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Publishing an academic paper: basics of the submission process

Background

Publishing an academic paper is key to distributing and communicating your research to the broader scientific community. These papers focus on the knowledge gained through a structured and accepted scientific process. It can be a daunting task, especially for those new to the submission process. Researchers start their work by reading background information and becoming knowledgeable on the topic they wish to investigate. Information can be obtained through books or research produced outside of traditional academic methods (grey literature). However, the most reliable way to gather other research that has been published about your topic of interest and/or in your field is to read papers published in academic journals. This article gives a broad overview of what you need to know before endeavouring to publish an academic paper, along with basic tips on the submission process.

Where to start

Before starting your research there were many questions you had to ask yourself, like: What is my research going to be about? What type of study am I doing? What types of data do I need to collect? These types of questions were pertinent in the conduct of your research, and they are similarly important when writing your paper. You should especially consider the key findings of your research and how it contributes to the body of knowledge in your field. What is so important about your findings that people should know about it? You should thus consider the audience you want to communicate too, and who you want reading your paper. These are very important considerations when deciding to which journal to submit your paper. Each journal has aims, scopes, an outline of what the journal is trying to achieve, and what topics it wants to publish.

Tip: Read the aims and scopes of journals to best match your research and topic to that of a journal.

Searching for journals

One of the most common questions asked by researchers is: in what journal should I publish my paper? Before trying to match your paper to a journal, you first need to search for journals that publish on your topic area. The easiest way is to look at where the papers have been published that you are using for your own research, the research papers you are building on and the background literature that frames your research. You can also see which publishers distributed the journals and you can search their online repositories for similar types of journals.

Tip: Look at where other papers on your topic are published.

Scrutinizing journals

Not all journals are equal. You need to be selective in choosing a journal that meets your needs. You are evaluating the journal as much as they will be evaluating your research. Most research literature and journals can be searched in well-known research databases like PubMed, CINAHL, MEDLINE, etc. These databases serve as repositories for journals and their articles, also known as 'indexing', and have rigorous criteria for inclusion that serve to improve the search and distribution of research. Publishing in an indexed journal should make your work easier to find and is often a requirement by institutions for various reasons. Impact factors and cite scores are also used to rank journals relative to each other. These values are merely a guide to show how many people read their papers, how many times their papers are cited, and how the research published in their journals are used to impact the advancement of knowledge. With that in mind, it should be noted that journals with higher values are more selective with the papers they publish. It is also worthwhile checking journal processing times and acceptance rates, so you get a sense of what to expect.

Tip: Search for journals of interest in research databases to review their indexed status, impact factors and cite scores.

Checking the finer things

The best place to find information on the publishing process of a journal is in their author guidelines. Although most journals follow standard conventions, there are

nuances from one to the other. This makes their author guidelines the most important document to read. There you will find the particulars of the journal such as the types of papers they publish, the word counts, headings to be used, referencing style, review process, submission platform, ethical and publishing policies, etc. Most journals require papers to be structured in a specific style, with line numbers, statements of conflict of interest, funding sources, and author contributions, among other things.

Tip: All the information you need to structure, write, and submit your article can be found in the journal author guidelines, and look at previous publications to see how papers in the journals are presented.

To pay or not to pay

Historically, two broad business models have been used by journals to cover their publishing costs. Either the author bears the cost to publish their paper once accepted or the readers pay fees for access. There are some journals that while they require subscription fees, selected articles are free for public consumption. Most journals in recent times offer a hybrid model, where the author can choose to pay for certain open access levels. One payment model is not better than another, nor does it reflect on the value or quality of the journal. Some journals known in the academic community as 'predatory journals' are out there to make revenue off publishing; however, their academic integrity and review process is questionable and do not meet database indexing standards. These journals look legitimate and often guarantee publication based on fee payment. It is worth talking to experienced researchers in your field and institutional advisers before submitting to any journal that require a fee.

Tip: It may be worthwhile getting institutional funding to pay open access fees so your paper can be distributed more widely and be freely read.

Getting everything ready

By this point, you have completed your study, analysed all your data, finished writing your manuscript, and formatted it within the journal's requirements. There are a few more things you need to do before you are ready to submit. Most journals have a double-blind review process, requiring you to submit a completely anonymized (no information identifying authors) version of your manuscript. Most journals require a

separate title page containing the details of the author(s) and their affiliations. Other information can also be asked in the author guidelines, such as: key words, word count, number of tables/figures, etc. Some journals require a cover letter addressed to the editor to state your case as to why your paper should be published in that journal. In recent times health related journals also require the completion of reporting frameworks that can be found on the 'Equator Network'. These accepted frameworks guide authors on paper structure and what content to report on based on the research methodology. It is also becoming commonplace for journals to give authors the option of publishing their data as supplemental material so that readers can scrutinize your findings from your original data.

Tip: Ensure you completed all the additional documentation required by the journal before beginning the submission process.

The process of submission

Each journal has a submission platform where you need to register as a user before you can submit. These platforms are usually self-explanatory and require you to complete certain fields based off the details from your manuscript or additional documents (e.g., title, abstract, author details, etc.). Follow each tab and ensure you upload the correct documents at each step. At the end, most journals will give you the option to review a mock-up of the full submission before you make the final submission approval.

Tip: Make sure you upload the correct documents onto the platform and review the mock-up PDF before final submission.

Review and decision

You can take a deep breath after submission and be proud of your achievement given that not all research makes it to submission for peer-review. You then need to wait for the editor or their associates to process your submission – this may take some time. Each step of the review process can be monitored via the submission platform so you can track its progress. Journals use 'peer-reviewers', researchers with expertise in your field or chosen methodology to scrutinise the scientific merit of your work and how it is communicated to the broader community. If the editor sends your submission

for peer-review it may take some time to get back, once all the reviews are complete the editor will send you a decision letter. Journals vary in how decisions are reached, but most will either reject your manuscript or ask you to make revisions based off reviewer comments before it can be accepted, the latter is a very good sign. It should not be a huge let down if your paper is rejected by a journal. There are various reasons for rejecting a paper and it is common to try many journals before your submission is accepted. The peer review system offers comment and critiques that are intended to strengthen the content of your papers. No paper is perfect and making the changes suggested by the reviews often strengthen your paper. These opinions should not be taken personally, and you should not be discouraged if your paper is rejected after peer-review. You should implement the comments and suggestions, where possible, to better your work and submit again to another journal.

Tip: Follow instructions carefully when asked to make revisions and be courteous with your responses to reviewer comments.

Conclusion

Like any other skill in life, going through the process of writing and submitting a paper gets better with practice. Understanding what is required of you and taking the time to seek out journals that match your work and reading their author guidelines are of utmost importance. Be realistic with your submissions and the journals you choose, accept the value of your research, and do not be discouraged by rejections – many articles are rejected multiple times before finally being accepted – so persevere. There is nothing as exhilarating in academia than seeing your paper published, with your name listed as an author. In an instant all the work you put in comes together and your work is trusted into the scientific cosmos. Learn from the process, spread your experiences, and help others reach for similar goals.