**THE RULES OF THE GAME: A short guide for PhD students and new academics on
publishing in academic journals**

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Introduction

In recent times 'publish or perish' has become the motto of academia. Appointment, tenure and promotion have become disproportionately dependent on achieving publication. Various national-level assessment exercises in Britain, New Zealand, Hong Kong and Australia have sought to evaluate the research contribution of different groups and the growing importance of league tables for universities, have also put the pressure on research performance - this is not entirely a new phenomenon. To a large extent the American system has long promoted a 'publish or perish' philosophy and other countries have also begun to tread a similar route leading to publication becoming an individual as well as a collective necessity (Berridge and Wilkinson, 1999).

According to Oscar Wilde, *"the only thing to do with good advice is to pass it on: it is never any use to oneself"*. Whilst this author is conscious of not always following the advice he offers in this article, following Wilde's dictum and writing from the perspective of having written (and rejected) a wide array of papers over the years as well as acting as editor, referee, critic, advisor, wine pourer and shoulder to cry on, I hope this paper can provide some basic insights into the process.

Selecting where to publish

In many respects, research and publication is very much the international currency exchange of the academic world. Whilst most academics claim to be effective teachers (and can provide student evaluations to support such claims), few would admit to administrative incompetence. Publication is the main area where individuals tend to be compared in terms of the quality and quantity of their record. Quality is the modern game: a lot of mediocre papers published in lowly regarded journals with limited readership is no compensation for work of high quality, published in household name journals of a specific field or discipline (although that does not mean that smaller name journals do not publish work of high quality or that big name journals always publish work of high quality).

It is important to note that there are different publication patterns in different fields, so one needs to be clear on the reference points of the specific field. In my field, many management scholars have turned to writing journal articles rather than books, but in some fields, the scholarly book remains very important especially in the arts and social sciences where a monograph can be the standard reference point.

In this short piece we are primarily concerned with how and where to publish, assuming that you have a well-designed and interesting piece of research, firstly you will need to analyse the field or fields in which your article falls. Who will be interested in reading your work? Where do you wish to have an impact? As well as aiming for the right community, it is important to target a *good home* for your work. You need to research the most suitable place to send your work and find where the key players publish. Refereed journals are the gold standard in the academic world today, although these may not be read by practitioners or policy people. To reach that audience and reduce the *impact gap* where academic research does not influence the real world, requires a mixed dissemination strategy, but that is another paper.

Your work will survive longer and have more chance of being known and cited if published in major journals. You have spent a lot of time, or years if it is a PhD, on your research and it would be a shame if it was not read because it was published in a journal which few in your field consult. But even among journals which double-blind referee all submissions, there is much variation in their status – since there is now a near-universal trend toward refereeing. As they say, all journals are refereed but some are more refereed than others. Within your field, there is often a recognised pecking-order, usually but not always, reflected in the journal ranking lists available (for business and management examples, see www.Harzing.com, [The Association of Business School's \(ABS\) International Guide to Academic Journal Quality list](#) (UK), and the [Australian Business Deans Council \(ABDC\) list](#)).

Be aware of list fetishism (Adler and Harzing, 2009; Willmott, 2011) - . slavishly using a list does not make sense. As Willmott points out, lists can also stifle diversity and constrict scholarly innovation with the formation of a monoculture which is preoccupied with shoehorning research into a form prized by elite US-oriented journals. You also need to be aware of the research realities where you are. It is important to remember that promotion and recruitment panels are often staffed by non-discipline experts who use proxy measures of quality – they are unlikely to read the work, and even if they did, they would struggle to gauge the merit - hence journal lists are widely used. You need to obtain advice from senior research colleagues.

The notion of lists being used is sometimes regarded with horror, but the old model of assessment often used volume alone as the overall gauge of success. There is a growing interest in measurement, but the keenness of universities to measure and evaluate is not matched by good measures in the arts and social sciences (notwithstanding the proliferation of G and H-indexes used to evaluate research- refer to the book by Harzing).

It is important to see your work in a broader perspective. There is a tendency for people too close to their work to only see its relevance in a narrow way. For example, Albert Hirschman studied Nigerian railways and the reason why the Nigerian railways performed so poorly in the face of competition from trucks. However his work was not published in the *Journal of Nigerian Railways* (I am not sure that there is one, but as a book. His ideas based on a theoretical model of 'exit' voice and 'loyalty' were influential in the social sciences with the interplay of the three concepts illuminating a wide range of economic, social and political phenomena from unions, schools, communism and so on.

