Invited Editorial: How to Prepare Theses and Dissertations for Publication in Peer-Reviewed Journals

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ABSTRACT. Although research and psychological literacy are pivotal components to one’s education in psychology, the generation of scientific literature is often a novel topic to students. The purpose of this article is to demystify and outline expectations for the publication process in *Psi Chi Journal of Psychological Research* and beyond, particularly for students who plan to submit capstone research projects (e.g., master’s theses, dissertations) for publication. There are a few important differences between theses and peer-reviewed articles, including the role of the committee or editorial board, the manuscript revision process, and the length of the manuscript. Students also need to be aware of typical review timelines, possible decisions, and expectations for correspondence with editorial boards. Finally, students must consider the ethical implications of submitting Electronic Theses and Dissertations for publication in peer-review journals.

Differences Between Theses and Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles

There are a few important differences between theses and peer-reviewed articles, including the role of the committee or Editorial Board, the manuscript revision process, and the length of the manuscript. Capstone projects (e.g., senior honors project, master’s thesis, doctoral dissertation) are typically conducted under the guidance and support of a group of faculty members within a student’s department or institution, often referred to as a committee. The committee members will have expertise in the topic of interest, the methodology, the population being studied, and/or other aspects of the project. At times, the student may recruit faculty members from other institutions who are known for their expertise in a given area.

For capstone projects, the student generally has a personal working relationship with the committee members and meets with them regularly to conceptualize, execute, and write up the findings from the research project. The committee members will provide feedback on theory, methodology, results, and other components of the project over the course of two or more academic semesters.
responsibility of the committee is to promote the student’s academic and professional growth during a pivotal time in academic training. Hence, they are likely to be available for student questions and concerns, and may demonstrate personal interest or investment in the student’s project.

Following completion of the project, committee members may encourage the student to submit the work for publication in an empirical journal. To be considered for publication in a journal, the manuscript must first be peer reviewed. The peer-review process advances objectivity in the field and ensures that high-quality research is disseminated to the public (APA, 2010a). When a student submits a manuscript to a journal for consideration, an editorial board will begin the peer-review process to assess the quality and rigor of the research, the suitability for that journal, and potential contributions to the field.

The editorial board typically includes an editor, associate (and/or managing) editor, and numerous reviewers with wide-ranging areas of expertise. For each manuscript submission, the editor or associate editor will recruit two to four reviewers who have known expertise in the manuscript’s theory, topic area, or methodology. The role of the reviewers is to (a) read the manuscript with a critical lens, (b) provide feedback for authors that summarizes strengths and concerns pertaining to the research, and (c) determine whether the dissemination of the manuscript would advance knowledge in the field.

The nature of the peer-review process is quite different from the committee’s role in a few key areas. First, the student will not know the assigned reviewers, and the reviewers will not know who submitted the work for publication (often considered “blind review” or “masked review”). Second, the role of a journal’s editorial board and reviewers differs from the role of a committee; rather than ensuring that a student has met requirements for graduation in one’s program, the editorial board and reviewers serve as gatekeepers for research disseminated to the public (Hawkins, Kimball, & Ives, 2013). Third, journal reviewers provide feedback after the research project is complete, rather than while the project is being conducted. Their feedback is often based on the rationale provided in the introduction, the methods, the statistical analyses, or how findings are interpreted. Reviewers may identify “fatal flaws” in the research that cannot be fixed or addressed without executing the research project a second time (Domenech Rodriguez, 2012; Evans et al., 2018). When this is the case, the likelihood of publication is decreased because findings may be resting on shaky scientific foundations.

It is also essential for student authors to recognize that the document submitted to an empirical journal will be substantially different from the thesis or dissertation document (APA, 2010b; Tribe & Tunariu, 2017). Journal articles are typically much more concise than theses or dissertations due to page restrictions of submitted manuscripts; page limits of 25 or 35 pages are common for empirical journal articles. Authors are thus required to focus only on the essential literature, research question(s), and findings. In addition to making the document more concise, authors have the additional challenge of updating the literature review and discussion section to include articles that have been published since completion of the project. Of note, journals may not only have page limitations, but many have restrictive word counts or a maximum number of tables and figures. Be sure to pay attention to each journal’s requirements. Do not assume that they are all the same.

