Getting your paper published: An editor’s perspective

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I will make the entire lecture available to SEAP-IAP
Explaining the publication process in 10 easy lessons

Image from Nature 2010;468: 29-31
Lesson one

Develop your skills by reading
Lesson two

Have something to say
Have something to say . . .

- The majority of papers are not cited
- Most are probably not read!

- Only when you have a clear message should you think about the publication process

- Your message should be clear
- It should be a **significant** addition to the field
How do you know if something is a significant contribution to a field?

- See Lesson 1
- Read and know the relevant literature
- Know the background
- Know the issues and controversies
- Understand the field
- Understand the methods used, advantages & disadvantages, values and limitations
Lesson three
Understand the structure of a scientific article
Austin Bradford Hill

Why did you start?
Introduction
What did you do?
Materials and Methods
What answer did you get?
Results
What does it mean?
Discussion
The Introduction

• Sets the scene
• *Concisely* gives the background to the problem
  – Should not be too long
  – Should be in proportion to the rest of the document
• Often useful to end it with a statement of the hypothesis to be tested
• Avoid rehashing all the results and discussion
Materials and methods

• Should contain enough information for the reader to understand what was done

• Extraneous detail can be placed in Online Supplementary information

• Placing the entire M&M section in the Online Supplementary section is unwise!
Results

• Clear statement of the core findings in a logical sequence
• Should not contain interpretation or inference
• Display items should not replicate information in the text
• Emphasise important controls
• Some results may be placed in online Supporting Information: *but they should not be core to the arguments* . . .
Discussion

• The data should be placed in the broad context of the relevant prior publications
• Stay focused!

• Do not speculate beyond the data
• A balanced paper will consider the field in the round
• “Why might we be wrong” is an important element of a paper
Lesson four

Understand the simple rules of writing
Keep it simple . . .

• Never use a long word if a short one will do
• If it is possible to cut a word out, then cut it out
• Keep sentence constructions simple
• Avoid one sentence paragraphs
• Use simple punctuation
• Worry about spelling and grammar!
• Get other people to read the manuscript
Two useful tests

• The ‘Tell it to a friend’ test

• The ‘Read it out loud’ test
A good paper is like a good novel

• Immediately captures your interest
• It tells a story
• The story is told with enthusiasm and excitement
• It doesn’t contain unnecessary information that detracts from the story line
• Each sentence reads easily and flows smoothly into the next
Writing with a reviewer’s perspective

• This is not about you – it’s about them;
  – write for them, not for you

• Be respectful of the reviewers time
  – never make them work harder than necessary

• If they have to work too hard to find the message, it will be missed every time

• Use a writing style that makes it easy to understand and minimizes ambiguity
A good paper is easy to read, but is very difficult to write . . .

Writing Law one:

*The Law of Conservation of Effort*

– A fixed amount of effort is required to adequately write and review a paper.
– The less the author puts in, the more the reviewer has to put in.

Writing law two (a corollary of law one)

*Law of Diminishing Returns*

– “The harder I have to work at reviewing your paper, the less I will like it”
Some thoughts on concise writing

“Brevity in writing is the best insurance for its perusal”
   – Rudolf Virchow

“I didn’t have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead”
   – Samuel Langhorn Clemens (Mark Twain)
   – However others have also claimed this line!
Lesson five

How to decide where to send your paper
Journal rankings

• Impact factor
  – ISI Thompson Scientific
    • Eugene Garfield
  – A measure of how many times papers are cited by other authors

• Other bibliometric measures
  – Eigen factor
  – Article influence scores
  – Connection values
Other problems

• Some work is influential and important but not cited
• Some fields are small . . . Work can be important but not cited by many
• Some fields are large so can have lots of cites even if not that important

• Games are played!
How to choose where to publish?

• As ‘good’ a journal as possible
  – The top quartile of a subject grouping

• Higher the journal ranking the harder it will be
  – Multiple rejections . .
  – Papers slide down the list . . .
  – Reviewers comments might be helpful - but time lost

• Not just IF
  – other quality issues, cost & access issues

• Think of your target audience
How to choose where to publish?

- Look at the journals!
- Do they publish the kind of paper you are writing?
- Do they ‘like’ the general topic and area?
- What do they say in their Instructions to authors about this issue?
- How fast (or slow) are they?
- Be realistic . . . .
Lesson six

The instructions to authors and the need to worry about detail
Instructions to authors

READ & FOLLOW THEM
Instructions to authors

GET THE DETAILS RIGHT
Instructions to authors

• Failure to attend to detail in the context of the Instructions to authors has consequences . . .