More recently, Bunderson and Thompson (2009) studied the work of zookeepers in the USA but their work was not published in the *International Journal of Zoo Keeping* (I am not sure there is one), but in the leading management journal *Administrative Science Quarterly*. Using qualitative data from interviews, they developed hypotheses about the relationship between individuals and their work. They observed that a zoo keepers calling was a double-edged sword—both a source of identity and significance as well as one of unbending duty and sacrifice. While this model of work as a calling might not apply to all, they suggest it would apply in not-for-profit settings, public interest settings, or settings that require unique skills and economic sacrifices for a perceived public benefit, such as the arts, education, health care, the military, social welfare and the public service.

It is also worthwhile keeping an eye and ear out for new trends. A new editor can, for instance, be working hard to increase the standing of a journal. Long established journals can become complacent with tired editors and slip down the ranks. Equally, journal fashions can change with new editorial teams who may have a particular agenda. You should try to target the best journal which is most relevant to your work. This will not always be the top ranked journal in the field – but don't fool yourself in your selection of a journal when asking if this is the best place for your paper.

Before you arrive at your target journal, carefully research the internal characteristics of the journals. Read the journal's 'notes for contributors' or 'editorial policy'. Look for coded expressions which will give you a hint as to whether your article would suit as well as talking to those with experience. Espoused editorial policy may not be the same as what happens in reality. It is important to research the journal – don't just rely on ranking lists and journal titles which can lead you to some odd outcomes, for example, *The Journal of Human Resources*, a leading US journal, is not a management journal and does not consider management or personnel research, it publishes in the field of economics.

There are some internal clues which you can use interpretively in anticipating the reception your article will receive at the referees' hands. Are all articles refereed largely or solely among the Editorial Advisory Board (EAB) members? If the latter, you may be able to predict their preferences and prejudices. Is the journal author-friendly? This is not the same thing as gauging the likelihood of acceptance but is more about the quality of feedback. Most journals provide full verbatim reports from referees and the editor will offer advice on the best way forward in making revisions. Others may send enigmatic, unhelpful statements, or possibly two contradictory referees' reports without any further guidance. Again, talking to academic colleagues who have published, reviewed, or been rejected for the journal can be helpful.

Writing the article

Having identified the journal – and it is helpful to write for a specific journal rather than write a paper and think about a journal later – define carefully what subject you are trying to tackle in the article. Identify the central theme and purposively eliminate extraneous detail, confusing or unnecessary themes, or discussion which clouds the central issue. Do not try to achieve too much in one article. Serious television programmes are said to treat only four or five topics in half an hour – even with the benefit of visual as well as verbal impact. If you are tackling a big issue or debate, one or two themes will probably be all you can focus on in one article. If it is a specialised point, you will need to concentrate closely on demonstrating its relevance. Most articles by inexperienced writers (and some by experienced authors) contain far too many themes. As a consequence, their articles can lack critical focus or quality of development of any one theme (Berridge and Wilkinson, 1999). This is where getting others to read your work is critical. Too many papers have dirty windows (Fulmer, 2012), that is, it is too hard to see the valuable findings as they are obscured amongst a 'hodge podge' of other material and it is difficult to discern the distinctive value of your message.

Having a target journal will help you frame your paper. What has it published in the last few years? Find an angle for your piece. Maybe a recent paper has suggested we need more papers on topic Y, or there needs to be more work done in a particular context. Perhaps other authors, or the editor, are suggesting that the area needs more work from a particular theoretical perspective. You can join the journal 'conversation' by answering this call. Editors like pieces which fit with current debates within their journal, as it can take a debate further and help increase citations. If your paper is on a topic of which the journal has published several papers, make sure you demonstrate why yours is different AND significant by engaging with those papers.

At the very least, you need to add a wrinkle to existing research (Barley, 2006). The main question an editor will ask is, "How does your paper make a contribution?" In other words, what is new in your work which will advance the field? Another way of thinking about this is identifying a gap in the literature or coming up with findings that are new or surprising. A theoretical dimension is important especially for leading journals -you need to USE theory not simply lean on it like a drunk on a lamp post.

Editors and referees are unimpressed by papers which ignore work published on the same topic in their journal. It is also worth remembering that someone who has written on the same topic is very likely to be asked to be a referee for your paper. They are likely to be seriously unimpressed if you have ignored their work and of course are now in the position of making a judgment on your paper.

Writing an article with others can be an enriching collaboration. Alternatively, it can be the end of a beautiful friendship. Writing an article is a potentially stressful and emotionally-taxing experience. Previously agreed rules will never solve all problems, but they help greatly in avoiding disagreements. Take measures in advance to agree on who is responsible for which parts of the work and how the authors' names are to be listed on the paper.

If you are a PhD student, you should take the lead on papers and consider writing at least one sole authored paper - it is your work, so don't feel obliged to put your supervisors' names on it. Equally, the publishing world is tough and you may think it is sensible to draw upon your supervisors' experience in these matters, again, there are different traditions in different disciplines.