The Review Process Itself: Timelines and Decisions

Due to the nature of the peer-review process, it is important for students to be aware of typical timelines for reviews and what to expect following a submission. Timelines are specific to each journal, and some journals provide time estimates on their website detailing the review process. For example, it takes approximately six to eight weeks for Psi Chi Journal’s editorial board to thoroughly review and arrive at a consensus for each manuscript. Some decisions may come sooner or later, depending on the time of the year, the number of incoming publications, availability of reviewers, or the journal.

Although it can be difficult for students to anxiously await a decision during this period, the editorial board always appreciates patience from those who submitted manuscripts for consideration. At times, manuscripts may take longer. It may depend on the journal, but it is generally appropriate for authors to contact the editorial board after three to four months with no news. Students are encouraged to consult with faculty regarding this decision. Typically, a simple and polite e-mail asking for an update on the review process is all that is needed.

Following the initial review, the editorial board will send an e-mail to the author stating the decision. The decision may be any of the following: Reject, Revise and Resubmit, Conditional
Acceptance, or Acceptance. Some journals publicize their acceptance and rejection rates to help inform potential authors. The more competitive or highly ranked the journal, the more selective they must be due to increasing numbers of submissions. In Psi Chi Journal, approximately 30% of submitted manuscripts are eventually accepted.

**Rejection**

A rejection can arise after an initial review by the editor, which typically occurs within a week after the author(s) submits the manuscript. This decision, referred to as a “desk rejection,” can occur if the editor identifies serious methodological flaws or concludes that the manuscript is not the best fit for the journal (APA, 2010b). When this occurs, authors will typically receive feedback directly from the editor that provides context for their decision. A rejection can also occur at any point during the peer-review process if the assigned reviewers identify serious flaws or question the manuscript’s intellectual contribution to the field. In this case, the editorial board will send a decision letter to the author(s) that includes feedback from the associate editor and two to four reviewers.

Rejections are common, so students are encouraged not to take the decision personally and to meet with a faculty member to go through the editorial board’s feedback. From there, discuss whether your team is supportive of the suggested changes and whether your team has the desire to submit the research to another journal. The references section may be a good starting point for potential journals to target next. Often, manuscripts are submitted to multiple journals before reaching acceptance (Shaikh, 2016). Do not become disheartened!

**Revise and Resubmit**

If the editorial board identifies some concerns regarding the manuscript that could be addressed through revisions, the editor may make a “Revise and Resubmit” decision. In this case, the editor will outline the concerns in the decision letter and invite the author(s) to submit a revised version of the manuscript. Typically, the editor will request to receive the revision within 30 to 60 days from the date that the initial decision letter is delivered. This decision means the editorial team is interested in the research, and is willing to work with the author(s) to make the manuscript suitable for publication.

Following a decision of Revise and Resubmit, the first author of the manuscript should share the decision letter from the editor with each coauthor, then schedule a time to discuss the feedback. At this meeting, the coauthors should talk with one another about the concerns noted, the suggested changes, and whether the revisions are feasible. If the team decides to make the changes, they can move forward with the revision process in accordance to the timeline provided. If an extension is needed, it is best to contact the editor as soon as possible and to request a specific date. If the team decides not to make the changes or to submit the manuscript to a different journal, it is best to contact the editor via e-mail. In this e-mail, the corresponding author can thank the board for their consideration and constructive feedback, and state the decision to withdraw the manuscript from further consideration.

Authors who receive a decision of revise and resubmit can increase likelihood of acceptance by addressing all comments from each reviewer in a detailed and professional letter to the reviewers (APA, 2010b). One effective approach is to copy and paste all reviewer comments into a new document and number each critique or point made by the reviewers. The research team can then respond to each comment in numerical order. Authors can display additional diligence by including quotations and page numbers that point reviewers to changes. Saying “thank you” for positive and/or constructive feedback is also a form of good etiquette. It is permissible to disagree with reviewer suggestions and to refrain from making some of the changes. When this is the case, provide a response that politely articulates the decision. Citations that support the decision to refrain from changes are helpful. Editors and associate editors may also appreciate a cover letter on letterhead that summarizes the changes and thanks them for the thoughtful and constructive feedback. Keep in mind that manuscripts may be rejected if authors do not address all the comments from the reviewers adequately, even if they initially received a revise and resubmit. Authors cannot pick and choose what they would like to address.

