contribution can be more than identifying a causal mechanism or showing an intervention is effective. Examining a previously described relationship or finding in a new context can count as a contribution, although the author should communicate in the manuscript what it is about that context that raised concern as to why the previous finding was potentially not applicable (this is a common criticism I see among reviewers). An interesting interpretation of the current knowledge base or a critical analysis of an issue, body of literature, or specific study may also be a contribution, provided it adds something new to the community's understanding of the subject of inquiry.

### **Responding to peer review**

Peer review is perceived as the gate keeper in publishing work. While that is not entirely true (editors have the final say and sometimes disagree with reviewers), it is a good idea to take seriously their concerns. Again, in some cases, the concern raised by the reviewer is not in fact a flaw with the study, but is due to poor communication by the author – everyone who has submitted a manuscript for publication has experienced (or will likely at some point) a moment of “but I showed that! The reviewer obviously does not understand my work” when reading a review, and yet it is too often assumed the issue is with the reviewer and not what was submitted. As I stated earlier, the author should not assume the reviewer was provided with enough information to understand what was done by the author and why or can follow the argument as presented. In my experience, reviewers are often trying to be constructive in providing advice on how the manuscript can be improved. I say “often” because I do believe there is collegiality in the community. That has been my experience. It is true that in some cases, the reviewer offers no advice on how the manuscript can be improved and only provides negative feedback. Sometimes that is due to an intractable difference of opinion regarding theory or method, sometimes it is because the reviewer is a contemptibly obnoxious person, and in some cases, the manuscript is just not very good.

A prudent approach to dealing with reviews is to consider the comments as advice on how to improve the manuscript. It is helpful that when responding to the reviewers, the author provides a written response to each comment and clearly outlines what changes were made to the manuscript. It is not enough to respond with “done” or “thank you for the comment, changes were made” (yes, I do receive such responses, and far too often). Such responses do not help the editor in determining if the manuscript has been adequately improved. Which changes were made? How is the new manuscript different than what was previously submitted? Answering these questions will avoid confusion – making the editor work hard to understand what has been done to allay reviewer concerns is counterproductive. I have heard several colleagues say they approach their response to peer review with a “the reviewer is always correct” attitude. I believe that is generally a healthy approach and shows humility. However, one must be mindful that there is room for scientific debate. The author is certainly within her rights as an expert in the field to disagree with the reviewer. What matters is that the author provides the editor with a defence for her position.

### **Final comment**

Getting your work published can be both a stressful and rewarding endeavour. I do not profess to be an expert in how to do that efficiently. All I can do is provide the reader with what I observe in my role as an editor. That role has given me an appreciation for the various pitfalls in preparing a manuscript. It has also given me the tools to reflect on some of the errors I have made in trying to get my own work published. We all think our work is worthy of publication and do not always appreciate that what our audience sees in our submitted work may be different than what we intended to communicate. I hope that what I express here will help authors close that gap.

## Footnotes

1. Incidentally, while writing this editorial I received an email from a prominent medical school advertising a certificate program focused on “Effective Writing for Health Care”. It would appear that I am not alone in my impression that there is a gap in training related to manuscript writing.
2. What I discuss in this editorial stems from a series of invited presentations I delivered over the past year in Canada and South Africa on how to get your work published.
3. I know of authors who take an “it’s good enough, let’s deal with (known or unknown) issues after review”, or a “let’s see what happens”, or worse, a “let’s see what the community thinks before we settle on a final manuscript (which we will then submit to the journal that we really want it published in)” attitude when submitting work. Those authors seem to think of the peer review process as some sort of proofreading service or feel it appropriate to distribute the effort of scholarship to a community of colleagues who will not receive credit for their contribution (e.g. providing input on how the data should be analyzed and presented, how the argument should be framed, etc.). Perhaps it is the ease by which manuscripts can be submitted and processed that drives such behaviour (which adds significantly to the labour of an already thinly stretched reviewer base). The first manuscript I ever submitted to a journal was sent (via conventional mail service) in a package that included 3 printed copies and high resolution images on a compact disc. The receiving editor would mail one of the printed copies to a potential reviewer. If that reviewer declined, the manuscript would be sent back to the editor, who would then need to write to another expert for review. Given the time a manuscript would be in review, the cost and effort to prepare and mail the package to be submitted, and a concern that my work would become outdated (or “scooped”) if I was required to “shop” it around to several journals, I was diligent to put my best work forward with the initial submission (and only submit work that I felt would be received as a contribution to advancing knowledge). I suspect that was a common attitude prior to the proliferation of the internet.
4. The term “scientist” was coined by William Whewell almost 300 years after the start of the period often referred to as the “Scientific Revolution”, and almost two centuries after Boyle’s investigations.
5. [https://www.nlm.nih.gov/bsd/stats/cit\\_added.html](https://www.nlm.nih.gov/bsd/stats/cit_added.html), accessed on December 5, 2019.

## References

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