

■ Guest Editorial

Submitting a paper to an academic peer-reviewed journal, where to start?

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Background

Writing your first paper for a peer-reviewed journal can be scary. You are putting your research, its findings and interpretations out to a wider and knowledgeable audience who may criticise any aspect of it. However, once you have made the mental step that you really want your work to be out in the open, and you are about to draft your paper, then you need to decide to which journal you like to submit.

This short paper raises some of the issues novice authors would need to consider. We also outline the process of submitting a paper to an academic journal based on the collective experiences of the three authors. All of us have all published widely, acted as reviewers or referees for many different academic journals and are members of editorial boards.

Selecting your journal

There are tens of thousands of academic journals worldwide so one of the first questions of a budding author is: "Which one do I target?" This decision might be influenced by various factors, such as: (a) the language in which the journal is published; (b) its readership, (c) the word limit; (d) whether the journal is paper-based, electronic or both; (e) its academic status and/or the journal's so-called impact factor; (f) the likelihood of your paper being accepted, or (g) submission fees. The word limit in many journals is challenging, particularly for qualitative research because

qualitative data is usually presented in the form of quotations, which can take up much of the maximum word allowance.³ Impact factors refer to the rate with which articles in a journal are being cited in a given period of time. A list of the journals with the highest impact factors in selected academic fields is available on the web.¹ Having a high impact factor means high status, which in turn often means that the journal has a high rejection rate. For example, the *British Medical Journal* stated in November 2011 that its rejection rate for articles is 93%!

Some journals ask the authors to pay a fee on submission, e.g. *BMC Pregnancy & Childbirth* charges currently \$1800 per article.² The good news is that journal offers discounts "to authors who lack funds. To apply for a waiver or discount, please request one during the submission process." Hence authors from poorer countries such as Nepal can apply for a discount or even a complete waiver of the submission charges.

Author instructions

Once you have decided which journal you would like to submit to, read the 'instructions for authors'. These are often listed in the journal and/or on the journal's web pages. These instructions tell you important details of the journal, such as the kind of papers that are included, the maximum length of a paper (either in pages or in number of words), the maximum number of graphs and tables, the reference style, the expected sub-headings in the paper and so on. These instructions are there to help you write an appropriate paper in the correct style and lay-out. Thus *Health Renaissance* clearly wants articles written in Oxford English, i.e.

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without American spelling.⁴ If you ignore these instructions you will not get passed the editor or even the editorial assistant. Your paper will be sent back to you straightaway with the request to resubmit a version which fits within the journal criteria. Common mistakes made by novice authors include submitting: (a) papers which are too long or (b) papers outwith the remit of the journal.

When you submit a paper you should include a short (one-page) cover letter telling the editor why your paper is appropriate for the journal. The letter should include statement that this paper is not currently under review elsewhere, and do not forget to sign the cover letter. If the paper is authored by more than one person, make sure you get everybody's signature on this letter or state clearly that you are signing on behalf off all co-authors.

Ethics

Your paper should clearly state which organisation has provided ethic approval for your research, if it is conducted on animals or people. For example, did you obtain permission from the Nepal Health Research Council, or the ethics committee of the hospital in which you work, the university ethics committee where you study?

Peer review

It is worth knowing a bit about the way editors operate. Journal editors will have a quick look at the title and perhaps the Abstract of your submission and on the basis of this decide whether or not to send out the paper for review. The reviewers are usually academics and researchers working in the field of your paper. Some journals ask you to list potential reviewers for your article, this should not be your friends, colleagues, your head of department or someone you have worked or published with in the past few years.

Reviewers will read the paper and assess its contribution to knowledge, the appropriateness of the research, the ethical considerations around the study, the quality of the research methods used and the relationship between your Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations and your actual Findings/Results. Some journals provide reviewers

with guidelines to help assess submissions, e.g. Table 1.

Table 1 Guidelines to reviewers of *Journal of Advanced Nursing (JAN)* ⁵

What we expect in general from reviewers

- We look to you for *expert* advice on the suitability of a paper for publication in *JAN*, including its relationship to the Aims & Scope, its importance and interest, and the acceptability of its scholarship;
- If there are parts of a paper that you do not feel competent to comment on, please tell us;
- Be timely. If you are unable to review a paper please let us know immediately, preferably by E-mail. If possible, tell us about a colleague with similar expertise to carry out the review;
- Be aware of *JAN*'s international audience in over 80 countries;
- Maintain confidentiality;
- Be constructive in your review. Type your specific comments to the author in addition to filling out the reviewer's form;
- Be honest and courteous. Reviewers sometimes disagree. In the final analysis the editors will weigh carefully *all* of the reviewers' comments and make a final decision. The main aim of peer review is to improve the standards of what we publish.