Responses to reviewers that seem defensive, patronizing, or dismissive may affect the opinion of the reviewers, so approach these revisions in a conscientious manner. Reviewers often spend several hours on each manuscript review. Thus, gratitude and clear integration of feedback is appreciated. When the revision is submitted, the manuscript is typically returned to the initial reviewers for...
another round of reviews. In addition to receiving the revised manuscript, all reviewers will see the author’s response to their feedback, which reinforces the need for a collegial approach. This round often takes an additional two to three months, and presents another opportunity to practice patience!

Acceptance

Authors are most likely to see decisions of Conditional Accept or Accept after a full round of revisions and a second or third peer-review cycle (APA, 2010b). In other words, it is very rare to receive this decision prior to receiving a Revise and Resubmit decision. Nearly all scientific research has room for improvements, particularly when reviewed by a panel of scholars with expertise in a topic. Due to the number of rounds and revisions, the timeframe from submission to publication for one journal article submitted to one journal can take several months to a year. Of course, the time to publication increases for each journal that considers (and subsequently rejects) a manuscript. For this reason, persistence is key.

After acceptance, the manuscript will be sent to copyeditors for production. Authors will typically receive a proof of the article prior to publication; this is not the time to rework an entire section of a manuscript, but rather, to address minor typos or errors and to check all numbers for accuracy. Once the manuscript has been accepted, students may list the publication on their résumé or CV as “in press.” Celebration is also encouraged!

Ethics

Prior Publication

There are a few ethical factors specific to publishing thesis and dissertation research to which students need to attend. Typically, Electronic Theses and Dissertations (ETDs) are published via ProQuest or a digital commons database, and are thus already considered scholarly (nonpeer-reviewed) publications (Barbour, Irfan, Poff, & Wise, 2017; Hawkins et al., 2013; Ramirez et al., 2014). ETDs present important considerations pertaining to publication ethics—specifically duplicate or prior publication—so it is important for students to be aware of potential concerns that may arise.

Although most journals now have clear policies regarding ETDs, nearly 50% of journals in the social sciences and humanities have some restrictions on what they will publish (Ramirez et al., 2014). When this is the case, editors will consider ETD submissions on a case-by-case basis, expect substantially different content from the original ETD, and/or limit access of the ETD to the university community. Some journal editors may ask that the student removes the ETD from the digital commons. Others may request substantial revisions to minimize similarities in language between the two documents. It is the responsibility of the first author to check with the journal to see if they consider ETDs for publication. Of note, the Psi Chi Journal does not permit any manuscript to be published on any other website or journal, including limited or open-access ETDs.

If the journal is open to publishing thesis or dissertation work, the first author should refer to APA’s Ethical Guidelines (APA, 2002), the Journal Article Reporting Standards (Cooper, 2011), and the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) best practices (Barbour et al., 2017). First, the author should note in the cover letter that the submitted manuscript reflects previous academic work (APA, 2002; Barbour et al., 2017; Cooper, 2011). An author note should summarize previous circumstances in which findings were disseminated to the public including research conferences, presentations, theses, or dissertations (Cooper, 2011). The citation to the ETD should also be included in the cover letter and the manuscript. Note that this citation should be de-identified in the manuscript to allow for masked review.

Duplicate and Piecemeal Publication

Knowing that manuscripts need to be cut in length to be suitable for publication, some students may be advised to split the thesis or dissertation into multiple projects. If this path is chosen, one should be cognizant of APA’s (2010a) guidelines pertaining to duplicate and piecemeal publication of data. Duplicate publication refers to publishing the same data or findings in multiple places; piecemeal publication refers to the separation of data files to falsely reflect separate research efforts.

According to the APA (2002) Ethical Standards, “Psychologists do not publish, as original data, data that have been previously published. This does not preclude republishing data when they are accompanied by proper acknowledgment” (p. 12). In the case of a thesis or dissertation, it is not ethical to publish the same data or findings in the form of multiple manuscripts, leading to the impression that findings are more prevalent than they actually are. It is also considered unethical to “submit manuscripts that have been published elsewhere in substantially similar form or with substantially
similar content” (APA, 2010a, p. 13). It is, however, permissible to publish data in one empirical journal article if the author discloses that findings have been presented to the public in the form of a thesis, dissertation, and/or conference presentation. It is also permissible to revise the form and content of previously published dissertations for consideration in peer-reviewed journals.

