

A Survival Guide for Your First Review Process

June 01, 2010

Your initial first author experience in the review process is not unlike setting out to explore the wilderness without a travel guide; you are likely to get lost or, even worse, never return. Even if you've been a co-author on another paper, you probably have been spared the brunt of preparation for submission and the emotional attachment of revisions by the first author. Thus, be prepared for a substantially different adventure! After navigating my own publishing obstacles, I can offer a few quick tips on consulting the map, self-administering first aid, navigating rough terrain, and setting up camp in the great publication outdoors.

Consulting the Map

You probably want to publish that hefty thesis, dissertation, or course research paper that has demonstrated your vast knowledge in a research area. Unfortunately, writing a manuscript for a journal has quite a different aim, so don't be afraid to ask for directions. Specifically, you should:

Familiarize yourself with the process. Ask your fellow students and your faculty members about their publishing experiences. They can help you identify journals that best fit your topic and can share other hard to find knowledge, such as information about journal quality in your field. They may also be willing to share examples of their cover letters, response to reviews, and multiple iterations of a published article. In addition, read articles regarding what editors and reviewers look for in a manuscript to help inform how to write yours (see additional readings below).

Pick an appropriate journal. Some considerations in choosing an outlet for publishing your paper may include the type of audience (e.g., general, specialty, practitioners), length (based on the complexity of research questions, design, and/or analyses), and general formatting guidelines. Writing a paper without a specific journal in mind may require lots of revisions down the road — or a rejection.

Solicit informal reviews. This helps avoid minor mistakes such as grammar errors and typos. Even if there are multiple authors on your paper, get someone with little knowledge of the project to read your manuscript. This helps identify assumptions or terminology that your research team may have not clearly stated, issues in overall article flow/organization, and perhaps even misinterpretations or overstatements in your study conclusions.

Self-Administering First Aid

Receiving your first rejection can be quite an emotional drain, with feelings ranging from hopeless dejection (“I’m never going to be a good researcher!”) to passionate disdain (“They just didn’t get it!”). This is natural given your enormous investment in the project, sometimes representing the bulk of your graduate activities. Instead of swearing off future travel, try these triage methods:

Put it in perspective. The majority of manuscripts submitted to any journal get rejected, sometimes because of factors other than the underlying quality of the research. Talk to other faculty members and students who frequently publish, and you'll be surprised to find how many times they have received rejections for articles that eventually were accepted. Writing a publishable manuscript takes a lot of experience, which you won't get by giving up. Remember that you are interacting with researchers at all levels in your area of expertise, some of whom have decades of experience.

Learn and grow from the experience. As a developing researcher, approach your reviews as a developmental exercise. This mindset will motivate you to reconsider the review comments and to jump right back into the process of revising and submitting to another journal. At the very worst, you now have ideas for a future study that can be packaged with your "preliminary study" in the future.

Navigating Rough Terrain

Once the initial excitement of being asked to revise and resubmit subsides, you are faced with the arduous task of responding to difficult and sometimes conflicting suggestions from the editor and reviewers. It's actually very rare to get an acceptance with minor revisions, so be prepared to significantly revise your article. To avoid potential pitfalls:

Be comprehensive. Always address the editor's comments first. The editor will help prioritize requested revisions in your manuscript and sometimes will even give you advice on how to reconcile contradictory reviewer comments. Then go through each reviewer's comments, noting in your revised cover letter how you addressed each one. It also helps to organize each reviewer's comments and your responses by numbering them.

Be firm. You don't have to change everything to get an article accepted. However, you do have to have valid reasons to stand your ground, and perhaps this just needs to be clarified in the manuscript or in your responses to reviewers.

Be respectful and gracious. Sometimes the reviewers are (gasp!) wrong, but be careful not to respond with condescending wording. This can be avoided by simply reiterating your rationale or by taking responsibility for confusion (maybe your wording was unclear). Always thank the reviewers and editors for their time and insights into improving your manuscript. Reviewing is tough volunteer work, so a little appreciation goes a long way.

Be timely. Initially, you may be too overwhelmed to get started on revisions, but don't succumb to procrastination. Meet the re-submission deadline at the very least, and try to resubmit as soon as possible while still appropriately addressing changes.

Setting up Camp

If your article gets accepted, celebrate, but stay focused. You will still be working with the editor and copy editors to get your manuscript into its final form. Similar to the issues mentioned above, be responsive and thorough when evaluating article proofs, which are previews of your printed article, and any accompanying paperwork, such as copyright transfer and author signatures. Now that you've acclimated yourself to the publishing wilderness, remember to:

Keep up the momentum. Manuscripts often take years to make it from initial submission to publication, which leaves you no time to rest on your laurels. Optimally, you should have multiple projects in various stages in the research and submission process to produce a steady stream of publication. This strategy also helps to reduce the sting of a rejection when it is balanced by another article receiving an invitation to resubmit or an acceptance.

Pay it forward. Being first author on a manuscript often qualifies you as a reviewer for the journal — don't pass up these opportunities! Being a reviewer, whether it's for a journal or informally for other students, makes you a better manuscript writer. Give other authors the timely, specific, constructive, and considerate reviews that you would want. ?

Additional Readings

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