If you are going to have an academic career, you need to develop a reputation in specific areas. Being in a specific area also means you are spread a little less thinly. It becomes clearer which conferences you should go to and what networks you should build (Agre, 2002). If you do end up with a few projects, it is also good to show that there is an intellectual coherence.

Do not rewrite and rewrite your paper forever. The journalistic maxim 'publish and be damned' becomes 'submit and be hopeful' for academics,. At some stage, the extent of improvement on each rewrite becomes less and less and you may well begin to lose your original clarity of purpose. The changes you make may become so minor that they will have little or no effect on the quality of your article or the editorial decision whether to publish. The referees and the editor may want to address other matters altogether, and they may pull you away from your original message. Often, informed people who are not experts on the subject of the article are very useful readers who can help you clarify

the arguments of the article. You can get too close to the subject and outsiders can have a sharper perspective on readability.

You also need the very best expert criticism you can get. Obtain comments from well-intentioned and analytical colleagues, seminar presentations and widely-published authors in your circle of friends and acquaintances. Don't be shy – it is much better to get constructive feedback from supportive colleagues early in the piece, than hide your work and get it butchered by reviewers who don't know you, especially if many of the problems could have been dealt with if you had been aware of them. Present your work at internal seminars and conferences and at each stage take the opportunity to polish and smooth out your paper.

Finally, you should not forget to provide signposts and landmarks for readers. Your abstract is key here -write it with care, picking out the article's themes and their treatment with clinical precision. Write the introduction to the article simply and logically, laying out the objectives and plan of exposition of the article in an accessible, attractive manner which grasps the reader's attention and explains what is novel about your work as well as providing the key take away message. You are not writing a detective story with twists and a surprise murderer identified at the end, you need to set out your story from the start! Editors' desk-reject (that is, reject without sending out to referees) a good number of papers based on what they see in the first few pages. They also allocate referees (usually 2-3) on the basis of their initial read through, so make sure your abstract is spot on. Equally, your conclusion should summarise lucidly, not look desperate or exhausted with the effort of completing the article as some editors' have a bad habit of reading the conclusion first. The title is important too, for if your paper is published, this is how prospective readers will find it - make it easy for them.

After submission, ensure that you receive an acknowledgment from the journal. Papers do get lost in the post and via email. There are many sad stories of authors waiting months for reviews and upon contacting the journal, find that it was never received. Once your paper has been safely acknowledged as received, make a note of the likely turnaround time. Most journals advertise this – it's often three months from submission to first review. If you have not heard from the journal by their advertised time, contact them to check (politely) where your paper is up to in the process. At the very least, this triggers a review of the status of your paper and may prompt the editor to send reminders. The best journals are often quick (in academic terms) with feedback, although they are also more likely to require several rounds of refereeing and much more extensive reworking. Remember never to submit to more than one journal at a time. Doing so is a no no which will get you blacklisted.

Receiving comments on your paper

Having submitted your article, you will need to be in a philosophical mood when you receive the editor's letter and comments from referees.

The four main possible outcomes are:

- desk rejected
- rejected after review
- revise and resubmit (with minor or major revisions)
- accepted.

Acceptance without review is very rare, and acceptance after a first review is not very common either. In all good quality journals it is normal for there to be extra work which needs to be done (or issues addressed) before your article is accepted for publication. Try to view this outcome as a constructive and positive challenge (the glass is half-full), not as a put-down. If you are targeting high level journals, rejection is normal and a request to revise and resubmit is a VERY good outcome. Again, speak to colleagues with more experience. It is wrong to think that the impressive long list of publications by Professor X have come about without too much sweat. You may well find a story of pain and profanity behind the success, and many papers have had a long tour of duty before finding a good home – often not the same home as the one they were originally submitted to. Rejection is normal and even the best scholars experience this. As a general rule, if your work is not getting rejected, you are either a genius or you are not aiming high enough.

If you have only had experience with conference papers, be aware that the journal game is different and much tougher. As a general rule, conferences aim to be inclusive, their model is to allow more papers which bring in the money and also to provide avenues for those developing their work and gaining experience. A single round of reviews is all that usually takes place. Journals are much more hard-nosed, with many boasting of high reject rates of over 90% and several gruelling rounds of reviews, to the extent that you could be in the system for two years before your paper is accepted or rejected. In fact, it may be another further year before your article appears in print after acceptance, although many journals are now making accepted papers available on the web prior to getting into print.

The refereeing process is hard work. As Rousseeuw (1991) notes:

“It is a commonly known and a constant source of frustration that even well-known refereed journals contain a large fraction of bad articles which

are boring, repetitive, incorrect, redundant, and harmful to science in general. What is perhaps even worse, the same journals also stubbornly reject some brilliant and insightful articles (i.e., your own) for no good reason” (p. 41).

