

A DOZEN HINTS ON GETTING PUBLISHED

This is a set of suggestions for people for advanced students and mentees. It assumes you have:

- Experience in research and/or data analysis (quantitative or qualitative)
- A topic you are genuinely interested in
- An idea or findings you think are important, with a clear sense of what you're saying that hasn't been said before

Today the competition to publish is greater than ever. And I'm going to be blunt: as the commencement speaker said, you're not special. Just because you want to publish something doesn't necessarily mean it's publication-worthy. But I'm starting with the assumption that you're smart, committed, have a good idea, and want to enter the big discussions in your field. Still, be prepared: It can take a long time to publish an article, so talk with your mentor about whether you're ready and whether it's an appropriate use of your time at this stage of your career.

What follows is not a definitive how-to guide, but some hints for what to expect and how to strengthen your position.

1. Read. A lot.

There is no way to get around this crucial starting point. Beyond mastering your content area, keep an eye on the following:

- Where are the controversies and the gaps in knowledge? This will help you figure out what you can contribute to the discussion.
- What style is most effective? For the most part, the field is dominated by a couple of basic article structures. Don't just master these basic structures: consider what writing styles you want to emulate, and those you want to avoid. Writing that is lively and shows your own interest is more likely to get an editor's attention.
- Where are the articles most relevant to your own work published? Start a list of the journals that publish work related to yours. This is your working list for where you're going to submit your own article.

2. Pick your format.

Medicine and public health are dominated by a couple of basic article formats:

- Research articles: usually 3000-4000 words, following a very strict IMRAD format (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion). These are based on original research or analysis of data
- Commentaries: not necessarily research-based, and a way to develop a new argument
- Review article: assesses the current state of knowledge on a specific topic

If you're a little murky on the differences between them, go back to #1.

3. Pick your collaborators

Publishing an article is a great opportunity to reach out to potential colleagues and mentors and build new professional relationships.

What are you looking for in collaborators? Someone who will pull fair weight ("looks great!" doesn't cut it as a contribution) and someone who will be direct and thoughtful. We all seek praise, but

your ideal collaborators will give you push-back. No article can improve without someone pointing out its flaws.

It's a good idea to clarify everyone's role, especially if you're working with someone new. Do you want to delegate data analysis or the literature review? At a minimum, be sure everyone understands they're expected to make substantive comments on all drafts in exchange for being listed as a coauthor.

4. Start drafting your article now, if not sooner.

You don't need to have completed your data analysis to start writing the article! Line up your background and literature review; create shell tables. This will help you identify gaps in advance.

5. Pick your journal.

In #1, I suggested starting a list of journals you might want to submit to. So how to choose among the journals on your list? Keep your goals ambitious, but realistic. Pragmatically speaking, these days it hardly matters what specific journal you publish in since almost everyone will find your journal through keyword searches in a database. But you still want to publish in something respectable. I suggest:

- Don't shoot for the top with your first articles. Realistically speaking, chances are slim that someone just starting out is going to get published in *JAMA* or *NEJM*.
- Don't settle for the bottom-feeders. There are a number of venues that will essentially publish you if you pay them to do so. Some of them are perfectly respectable (e.g. PLOS One), but if you're trying to build a career, you're better off with the traditional peer-review journals.

That leaves the large number of perfectly sound journals in the middle. Again, start with who has published the articles most relevant to your work. To be more scientific in evaluating their reputation and/or your chances of acceptance, you can always look up the impact factor for each journal (sometimes you have to dig around the website a bit) and the percentage of submissions that are accepted for publication

You can also ask around to start getting a sense of the inside scoop: what journals are notorious for dawdling in the review process? Which journal editors are known for adamant opposition to a particular line of work or theory? A lot of this knowledge, alas, will only come from bitter experience.

6. The abstract is everything.

Journal review is a two-stage process:

a) An editor reads your title and abstract and decides whether the journal might be interested in the article

b) Ifs/he finds the abstract compelling, the editor sends the article out to 2-3 reviewers for serious consideration (this is the "peer review" step).

So a LOT rides on how convincing your abstract is. Your first sentence should make clear why this is an important issue, and your last sentence should make clear why your own contribution is important. If your writing has any verve, now is the time to pull it out. Similarly, make sure your title is as informative but pithy as possible.

Some journals will require structured abstracts (i.e. a sentence or two on each component of IMRAD) and others unstructured (i.e. you can write a paragraph describing your article: but it's still a

good idea to include all the components of IMRAD); word limits may vary from 120 words to 300. This brings us to ...

7. Follow the journal's rules

Almost every journal, curse them, will have different formatting and submission guidelines, regarding things like word limit and citation format. Look for them on the journal website well before you want to submit your article.

8. Before you submit: REVIEW your work.

You should have gone through several drafts by now. You're probably sick of it. Even so, do a final round. Check your reference and your tables especially carefully. Make sure all the coauthors have had a chance to sign off (it's a good idea to give them a deadline for doing so!).

9. Ready to submit?

Be aware that the actual submission process can be very cumbersome, so leave yourself plenty of time. The journal may also require a cover letter and/or suggestions for peer reviewers.

You may be tempted to double-dip by sending the article out to two journals at once (why waste time?). Never do this: you're going to piss off editors, and they are people you don't want to piss off.

10. You're going to get rejected. Deal with it.

Usually, you'll know within two weeks if the article has been sent out for peer review. Often, they'll tell you within a couple of days if they just feel the article is not a good fit for their journal. Don't take it personally; move on to the next journal on your list. If this happens three times (that is an arbitrary rule I invented for myself; set your own number) ask someone to take another look at your abstract to see if it needs rewriting.

If you haven't heard anything in a couple of weeks, chances are good (but not yet guaranteed) that the article has been sent out for peer review. Put the whole thing out of your mind for a while. Most journals will give you a decision in 2-3 months. If you haven't heard from them in 3 months, it's okay to send a polite inquiry to the editorial assistant.

11. *Illegitimi non carborundum.*

Peer reviewers vary widely and very often you'll get two very different reviews for the same submission. I've had reviewers tell me to change no more than a comma, and I've had reviewers tell the editor to reject an article on a completely irrational basis that showed they hadn't actually read the manuscript. Suck it up and move on.

That said: sometimes they're harsh, occasionally gratuitously so. If you're hurt or angry, don't do anything right away. Wait a week, and then reread the review dispassionately, because now you have to decide on one of four next moves:

1. Send the article out to the next journal on your list
2. Revise the article
3. Abandon the article
4. Protest the decision to the journal editor

Discard options #3 and #4 (even if you're tempted by the latter, the odds are very high that you will only lose more time and alienate an editor). Whether to revise or immediately submit elsewhere is a decision to consult your coauthors on, on the basis of the reviewers' comments. Most of them will offer very good feedback. Take their advice seriously.

12. You got a bite!

If your article is accepted, it will almost always come with a demand for revisions. You'll usually have a few weeks (maybe more) to make these changes. When you submit the revisions, include a letter to the editor identifying what you changed in response to the reviewers' comments. If you decide not to comply with a *substantive* recommendation, provide a brief, rational argument for doing so. Keep this letter as brief and pointed as possible: the tone should be professional and courteous, never defensive or accusatory. Always thank the reviewers, even if they were schmucks.

Journals will give you an estimated publication date, but it is not uncommon to be pushed back to a later issue. At some point between submitting the revisions and the anticipated publication date, the journal will send you proofs. This is the absolute last chance to make any revisions, and journals frown on anything more substantive than typos and factual corrections. Warning: you'll usually have only a few days to return the proofs.

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