GUEST EDITORIAL

Another Perspective on Publishing: Keeping the Editor Happy

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This article presents information from an editor’s perspective about submitting manuscripts to journals. Authors should know the journal to which they submit, read and follow directions, respond to reviews, and bide their time after submitting their manuscript.

Previous articles in the Psi Chi Journal of Undergraduate Research have presented various perspectives on submitting manuscripts to the journal. For example, Brownlow (1997) answered the basic question “Why take the extra step to get your research published?” (p. 83) by enumerating the rewards that undergraduates can expect from publishing. Miller (1997) presented information about the process of writing for publication, particularly advising authors to take seriously the process of revision. He provided some valuable insights from the viewpoint of reviewers who read and make comments on a submitted manuscript. Clark (1997) offered helpful pointers about how to prune an honors thesis or senior project into a manuscript ready for submission to a journal. Her article gave some insight into the faculty advisor’s role in the thesis/project-to-manuscript process. In this article, I will give you some advice from the perspective of a journal editor. Knowing what the editor’s role is in the editorial/review process and what the editor looks for may prove valuable as you prepare your manuscript for submission. It is probably important for you to know how to keep the editor happy during this process.

Know the Journal to Which You Are Submitting

Many authors conceive of editors as gatekeepers—someone whose task it is to prevent people from publishing, rather than someone who helps authors to publish. This conception of editors is wrong in many cases, particularly for journals devoted to publishing undergraduate research. However, editors have the potential to serve as gatekeepers when they initially receive a manuscript and scan it to determine whether it fits the journal’s mission. All journals have a particular mission. Some journals publish articles only in narrow specialty areas; some publish only certain types of articles. It is your responsibility to submit your manuscript to the proper journal.

To determine the mission of a particular journal, you should examine a page that appears near the front of most journals: In most cases, it is labeled “Instructions for Contributors.” In the Psi Chi Journal of Undergraduate Research, you will find this page on the reverse side of the table of contents. You can read that section to get an idea of the journal’s mission. From this reading, you will learn that the Psi Chi Journal publishes articles from undergraduate students, as long as the primary author (the first person listed) is a Psi Chi member. You will also find that graduate students can submit their articles if they completed the work as undergraduates. If you do not fit one of those categories, you should not submit your manuscript to the Psi Chi Journal.

As you continue to read the section, you will find other important pieces of information. “Although manuscripts are limited to empirical research, they...
may cover any topical area in the psychological sciences” (“Instructions for Contributors,” 1997, p. 85). This sentence provides you with one restriction and one freedom. On the one hand, you must have conducted a piece of empirical research—a project in which you gathered data—in order to submit a manuscript to the Psi Chi Journal. On the other hand, you can submit a manuscript from any subarea of psychology. So, as long as you have collected data that relates to psychology, you are free to submit to the Psi Chi Journal of Undergraduate Research (S. F. Davis, personal communication, January 10, 1998). Finally, you will see that “Only original manuscripts (not published or accepted for publication elsewhere) will be accepted” (“Instructions for Contributors,” 1997, p. 85). It is not ethical to publish the same information in more than one outlet. However, this provision does not prevent you from submitting a manuscript based on a presentation you have made at a research conference or similar meeting.

Thus, there are several cases in which the Psi Chi Journal editor may serve a gatekeeping function. The editor would automatically return a manuscript without sending it out for review if (a) the first author of a manuscript is not a Psi Chi member; (b) the work was done when the author was a graduate student, (c) the study is not empirical, (d) the paper is not psychological in nature, or (e) the paper has been published elsewhere. If you want to keep the editor happy, avoid violating any of these guidelines.

If you or your manuscript does not meet one of these criteria, there may still be other publication outlets available. On its inside back cover, the Psi Chi Journal presents information concerning other psychology journals that publish work by students. For example, if you are a graduate student wishing to publish work you have completed in graduate school, the Journal of Psychology and the Behavioral Sciences is a possible outlet. If you have authored a paper that is not empirical, the Journal of Psychological Inquiry publishes literature reviews and historical articles in addition to empirical studies. Modern Psychological Studies also considers theoretical papers and empirical research reports.

