Empowering yourself to publish in international refereed journals: A journey of perseverance

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Views expressed are that of the author only.

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You are attending this seminar because...

✓ You are passionate about **life-long learning**
✓ You appreciate the *world of discovery* that opens up in front of you the moment you conceive a paper
✓ You enjoy **detective work**
✓ You enjoy **networking and collaborating** with others
✓ You realise publishing is increasingly **competitive and challenging**
✓ Being identified as an author **excites** you
✓ Publishing is part of your **job description**
✓ Other motivations?
Overview of the seminar

- **Conceiving a publishable paper and writing it**
  - Identifying the research question/problem and motivation
  - Drafting a blueprint for your paper
  - Ascertaining feasibility
  - Writing it

- **Publishing your paper**
  - Submitting and handling correspondence
  - What do you do if the editor rejects your paper?

- **Some additional pointers**
  - A final checklist before submission
  - Wearing the hat of a reviewer and/or an editor
Identifying the research question/problem and motivation

- Identifying a research question can be an *opportunistic exercise*
- Importance of literature review, including articles in press
- Importance of cross-pollination, i.e. be prepared to read outside your designated discipline
- Importance of networking (is it overrated?)
- Importance of solving the research problem(s)
  (i.e. your paper’s contribution)
  - Theoretical implications
  - Managerial implications
  - Social implications

*Gap identification vs. problematization?*
*Consensus creation vs. shifting?*
Drafting a blueprint for your paper

Give your paper a tentative title and write a preliminary 100-word abstract

- A traditional layout?
  - Introduction
  - Literature review and conceptual framework
  - Method and data
  - Results and analysis
  - Concluding remarks

- A customised layout? Best approach is to pay attention to the particular journal you are targeting, but be flexible enough to accommodate the idiosyncrasies of your chosen topic for the paper.
Ascertaining feasibility

- Do you have all the skills needed to complete the paper?

- If not, how do you choose a potential co-author with complementary skills? How many co-authors before the team becomes sub-optimal? That is, can a synergistic partnership be developed? See “Avkiran NK (2013), An empirical investigation of the influence of collaboration in Finance on article impact, *Scientometrics*, 95(3), 911-925” as well as “Avkiran NK, Alpert K (forthcoming) The influence of co-authorship on article impact in OR/MS/OM and the exchange of knowledge with Finance in the twenty-first century, *Annals of Operations Research*”

- Are data available on the anticipated key variables?

- What is a realistic timetable and how do you negotiate with your co-author(s)?
Writing it…

- Initially identify two or three suitable target journals.
- Think of your paper as a piece of sculpture, architecture and/or a short story.
- As you read and discuss with your co-author, insert various developments in your blueprint or draft paper.
- A two/three-page introduction where you outline the research problem(s), motivation, method and possibly key findings is ideal. Leave concise literature review to section 2. The first paragraph is your most important paragraph. Keep it under half a page long.
- The concluding section ought to be at least one to two pages long. Avoid a one paragraph or half a page long conclusions.
- Overall length of the paper is best kept to around 30 pages – give or take 5 pages. Editors and referees prefer concise papers around 8000 words.
Check to see if the other sections in between the introduction and the conclusions are balanced in length.

- For example, literature review should be organised around themes relevant to your paper’s motivation and can be used to generate research question(s) or hypotheses.
  
  • When criticising some else’s work, use a neutral tone of voice. “What goes around, comes around!”

- Consider your starting research question as ‘work-in-progress’. It may change as you start writing the paper or after it comes back from the referees.

- Avoid a listing of publications in chronological order in the hope of pleasing all potential referees. The moment your writing starts to meander, you will lose the interest of the referee.
Use sub-headings as navigational help for the reader. People, including referees, have a short attention span.

Minimise the number of footnotes and endnotes. Some journals do not accept them at all.

Minimise psychological markers such as ‘new’ and ‘innovative’. Overuse of markers will damage the credibility of your claims.

Minimise use of acronyms. Anything that taxes the referee’s attention or reduces readability will work against you.

Do not start numerical analysis until conceptual framework is settled and data cleaned. If you find yourself in the right space, consider collecting more data than your original research question indicates!
Assuming your conceptual framework is sound, remain faithful to it until the end.

Be prepared to **make multiple drafts and pay attention to how well various sections connect with each other.** You can check the latter by summarising each paragraph’s message in a few words.

- Draft a separate table of contents listing all the headings to generate a birds-eye view of your paper.

In writing results and analysis, **make sure inferences are linked back to insights gained in literature review and the conceptual framework.**

Be extra careful **not to quote out of context.** Some referees will actually check whether your quote is correct or appropriate.
Deliver on promises made to the reader.

Briefly highlight your paper’s contribution to literature in the abstract, introduction, and conclusions.

Using active voice (rather than passive voice) can have more impact. Some journals insist on use of active voice, e.g. Journal of Business Research.

