

How to Get Your Article Published

Twenty Tips from Two Editors

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Academic librarians are expected to contribute to the profession through scholarship, service, and creativity. Many are specifically encouraged to publish, but they frequently are unsure where to begin. In this column, two editors with decades of experience at the editor's desk offer guidance to help librarians and other information professionals get their work published. Good management of both time and the scarce resources for library research requires that the hard work of writing an article not be wasted. A few simple steps will help aspiring authors create a finished product that will be accepted for publication in a leading journal and thus enable them to share new knowledge with others in the profession.

Here are some tips on what editors want. Many of these hints may seem like common sense, but authors often neglect them. Following these suggestions might help you get your article published in a top-ranked journal.

1. Write about what you know. Both novice and seasoned writers often anguish over what to write about, struggling to come up with just the right topic, but the best ideas are usually in plain view. Trust your instincts and write about something you have experienced or observed, and at a level with which you are comfortable. It isn't necessary that every article be hard research; there are places for essays, features, and thought pieces. These are especially good options for new writers or anyone having trouble getting started.

2. Write the article in a simple, readable style. Use mostly short, declarative sentences in the active voice. Make sure to vary your sentence structure and to write in complete sentences.

Many scholars love to write in the passive voice, but try to keep your use of the passive to a minimum. The active voice is livelier, clearer, and more interesting. The active voice also forces you to be explicit about who did the action you describe—that is, who deserves the credit or the scrutiny. Was it, for example, the library, teaching faculty, or the administration?

3. "Omit needless words." This timeless advice from William Strunk cannot be overstated. In his classic work, *The Elements of Style*, he goes on to say:

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.¹

Nough said.

4. Keep yourself out of your article. It might seem stilted, but call yourselves *the authors or the researchers* instead of *we*. Many referees and editors think the first person is inappropriate for scholarly writing. By the same token, make sure to present your information in an open-minded and objective manner. Avoid editorializing.

5. Do not use the literature review merely to show how many articles you have read. Use it to support your work and to show where your investigation adds to or diverges from past research. If many other authors have explored the topic, try to explain how your work brings a new or provocative approach. Nancy Rivenburgh, professor of communication at the University of Washington in Seattle, explains the importance of this section in a research paper:

A literature review places your study within a larger body of work. It shows how your study seeks to fill a gap in, or extend, our knowledge in this area. A literature review offers a benchmark for assessing your own results. In the conclusion to your study you will revisit the literature review armed with your new findings.²

Include the most current writings possible in your literature review. Do not overlook articles published within the last year or two. Referees notice and are often critical of literature reviews that cite only older articles.

6. Try to come up with a brief, catchy title. If the title does not provide a good description of your article's content, add a short subtitle. Use the title and the abstract as hooks to pull in referees, editors, and readers.

7. Work hard on the abstract. This short section—often the last thing you do when writing an article—will get far more views than the article itself. The abstract is perhaps the second most important section, after the title. It should briefly introduce the topic, state the problem the article tries to address, summarize your main findings, and speculate on the possible benefits and usefulness of your study. Be sure to use any keywords that will support effective indexing and help later researchers find the full text of your article.

8. Put your best writing into the discussion and conclusion. These final sections should make the case for why your article is worth publishing—and reading. The conclusion, especially, should discuss what is new in the article and what new knowledge it contributes to the profession. Many writers fail to explain why what they did or discovered is important.

9. If appropriate, include charts, graphs, tables, and images to support the text and summarize your findings. Do not worry if they duplicate information already given in the text. Some readers skim articles and look mainly at the charts and graphs, and other readers are visual learners who grasp facts better when they are presented in graphic form. That said, avoid overdoing these or including them just for the sake of doing so.

10. Never be satisfied with a first draft. It may be tempting to submit an article the instant you finish writing, but do

not do it! Once you have finished writing, revise your work, revise it again, and then revise it some more.