**Read and Follow Directions**

Not only does the “Instructions for Contributors” section tell you what types of manuscripts a journal publishes and whether the journal has specific author requirements, it also gives you a list of directions to follow as you prepare your manuscript. Some journals (e.g., Journal of Psychological Inquiry) go so far as to provide a checklist of items to include when you submit the manuscript. As you might imagine, editors do not write these instructions just to keep themselves busy. Thus, it is wise to follow these instructions as carefully as possible.

**American Psychological Association (APA) Format**

Most psychology journals require that authors write manuscripts in the format described by the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (4th ed., 1994). In order to facilitate communication, psychologists use a standard style that is uniquely their own (although other academic disciplines are increasingly using APA style). This standardization allows readers to find information in journal articles easily and lets writers know what belongs where in their manuscripts.

Although many experimental psychology or research methods textbooks include a chapter devoted to APA style, it is impossible to condense a 368-page stylebook into a single chapter. Such a chapter may be sufficient for writing an experimental report or a term paper for a class, but it is unlikely that the chapter would provide all the information you need to prepare a manuscript for publication. In other words, if you do not own a copy of the Publication Manual, you should buy one—think of it as an investment in your future.

Although your faculty advisor may know a great deal about APA format, you would be wise to learn as much about the Publication Manual as you can. There are so many different guidelines and nuances that it is difficult to know them all. I have reviewed for many years and served as an editor for two years, and I am still learning points about APA format. Some faculty members may “know” facts about APA style that have changed since the previous edition. Having reviewed hundreds of manuscripts submitted by faculty around the country, I can assure you that faculty members do not know APA format perfectly!

It would be impossible to summarize all the details of APA format in a brief journal article. Again, there is simply no substitute for having a copy of the Publication Manual in your hands. In addition to having a copy, you may wish to visit the Journal of Psychological Inquiry’s Web site (http://puffin.creighton.edu/psy/journal/JPHome.html). At that location, you will find a list of common APA format errors that authors make (Ware & Murdock, 1997). This list may help you avoid errors as you compose your manuscript.

How do you keep the editor happy concerning APA format? First, you follow it to the best of your ability. Any time you have the least bit of indecision or uncertainty about a particular style question, consult your Publication Manual. It is important to remember that APA style is different in many ways from MLA...
style or other such styles you may have learned in English composition classes. Second, don’t violate APA style guidelines just because you think they are arcane or pointless. As authors have pointed out to me, all word processing programs can print characters in italics, so why shouldn’t authors use that function? At this moment, the companies that print and publish journals are set up to deal with APA format as it appears in the Publication Manual, so their computers are programmed to turn underlines into italics. Although it may seem silly (and will probably change some day), that’s the way it is for now. Finally, remember that the editor did not write the Publication Manual; he or she probably sees some of the same oddities that you do. But—remembering that the editor had no role in preparing the Manual should keep you from arguing points of style with him or her.

What to Submit

Most journals provide authors with a list of materials to include with their submission. As you might imagine, you can keep the editor happy by double-checking to make certain that you include everything required when you send your manuscript for review. Your attention to these details will save the editor from either taking care of those necessities for you or returning your manuscript so that you can attend to the details. Note that the Psi Chi Journal of Undergraduate Research has four requirements, explained subsequently. All of these requirements have a purpose; following them helps keep the editor happy.

Four copies of the complete manuscript. The editor will send your manuscript to three reviewers—faculty members who are knowledgeable about the topic of your research. The editor will keep the fourth copy and personally review it. Thus, there is a reason for requesting that you send four copies. If you do not provide the requisite number of copies, the editor will either have to make copies (incurring Psi Chi expense) or return the manuscript to you for the correct number of copies. If the editor returns the manuscript to you, that will result in a delay in processing it.

A self-addressed, stamped postcard. The postcard is primarily for your benefit—the editor will use it to let you know that your manuscript arrived. Again, if you do not enclose the card, the result will be either no notification for you or extra work and expense if the editor takes the time to write you a letter informing you of your manuscript’s receipt.

A self-addressed (large) envelope with postage. When you have everything in your manila envelope ready to mail to the editor (including the self-addressed envelope), do not seal your envelope. Instead, have a postal employee weigh the envelope to tell you the cost of mailing—put the same amount of postage in stamps on the self-addressed envelope before you seal your envelope and mail it. The amount of postage required to process all the mail dealing with a journal is surprising; including an envelope with postage on it is a way to help the journal defray its costs. Be sure to use stamps rather than a postage meter label on the self-addressed envelope so that the editor will be able to mail the envelope to you without problems. You should use the same amount of postage as mailing the package costs you because the editor may return copies of your manuscripts that reviewers have marked. Once more, if you fail to follow these directions, you will inconvenience the editor.

