

RESEARCH

What Editors Want

By LYNN WORSHAM | SEPTEMBER 08, 2008

A journal editor reveals the most common mistakes academics make when they submit manuscripts

The pressure to publish is a fact of daily life in academe, not only in research universities but increasingly in teaching-focused colleges. Professors are expected to demonstrate that they are active researchers and that their work has been vetted by peers and disseminated in reputable scholarly forums.

That increase in expectations has led to an increase in the competition to publish in a finite number of available forums. While research quality is the single most important factor in determining whether your article will be published, a number of procedural mistakes can help tip the balance against you.

As editor of one of my discipline's major scholarly journals, I have served on a number of conference panels with other editors to talk about publishing. Our concerns about submissions are surprisingly consistent across a range of disciplines. Knowing what those concerns are and paying attention to a few helpful tips might significantly improve your chance of placing your next scholarly article.

The No. 1 complaint of editors: We often receive submissions that reveal the author is unfamiliar with the journal and perhaps has never even read it.

That unfamiliarity becomes manifest in a variety of ways. Some authors will submit a type of article that is clearly inappropriate, such as when a theory journal receives an empirical research report or when a pedagogical journal receives a lengthy philosophical treatise. Other authors will submit informal, chatty pieces to a journal that publishes only formal scholarly works, or vice versa. Still others will submit work formatted according to MLA style (Modern Language Association) when the journal requires APA (American Psychological Association).

Submitting an article that is clearly inappropriate for the journal will result in a swift rejection, and may well cause the editor to be wary of your future submissions.

Frequent complaint No. 2: Academics sometimes submit work riddled with grammatical and proofreading errors. A poorly proofread manuscript can cause editors and reviewers to question how careful you have been in conducting your research; if your writing is sloppy, perhaps your scholarship is as well. A meticulously polished manuscript leaves us confident in you and your work.

By polished, I mean avoiding awkward sentences, unclear modifiers, ungrammatical constructions, improper word usage, misuse of punctuation — i.e., the same things you expect your students to avoid.

Poorly edited and proofread manuscripts can cause editors a great deal of frustration, and occasionally amusement. In one manuscript I read, the author wrote, "A major postmodern philosopher, I believe Derrida's work will assert influence for decades." That author was not a major philosopher, postmodern or otherwise, and meant to write "exert," not "assert." Another author referred to a "posthumously written work" (which would be quite a feat), and a third lauded a work for "drawing heavily on the scientific disciples" rather than "disciplines."

Occasionally, a sentence is so garbled that it is impossible to decipher. Ensuring that your manuscript is well edited is fully in your control, and an ideal opportunity to create a good first impression.

Another common form of sloppiness is writers who misquote or incorrectly cite their sources. A recent study of articles in public-health journals found that nearly a third of the references contained errors; 3 percent of them were so botched they could not be tracked down. I have literally received manuscripts — some of them from senior scholars — in which every citation was incorrect (a misspelled name, an incorrect page number, an inaccurate publication date) and in which errors had been introduced into direct quotations. Double checking your quotes and references takes relatively little time and is another important way to produce a positive first impression of your work.

My own pet peeve is writers who submit manuscripts that fail to cite articles previously published in the journal on the topic. If you think of scholarly work as a kind of ongoing conversation about a series of key topics in a discipline, then it is important to acknowledge those who are already participating in the conversation.

When you attempt to join a conversation by submitting a manuscript to a journal, but you fail to cite previously published work relevant to your own scholarship, you not only slight the journal and the other scholars, but you also might be sending a message that perhaps you haven't kept up with latest scholarship — not a good signal to send your editor.

Then comes the problem of writers who ignore specific submission requirements. If a journal requires four copies of your article with return postage clipped — but not pasted — to the return envelope, it is bad form to send three copies with the return postage pasted to the envelope.

Such concerns may seem trivial, especially given that many periodicals are moving to electronic submission, but consider just how many articles we see. Consider how much competition you have. Disregarding a journal's submission requirements is yet another way to communicate either sloppiness or lack of concern. Why risk sending negative messages when positive ones are firmly in your control?

Some authors make the mistake of submitting a conference paper to a journal without taking the necessary steps to convert the paper to a form appropriate for publication. Conference papers tend to be short and less formal than the type of scholarship typically published by most academic journals. While many good journal articles first began as a presentation, they usually need to be fleshed out and substantially expanded to be suitable for print.

Another common concern is how some writers deal with reader reports — the evaluations of your manuscript commissioned by journal editors and written by fellow academics in your field.

If an editor asks you to revise your article according to the reader reports, don't be defensive. Some academics mount elaborate responses, pointing out all the flaws in their critics' interpretation of the manuscript. That kind of response may be cathartic for the scholar, but it's not editorially productive.

Most reader reports are prepared in good faith, and it would be a mistake to take the criticism personally. The fact that a reviewer misunderstood your work might indicate that other readers could develop similar misperceptions. Try to follow as many recommendations as you can, in good conscience. If there is a recommendation that you can't follow, explain why, carefully and succinctly, in a letter to the editor.

Many academics weaken their odds of future publication by reacting badly to an editor's rejection. That's a perennial problem; the acceptance rate of any good scholarly journal is typically quite low, so the chance of rejection is always necessarily high.

Don't assume that your work has been judged substandard simply because a journal decided against publication. Editors are always dealing with matters of "fit," and your article might be excellent — just not a good fit for any number of reasons.

Authors who attempt to argue with editors over a rejection or to persuade them to change their minds are playing with fire. This particular article might not have been a good match for the journal, but maybe your next one will be. It would be counterproductive to risk alienating the editor.

In short:

- Familiarize yourself with the types of articles that a journal publishes and only submit work appropriate for that journal.
- Pay close attention to the tone and style of work published in the journal and try to duplicate it in your own work.
- Follow, religiously, the style guide used by the journal. No hybrid styles!
- Only submit work that you believe to be final, publishable copy. A poorly proofread manuscript wastes your time and mine.
- Placing your work in the context of articles previously published in the journal is good scholarly practice and helps make your article a better "fit" for the journal.
- Follow the journal's submission rules — exactly.

- Develop a healthy attitude toward rejection. You know from the outset that competition is fierce, so maintain a positive attitude.

Most of the concerns I have mentioned are unlikely to cause an editor to reject your article outright, but they could create a negative impression. And if an editor is wavering, too many missteps could turn the decision on your article from a "revise and resubmit" into a "rejection."

Remember, when you submit a manuscript to a scholarly journal, you have two audiences to satisfy: first the editor and external reviewers, and then the journal's readers. You need to satisfy that first group so you can have the opportunity to appeal to the second.

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