11. Take a careful look at your own article. See if you can spot what is confusing, what needs development or expansion, and what can be eliminated. Check for mistakes and for passages that fail to ring true. Then double-check your facts. The City News Bureau of Chicago—the news agency that trained Ben Hecht, Mike Royko, and Kurt Vonnegut—had a famous motto: “If your mother says she loves you, check it out.”³

12. Set your article aside and do not look at it for a few days. Give yourself distance from your writing before you read it again. Then look at it pretending you have never seen it before. You need to consider your article with fresh eyes because that is how editors and readers will see it.

13. Read the article aloud to yourself. Reading aloud is the only way to notice word repetitions and passages that sound clunky, and to ensure that the rhythms of sentences work well.

14. Make sure the spelling and grammar are as perfect as possible. Use your software's spell check and scrutinize the spelling with your own eyes. Remember that spell checking does not catch everything; it will not help you with homophones such as *their*, *they're*, and *there* or *its* and *it's*, nor often with words left out of sentences.

Pay close attention to your grammar. Do your subjects and verbs agree? Editors and referees can be harsh. Many of them think an article with misspellings, typos, and grammatical errors has little merit, no matter how brilliant the actual content may be.

15. Enlist one or more colleagues to review your article before you give it to anyone in the publishing business. No one can be his or her own proofreader. *You* know what you intend to say, so you may fail to notice sentences that are unclear to others. You will almost certainly miss some typos. You will not see those flaws for yourself because your brain supplies what should be there instead of seeing what is really on the page.

Choose your readers wisely. Do not ask people who only give you admiring reviews; get people to read your article who will not hesitate to offer constructive criticism. Do not ask your mother, your spouse, or, as Canadian writer Margaret Atwood says, “someone with whom you have a romantic relationship, unless you want to break up.”⁴

16. Read the submission guidelines for each journal thoroughly and follow them scrupulously. Did we mention that you need to read those guidelines *thoroughly*? Each journal's website has specific guidelines for formatting, word count, subject matter, and citations—and the editors will expect you to adhere to them. Follow the guidelines to the letter. If your article does not comply with the instructions, editors and referees may have concerns about the article before they even read it.

17. Send your article to the right journal. This should be obvious, but many authors submit articles to publications that are not the right fit. That is perhaps the most common

reason for which editors reject a submission. Each journal's website sets out its editorial philosophy, aims, intended audience, and scope. Look through some recent issues to see if it publishes articles on similar topics that are of similar quality and impact. It is a bad sign if you do not recognize the names of any members of the editorial board or recent authors.

18. When you get your article back from peer review, do not be offended by the referees' comments. Feedback can be painful but try to steel yourself. Develop a thick skin for criticism and do not take it personally. Even the best writing can always be improved.

Do not respond to reviewer feedback as soon as you get it. Read it, think about it for several days, discuss it with others, and then calmly draft a response.

19. It is acceptable to challenge a referee if you have a good justification, or if you can politely explain why the reviewer is wrong. Editors will accept a rational explanation, especially if it is clear you have considered the feedback and accepted some of it.

It is often better to fix an identified problem in your own way rather than in the exact way suggested by the referee. When making revisions, you need to understand the point of the suggested changes and make them your own for them to work in your manuscript. The British author Neil Gaiman says:

Remember: when people tell you something's wrong or doesn't work for them, they are almost always right. When they tell you exactly what they think is wrong and how to fix it, they are almost always wrong.⁵

20. Be prepared to revise and resubmit. You would be surprised how many authors who receive the standard

"revise and resubmit" letter never actually do so. No matter how tired of your article you may have grown by this time, do not give up at the prospect of working on it some more. Do not let your efforts go to waste after you have successfully run the gauntlet of peer review and the editorial pen. Incorporating the guidance from referees almost always makes a strong article even stronger. Resubmit the very best version of your article that you can. The editor will notice, and your investment will pay dividends.

Researching, writing, and preparing a manuscript for publication is hard work that can be tedious and time consuming. But seeing the final product in print makes it all worthwhile. Following these twenty tips will not only get you started but also will take you to the finish line—then help you feel ready to embark on the process again, on your next writing project.

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