A sponsoring statement from the faculty supervisor. Your supervising faculty member should certify three items in a cover letter. First, in conducting your research, you must have adhered to APA ethical guidelines. As you may remember from an experimental psychology class, APA has developed ethical guidelines for research with both human and animal participants. Second, your supervisor must have read and critiqued your paper for style, content, APA style, and presentation. A helpful faculty eye can spot problems with your manuscript that you can correct before submitting it. Third, the research, from conception to manuscript preparation, must be primarily your work. A faculty member can lend you assistance, but should not be the driving force behind the research. Forgetting to include this letter with your submission will delay the processing of your manuscript.

Responding to Reviews

One day, approximately six weeks after submitting your manuscript, you will find in your mailbox the envelope you addressed to yourself. You will excitedly open the envelope, but probably will find a letter from the editor that informs you that your current manuscript will not be published in the journal. A study of APA journals revealed an acceptance rate for initial submissions of less than 2% (Eichorn & VandenBos, 1985). You should take the package and consult with your faculty advisor as soon as possible so that you can jointly decide how to proceed.

In many cases, the editor’s letter will provide you with some direction for revising the manuscript so that you can resubmit it. Miller (1997) provided many good suggestions for revising manuscripts in light of the editor’s and reviewers’ feedback. The good news is that the acceptance rate for revised manuscripts increases to 20% to 40% (Eichorn & VandenBos, 1985), and may be even higher for student journals.
However, acceptance of a revised manuscript is not a given. It is particularly important to keep the editor happy with the revision of your manuscript. Editors are happy when they receive revisions that are better than the original manuscript, that address substantive comments raised by the editor and reviewers, and that include a letter providing reasons for ignoring suggestions the editor and reviewers made. Let’s examine each of these factors.

**Submitting an Improved Manuscript**

Editors and reviewers will typically give you feedback about improving your manuscript. You are likely to receive a large number of comments: Fiske and Fogg (1990) studied 402 reviews of 153 manuscripts and found a mean of 8.6 editorial comments per review and that the comments often did not overlap. As Miller (1997) noted, editors and reviewers may make suggestions about any or all sections of your paper, your writing style, adherence to APA format, and so on. Although it may be difficult, it is important for you to view this feedback as constructive criticism rather than harsh disapproval of your work. It is particularly true that editors and reviewers for undergraduate journals attempt to provide their feedback in a positive manner. As you and your advisor look at the critiques and your original manuscript, it is important to divide the editorial comments into those that you will incorporate into your revised manuscript and those that you will not.

**Addressing Substantive Comments**

It is likely that many of the editor’s and reviewers’ comments will evoke a “Why didn’t I think of that?” response from you. As you can imagine, these comments are typically the simple ones with which to deal. Still, however, they may require a good deal of effort on your part. A reviewer may ask you to explain a passage more clearly, when you think it is already perfectly clear. A reviewer may suggest including more background literature for your introduction, and you remember how hard you worked to find the information you did include. The editor may ask you to clarify some aspect of your methodology, although you thought that you included all the important details. Always keep in mind the fact that you are intimately acquainted with every detail of your research, so it is quite easy to overlook an item that readers might need in order to fully comprehend the study. Sometimes a reviewer or editor might suggest different or additional statistical analyses of your data. You might even receive editorial comments that suggest additional or different implications of your results—information that might lead you to revise your discussion or conclusions. Thus, although it is helpful and desirable to receive editorial comments with which you agree, there is no guarantee that the revision process will be a simple one.

You should write a cover letter to accompany your revised manuscript. A good cover letter documents the changes that you made in your revision based on the reviewers’ comments. Because your manuscript incorporates those changes, your description of them can be brief. A more important function of your cover letter is to address the editor’s and reviewers’ suggestions that you did not incorporate (see subsequent discussion).

**“Ignoring” Editorial Suggestions**

It is not uncommon to receive editorial comments and suggestions with which you disagree. I must emphasize, however, how important it is to carefully consider all suggestions and discuss each comment with your advisor. Often, after reflection and discussion, you may change your initial impression and come to the realization that the comment was a good one. Many writers have difficulty accepting criticism and suggestions, but that is not a good attitude when it comes to writing and revising articles for publication.