• Delay . . .
• Irritation . . . *for all involved* . . .
Instructions to authors

• Failure to attend to detail in the context of the Instructions to authors has consequences . . .

• Delay . . .

• Irritation . . . for all involved . . .

• It sends a message!
  – “if you fail to attend to detail in this, is there failure of attention to detail in your research?”
Lesson seven

Understanding the steps after manuscript submission
The Steps in the Process

• Submission
• Editorial consideration
• Peer Review
• Editorial Decision
• Resubmission
• Peer Review
• Editorial Decision

• Acceptance . . . .
The Steps in the Process

- Acceptance . . . .
  . . . a lot still has to happen . . .
- Editing
- Copy editing
- Type setting
- Proofs
- Publication
Editorial response to corresponding author

• Immediate acceptance is vanishingly rare

• The email letter usually says either
  – Your paper may be acceptable if you revise it, or
  – Your paper is unacceptable but it may be accepted if you re-submit after revision
  – Your paper is not acceptable

• If asked to revise, there might be a time limit on resubmission

• If you resubmit, the paper will probably be sent for review again. You may be asked to carry out further revision
When you re-submit

• Include a covering letter indicating how you have responded to each point raised by the editor and reviewers
  – repeat in your letter each of the reviewers’ comments in italics and follow each with your own response.

• Any changes you have incorporated into the revised manuscript should be highlighted by using a typeface other than black or use *track changes*
When you re-submit

Even if you judge the reviewer to be incompetent or not to have understood your paper, use temperate language!

• Do not ever get angry!!
Lesson eight

Understand what editors like
What are Journal Editors looking for?

– Novel or original findings

– Credibility

– Clarity of data and conclusions

– Interesting to the international community

– Brevity
Editors like…

– Good ‘fit’ with the Journal scope
– Clear research questions
– Messages that matter
– Brevity and clarity in writing
– Good abstract
– Good grammar and spelling
– Clear presentation of methods and results
Lesson nine

Be aware of what editors do not like!
Editors don’t like…

– Poor fit with scope
– Unoriginal research
– Very long papers
– Incorrect or flawed research methods
– Unrepresentative samples
– Non-randomised interventions
– Poor controls
– Poor images
– Poor presentation
Lesson ten

Do understand the review process and do not give up
How do Journals make decisions?

– Fit with the scope of the Journal
– Originality
– Importance
– Substantial contribution to the field
– Methods correct
– Ethically sound
– Interesting to readers

– There is huge competition . . . .
– Many good papers get rejected
Peer review: flawed . . . but the best we have

• What is the principle role of an Editor?
  – Ensuring the quality of the published record

• Much debate about Peer Review . . .
  – The available evidence says ‘it works reasonably well’

• It is designed to improve papers . . . .
Engage with reviewers’ comments constructively

• Don’t whinge!
• Use the comments to improve your paper.

• Not all suggestions have to be taken on board, but you should think about and respond to all the points that are brought up:
  • seek clarification if unsure
• If you think a reviewer is being particularly unfair, take it up with the editor (carefully!).
Key points - 1

• Have something to say
• Chose carefully where to say it
• Say it well
• Read the ‘Instructions to authors’
• Follow the ‘Instructions to authors’
• Respond to reviewers comments positively and politely
• Do not give up - but be realistic
Key points - 2

• Know the literature
• Read the literature
• Be guided by the literature
• Understand the process
• Learn to write . . . .
• How?
  – By reading and writing
Summary: The ten lessons

Lesson 1. Develop your skills by reading
Lesson 2. Have something to say
Lesson 3. Know the structure of a scientific article
Lesson 4. Understand the simple rules of writing
Lesson 5. Where to send your paper
Lesson 6. Instructions to authors & the need to worry about detail
Lesson 7. Steps after manuscript submission
Lesson 8. Know what editors like
Lesson 9. Know what editors do not like!
Lesson 10: Do understand the peer review process & do not give up
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Open access

see also

What does an Editor look for? Dr Ed Gale, Diabetologia
http://www.diabetologia-journal.org/eicadvice.html

Please come to the Writing Workshop at ESP 2013 Lisbon
@ 14-15 on Monday 2nd September