If your paper is rejected, you may need to judge how far you wish to incorporate comments of the editor/ referees before you send it to another journal. This depends on how far you see these as generally valid comments, or whether you see them as specific to the particular journal you sent it to. It is not unknown to send an unrevised manuscript to a different journal which has a much more positive view, or even comes up with a completely different list of criticisms - there are elements of luck in the whole process. This is when you need the advice of more experienced colleagues. Some journals have horrendous rejection rates which may not indicate demerit in articles, but simply a shortage of space. Many rejected papers could validly merit publication elsewhere in reputable academic journals.

To simply ignore all of the referee comments and just roll the dice again is a risky practice, not to mention a little arrogant. Firstly, scholars have taken the time to read your work and give you feedback – is it really sensible to ignore that advice? Secondly, there is a reasonable chance that even if you send your paper to a different journal, they will use at least one of the same referees. They will be very, very unimpressed that you have ignored the work they have put in to help you improve your paper. Bill Starbuck (2006) formulated a famous golden rule that “no reviewer is ever wrong!” What he meant by this was not the reviewers are perfect; far from it, as he notes reviewers’ comments can reveal their ignorance or stupidity and some can appear to be arrogant, disrespectful and even downright nasty (p. 97). Some reviews can seem like longer versions of Wolfgang Pauli’s famous comment – “That is not right, it is not even wrong”.

What Starbuck meant by this apparent absurdity was to draw attention to a more fundamental truth, that every editor and every reviewer is a sample from the population of potential readers.

My golden rule reminds me to look upon reviewers’ comments not as judgments about the value of my research or the quality of my writing, but as data about how readers might react to my manuscripts. If a reviewer interprets one of my statements in a different way than I intended, other readers, possibly many other readers, are likely to interpret this statement differently than I intended; so I should revise the statement to make such misinterpretations less likely. If a reviewer thinks that I made a methodological error, other readers, possibly many of them, are likely to think that I made this error; so I should revise my manuscript to explain why my methodology is

appropriate. If a reviewer recommends that I cite literature that I deem irrelevant, which other readers could possibly think are relevant; I should explain why it I think it is irrelevant.

In general, you should carefully attend to the thoughts of anyone who may have read your words carefully - good data about readers' reactions are valuable and they can never be 'wrong'. My golden rule does not assert that I should always follow reviewers' advice - absolutely not! Their advice derives from their interpretations of what they thought I was trying to say, which may not be what I actually intended to say (Starbuck, 2006, pp. 98-99).

If the editor's decision is encouraging, but revisions are required, there is a skill in reading between the lines of the editor's letter. Are there relatively minor revisions which need to be done, perhaps acknowledging the points of the referee(s)? Are quite substantial changes required? Or is a fundamental re-write of the paper effectively being demanded, which may essentially change the original argument? With regard to the latter, you may feel that a different paper is being requested and it is your right to discuss this with the editor. Editors are not always specific (sometimes acting as posties with a set of reviews) and may ask you to merely address the comments (perhaps varied and possibly contradictory!) provided by the referees. In such an instance you may wish to attend to all the points raised by Referee A but only points 1-7 of Referee B, for example, arguing that points 8 and 9 are beyond the scope of this particular paper. You should write a full account to the editor demonstrating what you have done (or not done) and explain your rationale. It is best to write a note which goes through each point every referee has made and the instructions from the editor. It may not make sense for you to incorporate every single suggestion or comment, but you must explain this to the editor. This will also help if, as is common practice, the manuscript is sent to the same referees again and they then make an additional list of suggestions! Most referees are positively intentioned and react fairly to a list of the author's responses but they expect you to treat their comments seriously. Referees are not paid for reviewing and don't get much credit within their own university. They are doing it as an act of professional courtesy. Simply ignoring them is not a good idea, nor is a brief note which tells them you have attended to all the comments without explaining how this has been done. Letters of response often run to a few pages. Again, ask experienced colleagues to show you some examples of the editor's letters you can receive and the type of responses expected. Be prepared to put in a lot of work, possibly over some months, on a revision (Altman and Baruch, 2008).

It may take several rounds, but hopefully your paper is eventually accepted by your target journal. If not, one must not lose heart. You may need to go back to step one and rethink the most appropriate place to send your paper, the most

effective emphasis to give it, or the quality of its argument and exposition. This is where you need the advice of experienced colleagues to support and guide you. Persistence is one of the main qualities that you need in the academic publishing world.

Conclusion

The purpose of this short paper is to shed some light on what can sometimes appear a rather uncertain world to an outsider. Moreover, we are emphasising that having spent several years researching a topic or issue, it pays to put in some research into publication, and to develop a strategy as to its possible outlets. Obviously, this does not guarantee publication - death, taxes and rejections are the only certainties in academic life. Clearly, the substantive content of your research is important! Hopefully, the approach suggested should enable you to make the most of what you have written about your research, and in which you have invested so much time.

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