At the same time, it is important to remember that some of the comments are merely suggestions. You should attempt to distinguish suggestions from imperatives. For example, if the editor or reviewers find errors in your APA formatting, making those changes is not optional. Likewise, if they point out that you ignored important background literature, left out important details about your participants or procedures, or used an incorrect statistical analysis, you should take those comments as representing mandatory changes.

On the other hand, you will recognize some comments as being matters of opinion or interpretation. Some reviewers may begin questions with phrases such as “I wonder if you thought about . . . ?” or “Did you consider . . . ?” Such questions often indicate points that reviewers would like you to ponder, but this approach leaves the final decision of inclusion to you. This type of question does not mean that you should take it any less seriously than other questions; the reviewer simply is not insisting that you incorporate this change into your revision.

Finally, you might note, in the header for this section, I put the word Ignoring in quotations. It is not a good idea to reject a suggestion, comment, or question without providing a rationale. Obviously, such a rationale does not belong in your manuscript. Thus, you should include in your cover letter a careful documentation of why you did not address cer-
tain points that the editor or reviewers made on your original manuscript. Editors and reviewers appreciate a clear and convincing statement as to why you did not make a change that they suggested. If you cannot provide a clear rationale for not making a suggested revision, you may be on shaky ground and probably should rethink your position. As you might imagine, it is a good idea to be appreciative in the letter of the suggestions made, even those that you did not incorporate. A good cover letter keeps the editor happy because it provides an easy-to-see record of how you addressed and acknowledged the editorial comments you received. Often, the editor will copy your letter and send it to the reviewers with your revised manuscript.

**Biding Your Time**

One of the most difficult things for you to do after you submit a manuscript or a revision is to wait. The editorial process is a slow one. The editor must receive your manuscript, package and mail it to reviewers, and wait on them to mail their reviews back. Reviewers are busy people—they do more than merely review manuscripts, as they have class, school, and family responsibilities also. Although editors may ask for reviewers to return reviews within a month, reviews often trickle in late (I have had reviewers take over 3 months with a review). Once the reviews are back, the editor can process your manuscript. However, the editor has other responsibilities also—other manuscripts may be ahead of yours in the queue, there are classes to teach, and so on.

Although the previous paragraph may sound like excuse-making, it simply informs you of the realities of processing journal submissions. According to the *Publication Manual* (1994),

> The period of review can vary, depending both on the length and complexity of the manuscript and on the number of reviewers asked to evaluate it, but the review process usually takes 2 to 3 months. After 2 or 3 months, the author can expect to be notified either of the action taken on the manuscript or, if a delay occurs before or during the review process, of the status of the manuscript. If not notified in 3 months, the author may appropriately contact the editor for information.

(p. 302)

Simply put, you will not make the editor happy if you write, call, or e-mail about the status of your manuscript before it has had adequate time to make it through the review process. Be sure to record the date on which you send your manuscript so that you will know exactly how long it has been under review. Although the time may seem like an eternity to you, be patient and wait. Most editors would become much less efficient at their jobs if they constantly had to respond to authors wanting details about the status of their manuscripts.

Likewise, if you are fortunate enough to have a manuscript accepted for publication, be aware that journals tend to have long production schedules. For example, in my editing of *Teaching of Psychology*, I have to send a complete set of manuscripts for an issue to the publisher a full 5 months before that issue will appear in print. Add to those 5 months the amount of time that it takes to accumulate enough manuscripts to make an issue and you can see that the publication lag for journals (time from manuscript acceptance to actual publication) can be quite lengthy. According to the *Publication Manual* (p. 291), the publication lag varies by journal, but is about 7 months. If asked to predict, I would guess that this time is only likely to grow longer in the future. Again, you will not make the editor happy by continually asking when your article will appear in print.

**Summary**

I have attempted to provide you with some insights to the editorial and publication process from an editor’s point of view. Although much of the editorial processing of your manuscript is in other people’s hands, there are a variety of strategies you can adopt to increase your chances of being published and to make the process more bearable for you. If you know the journal to which you submit, read and follow directions, respond appropriately to reviews, and wait patiently, you will find the editorial process to be more bearable.

**References**