Students may also be advised to split the project into more than one manuscript, which leads to a discussion of piecemeal publication. The APA (2010a) advises authors “to present work parsimoniously and as completely as possible within the space constraints of journal publications” (p. 14). They also note that piecemeal publication “is a matter of editorial judgment” (p. 14). Given the complexity of theses and dissertations, it may not be feasible for students to present all findings in a parsimonious manner without separating them into more than one project.

If this is the case, it is important for student authors to have a discussion with their faculty advisors regarding the decision. Authors will want to make sure each manuscript includes previously unpublished data and tells a meaningful and relevant story (Tribe & Tunariu, 2017). It is then the responsibility of the authors to disclose in the cover letter and the manuscript that the data were collected as a part of a larger investigation. Authors should be transparent in the Method section by citing the corresponding studies as appropriate. The same variables from the same dataset should not be used in more than one project because such practices can dilute the literature while falsely inflating the perceived presence of phenomena (APA, 2010a). However, it may be appropriate for authors to separate a project based on groups of variables or types of data. For example, a mixed-methods study may result in one manuscript that summarizes the qualitative data and another manuscript that presents the quantitative findings (Tribe & Tunariu, 2017).

Authorship

It is never too soon for a student to discuss authorship expectations with committee members—particularly the chair of the committee. According to APA’s Ethical Standards (2010a), authorship is warranted when team members make a substantial “scientific or professional” contribution to a manuscript (p. 12). Team members who were involved peripherally (e.g., data entry, editing) may be given acknowledgements in an author note. The APA Ethical Standards also state that students should be listed as the first author on manuscripts that stem from a dissertation. Masters theses and senior honors projects are dependent on the level of student involvement and the role of the faculty advisor.

Aside from the APA guidelines, some teams may appreciate a structured points system described by Winston (1985) when determining authorship order. Regardless of how it is decided, authorship is best navigated with consistent and transparent communication regarding expectations, contributions, and one’s role on a team (Fine & Kurdek, 1993). It can take several months (or years!) to prepare a manuscript for publication. Students who are graduating and leaving their institution should also work with coauthors to create a plan for continued communication throughout the article review and revision process. Roles and contributions within the research team can change within this time frame, so research teams should enter the authorship conversation with the understanding that they may need to revisit authorship as roles change.

Final Reminders

Although the quality of the research is important when submitting articles for publication, it is essential for authors to demonstrate attention to detail, patience, and collegiality during the review and revision process. Before formally submitting a manuscript for consideration, authors should ask a colleague to read through it as a reviewer would, and to provide the team with critical feedback. Teams should also ask colleagues to comb through the manuscript to attend to APA format, APA style writing, and grammar. Minor grammatical errors and APA style mistakes can detract from content, and reviewers may wonder what other important details may have been missed in the research project itself.

It can take several months to prepare an article for submission, so authors should do one final check to make sure the literature is up-to-date. The reviewers have expertise in the field and will expect authors to include recently published articles in the area of interest. After performing the final literature search, authors should make sure all in-text citations and references match within the manuscript. Through the manuscript preparation process, it is common for authors to remove redundant references (often to save space), while adding newly published research. Finally, remember to redact information as appropriate to allow for a
masked review. A fully redacted document means author names are included on a separate title page, are removed from in-text citations, and the name of the institution is removed when referring to Institutional Review Board approval. Failure to appropriately redact a manuscript threatens the integrity of the masked peer-review process.

**Conclusion**

Prior to making the commitment to submit work for consideration in a peer-reviewed journal, it is important for students to understand timelines, expectations, and potential outcomes. Students should also understand the benefits of publication, particularly those who plan to attend graduate school or pursue careers in research or higher education. While waiting on decisions from the editorial board, students can note that they have a manuscript under review in their job or graduate school applications. Although the publication process may take as long as it takes to complete a capstone project (or longer!), it is well worth it. The benefits of publication are long-lasting, and authors will likely walk away with a new understanding and appreciation of empirical research in psychology.

**References**


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