Subject reviewers are asked to comment on: clarity, originality, relevance/accessibility, and the evidence base. Questions are asked on the standard of reporting if papers are based on empirical research. Any potential copyright issues are raised. The reviewer is then asked to give an overall assessment of the paper under consideration.

Statistical reviewers are asked to comment on: study design, conduct of the study, analysis and presentation, and then provide an overall statistical assessment of the paper

The comments received from two or more reviewers will help the editor to decide on the faith of your paper. Table 2 lists the four possible verdicts of a reviewed paper. Starting with the most negative decision, if you are rejected this is not necessarily because your paper is poor. Some times papers are rejected because the topic does not fit the scope of the journal. For example, your paper might be too detailed on a specific disease or specific intervention for a general medical journal such as the *British Medical Journal* or the *Health Renaissance*. Sometimes a paper is too general

for a specialist medical journal such as, for example, *Birth* or *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*. Perhaps the journal has just published four papers on your topic or from your country and the editors want some variation. If your paper is not too bad, the editor may suggest in the rejection letter a more appropriate journal for you to target.

Option 1 is very unlikely as very few articles are accepted on first submission. For example, the first author has over 140 peer-reviewed publications and only two out of these were accepted upon submission, the rest had to be changed, some needed expanding, others shortening, or refocusing. In reality most published papers have been through one or two more rounds of rewriting and polishing up. So if you are asked to add some further interpretation, or explain the sample better or refer to a few more key papers you're lucky. Thus an invitation from the editor to resubmit your paper is a good thing; it is not a rejection!

Table 2 Possible editorial decisions

1. Your paper is accepted straightaway without any changes;
2. Your paper is conditionally accepted with the condition that you make certain minor changes;
3. You are invited to resubmit your paper with the condition that you make certain major changes;
4. Your paper is rejected.

Revising your paper

Once you have recovered from the shock, consider

whether or not you can make most of the suggested changes. If not, consider whether to approach in the article need to change or whether submitting to a different journal would be better. If you decide to stick to your original journal and aim to rewrite and resubmit your paper, make sure you follow the editor's guidance or advice which comes with the reviewers' reports. Sometimes the editor indicates which of the various reviewers has made comments which are more pertinent and need to be addressed, whilst other comments from another reviewer might be deemed less important by the editor. Sometimes comments made by different reviewers can be contradicting each other. E.g. one reviewer asked for more details on the individual findings you presented AND another suggests more focus on the findings overall. In this case you might not be able to deal with all the reviewers' comments. Under these circumstance do what you think is the most sensible way of improving your paper. Then, very importantly, inform the editor why you chose one particular option in your cover letter (see below).

Resubmission cover letter

Write a detailed cover letter to the editor, outlining what you have changed in the light of the reviewers' comments. If there were comments you could not deal with, for example, because it would change the scope of the paper or the limited sample size, etc. tell the editor this. In other words try not to hide the things you were asked to change but did not! Table 3 gives an example of a clearly laid-out cover letter to the editor outlining which changes have been made in reply to which author.

Table 3 Example of cover letter to accompany resubmission of paper

Kathmandu, 12th November 2011

Dear editor,
 'Title of your paper'

Thank you very much for encouraging us to improve and resubmit our paper. In reply to the four points Reviewer 1 raised, we have made the following improvements:

1. More reflection on publicly and privately provided services

Authors' reply: We have added a comment on 'the private sector' and 'health policy makers in publicly funded services' to the paragraph starting with "Our analysis has focused .." on page 15.

(Contd.)

2. Explanation of the concept of risk

Authors' reply: We added an explanation on the concept of risk in the paragraph starting with "Clearly, the move towards fewer..." on page 9.

3. Some reflections on policy implications

Authors' reply: We have added a short section on policy on page 15. However, we like to point out that Reviewer 2 suggested to us that there was too much mention on policy-making in our paper already.

Etc. etc.

Yours sincerely

(your name) signing on behalf of my co-authors.

On publication

When you have jumped through all the hoops and your article is accepted for publication and you have told your colleagues, family and friends, remember to put the details of the publication on your C.V. and/or web pages. In the months following your publication read the letters to the editor section in the journal to check whether someone has commented on your paper. If there is letter commenting, criticising or praising on your paper, consider whether you want to reply to this letter. If you decide to do so write a short and to-the-point letter to the editor. Finally, this is the time to start drafting a new paper, book chapter, etc.!

Conclusion

We often say: "I wish someone had told me this before." This paper hopefully supports inexperienced academic writers in the process of submitting their papers. We like to reiterate the importance of writing for peer-reviewed journals, as this helps: (a) to build the body of scientific evidence in your field; (b) to disseminate your ideas

or research findings to academics, practitioners, policy-makers the wider society; and (c) you to make career progress.

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5. Web address: www.journalofadvancednursing.com/default.asp?file=reviewers (accessed December 2010).