- For example, instead of saying “The research reported by Sherman and Gold (1985) suggested that bank branches were mostly inefficient…”

- Rephrase as “Sherman and Gold (1985) report mostly inefficient bank branches…”.
Consider giving your paper a title that captures the main contribution/motivation and the reader’s imagination:

- For example, “Monitoring the performance of banks during the GFC” vs. “How to tell which banks deserve tax payers’ help”. That is, try to capture the key motivation of your paper in its title.

- But, also note that some referees prefer descriptive titles over attention grabbing titles… the odds of getting it right are 50:50.
Quality of your writing will determine the extent referees ‘like’ or ‘dislike’ your paper. That is, you need to **communicate your contribution in an clear, concise, convincing and interesting style:**

- Is your study coming across as being rigorous in research design and data collection?
- Does your analysis appear to be systematic or *ad hoc*?
- Are you ticking the boxes for ‘credibility’ and ‘trustworthiness (see above), ‘transferability’ and ‘confirmability’ of findings, etc.?
- Are your findings likely to be considered ‘insightful’ by those *not* involved in drafting of the paper?
Don’t **underestimate** the challenges of working with a co-author. See “Avkiran NK (2013), An empirical investigation of the influence of collaboration in Finance on article impact, Scientometrics, 95(3), 911-925” and other references therein.

Remember that most referees will form an opinion on your paper in the **first 15 minutes** of reading it.

- That is, **if you fail to impress early on, your chances are truly slim**. A referee who develops a ‘dislike’ for your paper often will *not* hesitate to list many other less important criticisms to justify a ‘reject’ recommendation to the editor.
- Edit the paper with the target journal in mind.
- Acknowledge other publications from the target journal. While you can make an argument against this practice on ethical grounds (cf. coercive citations), the reality is that editors want to promote their journals in every possible way.
- If you are going to ask someone with the potential to make a substantial contribution to edit an early draft of your paper and offer constructive criticism, be prepared to offer that person co-authorship. At the same time, everyone’s time is equally precious so don’t be offended if they decline.
- Acknowledge your emotional attachment but distance yourself from the paper.
  
  - **Walk away from the paper for a while before reading it again. Repeat this many times.**

- Remember the need for peer review before submission.
  
  - **Do not submit a paper until it has been exposed to peers** (e.g., workshops, conferences, etc.). The act of preparing slides for presentation benefits the paper because you look at it from a different angle.
  
  - Similarly, do **not** rely on friends’ ‘glowing’ remarks on your paper.

- Listen to people with experience but do not let **cynicism or blinkered views** make you lose confidence in your work.
Publishing your paper

Submitting and handling correspondence

- It is possible to improve a paper almost indefinitely. You need to make a judgement as to when you think the paper has adequate quality to survive referees.

- Editors reject a substantial proportion of submissions without sending a manuscript to referees. In your cover letter, tell the editor what is unique about your paper (see sample cover letter to editor).

- Make sure you follow the journal’s author guidelines to the letter. Don’t promise to format the references later.
Correspondence

- Observe timely correspondence with the editor’s office and address him/her by family name (i.e. not ‘Dear Editor’).
- Check to see who else is on the editorial board.
- If your paper is appointed to a track editor or associate editor, you will need to re-establish correspondence and rapport.
- Closely monitor the progress of your paper; the first gentle inquiry to the editor’s office can go out by the end of three months following submission.
- Be courteous at all times but don’t hesitate to be assertive when it is called for. Referees and editors are also mortals with many flaws!
Responding to the referees: ‘Revise and re-submit’

Start with a positive attitude by treating a ‘revise and re-submit’ as an opportunity to learn... don’t fool yourself that you know better than the referees just because you have spent a lot of time on your paper.

- An invitation to revise and re-submit can be a great opportunity but it does not guarantee publication.
  - From an educational perspective, it is an opportunity for you to learn new skills you may have put off as ‘too difficult or bothersome or simply marginal to your interests’.

- At the same time, it is safer to assume you will be dealing with ‘hostile’ referees. Referees are more likely to look for reasons to reject than accept your submission; after all, they may see you as a competitor.
Prepare a detailed report (a roadmap) explaining how and where in the revised paper you have addressed the issues raised by the referees and the editor.

Summarise positives identified by the referees (and the editor) in the introduction to your report and thank everyone involved. You may also summarise the main changes before presenting detailed responses.

- When appropriate, you may tactfully bring to the attention of Referee#2 a positive identified by Referee#1 (and vice-versa) but do not play referees against each other.

If you make any errors in your submission, admit them openly in your revision letter to the referees.

Sometimes referees will raise the same issues – patiently acknowledge them again.
You need to mention in your reply all issues raised, including those you may not have addressed as required by the referees (see sample revision report).

If you are unable to address a particular issue raised by a referee, politely explain why and thank the referee for raising it.

Do not bring in new issues not raised by referees because you are keen to show how knowledgeable you are!

Avoid using exclamation marks (!) in correspondence. They can be interpreted as ‘sarcasm’.

If you suspect a second revision will be required, feel free to ask for guidance from the referees on issues you may feel uncertain.

Undertake revision promptly (i.e. within a month).
What do you do if the editor *rejects* your paper?

a. You thank the editor/referees and say you look forward to publishing with them at another time, then you revise and submit elsewhere (*see sample reply to rejection*)

b. You politely and carefully challenge the editor’s decision on the grounds that referees overlooked important aspects of the paper

c. You are so appalled with this ‘unfair’ decision, you give the editor a piece of your mind shortly after you open his/her email

d. You decide not to waste your time with this journal and thus, do nothing
Some additional pointers

- Effective written communication throughout is just as important as the extent of innovative content in your paper.
- You will come across idiosyncratic reports from referees that make little sense to you, but the editor will still reject your paper. DO NOT DESPAIR!
- There is a substantial element of luck in publishing. If you are convinced that you were born ‘unlucky’, change your career.
- Having a thick skin will not stop you from feeling ‘hurt’ when a rejection arrives in your ‘Inbox’. Develop emotional coping mechanisms to deal with it and stick to your guns if you are convinced of your paper’s contribution. Don’t hesitate to submit to a different journal, possibly outside your field.
Some additional pointers (cntd.)

- Work on a paper over substantial periods of time, say, at least two/three days at a time, rather than a few hours at a time.
  - Building momentum is critical to gaining insight and writing a cohesive paper.
  - Identify the moment when you are ready to synthesise and use that time of the day when you are most lucid, e.g. early morning.

- The first rule of managing your time is not entering authoring partnerships that are likely to fail. While it is difficult to make this judgement call, avoid partnerships where the potential contribution of each author is not clearly identifiable.

- Publishing outside your immediate field of expertise may well bring in extra citations of your work, e.g. see Google Scholar.
Some additional pointers (cntd.)

- Be mindful of where your ‘blinders’ are located at any given point in time. Writing a paper is a multi-dimensional exercise, and depending on the task on hand, your focus will change between narrow and wide. You are likely to create ‘loose ends’ as you move between different foci.
  - If you are the main author, encourage your co-author to identify loose ends.

- Be aware of your writing style and make multiple drafts. Most people initially write in a colloquial language which may not be appropriate for a journal.
  - If working with a co-author, one person should be the lead author to avoid ‘two voices’ creeping into the write-up.

- Make a checklist (separate from that provided by a journal), say, using some of the points made in this presentation, and refer to it before submitting.
Some additional pointers (cntd.)

Here is one such final checklist before submitting your paper (please draft your own). *Have you*…

1. clearly explained the research question/problem/motivation and expected contribution to literature at the outset?

2. acknowledged extant relevant literature, and thus, placed the research question(s) in context?

3. devised a robust method that will allow you to explore various aspects of the research question(s)?

4. identified what you intend to deliver under ‘Findings’?

5. delivered what you promised earlier in the paper? and,

6. summarised key points including managerial/social implications in the final section?
Some additional pointers (cntd.)

- While it is highly commendable to target Tier 1 (A*) journals in your field, be aware that the odds are slim, e.g. often less than 10% chance of acceptance even for papers that may be breaking new ground.
  - See the list of journals ranked by the Australian Business Deans Council.
- Be realistic in assessing whether your research is the type of work that would interest Tier 1 journals.
  - If it’s not, there is no shame involved! Every piece of well-conceived and coherently written research expands the knowledge envelope.
- All else the same, it is better to publish your work in a lower tier journal and have your ideas in the public domain than hold out for those elusive Tier 1 publications.

When your paper is accepted, make sure proof readers have not introduced errors.
Some additional pointers (cntd.)

If, on the other hand, you are asked to review a paper, remember all of the preceding comments.

- Your report should be **constructive** and **compassionate** on papers where there is adequate evidence of the authors’ hard work.

- If, on the other hand, you receive a very rough paper where it is evident that the authors are using you as a free editorial or consulting service, don’t hesitate to **reject** with a short note.

- Similarly, if you can’t write an impartial report, do the right thing by **declining** to referee, or declaring ‘conflict of interest’.
Some additional pointers (cntd.)

- **Do not reject** a paper solely because it does not heavily rely on extant literature. Too much emphasis on well-established concepts can sometimes lead to a stagnant pool of knowledge and prevent innovation.

- Similarly, a paper that is **innovative** and has been **carefully crafted** deserves **acceptance** regardless of whether you agree with all the arguments or analysis techniques used. Rejecting such a paper stops a wider discussion.
Some additional pointers (cntd.)

Finally, how about wearing the hat of an editor? Here is how you can forward a manuscript to reviewers in a manner considerate to all parties (i.e. an extract from a letter inviting you to review a paper):

“…If you accept the task, please provide constructive criticism to the author(s) in a manner you would like to receive on your own journal submissions.

Please make sure you have downloaded any supplementary material the author(s) may have uploaded separate from the paper.

In rejecting a paper, it is expected that both the editorial office and author(s) are provided with clear reasons as to why the paper is not suitable for [journal title]. This may also include a poor command of the English language because the referees are not expected to edit a paper beyond minor corrections.

It is important that acceptance or rejection of the paper is not simply based on whether the paper subscribes to the theoretical preferences or personal views of the reviewer. The paper needs to be evaluated on whether its aims promise to make a significant contribution to literature, and whether execution of the research design serves the paper’s aims well…”