

What reviewers want: how to make your article more appealing to peer reviewers (Editorial)

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What Reviewers Want: How to Make Your Article More Appealing Peer Reviewers

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Introduction

It is the bane of the life of all researchers in health psychology and behavioural medicine; after spending many weeks, months, and even years preparing a research article from inception to submission only to have it rejected by journal editors on the advice of some ‘sniffy’ reviewers. We have all received that ‘rejection’ letter, and the accompanying sinking feeling. Even the knowledge that the work of the most eminent minds in the field has been rejected at one stage or another, which my PhD supervisor was at pains to point out after I had had my first manuscript declined, is no consolation. Reflecting on the (numerous) rejection letters I have received from journal editors during my career as a health psychology researcher, and on my experience as a reviewer, editor and editorial board member of numerous scholarly peer-reviewed journals in the field, I have identified a number of tips and ‘tricks of the trade’ that would have been of considerable benefit to me when I was an early-career researcher preparing articles for submission to journals. Such advice could have saved me a lot of time in helping me get my journal submissions in the right shape first time and a lot of anguish over subsequent rejection letters. Knowing what journal editors and, in particular, peer reviewers are looking for is extremely important when preparing manuscripts for publication. The purpose of this editorial is to outline the tips and recommendations based on my experience and those of others, so that researchers, particularly those less familiar with writing articles for publication, especially in a specialist ‘review’ journal like *Health Psychology Review*, can benefit from the advice I wish I had had when I was embarking on my research career. I will outline the importance of: a lucid statement of aim or purpose from the very beginning of your article; a similarly overt statement of contribution and novelty of your work; comprehensiveness in the reporting of your methods; making sure that your claims are evidence based; ensuring your manuscript is well structured; and providing a clear summary of your findings and conclusions and how they relate to practice and future research. Along the way I will make reference to articles published in *Health Psychology Review* that amply illustrate ‘good practice’ for each of these issues. The guidelines focus on review articles but, in most cases, they could equally apply to

empirical articles and reports of original research submitted to *Psychology and Health*, for example, or other journals in the field. Finally, I propose a disclaimer: following these suggestions is not a guarantee that your article will be published, but they may just help reduce your chances of rejection. Doing original research well and having new and original idea are the most important elements to getting published; these recommendations may just help you across the line.

The Key Manuscript Elements Reviewers Want to See

Statement of Purpose

Reviewers want to see a clear and unambiguous statement of overall purpose very early in the manuscript. Too often researchers embark on a lengthy description and background to the topic of research or ‘the problem’ under scrutiny before even touching on their research aims. Of course it is important to ‘set the scene’ but the overall aim and focus of the research should be prioritised to contextualise the research, in the first instance, and provide the reviewer with a clear sense of the direction of the article. Articles in *Health Psychology Review* usually follow a similarly structured first section of the introduction. The first paragraph or two provide just enough detail for the reader to contextualise the research before providing a very clear and overt overall statement of purpose. Of course, this is not the place to provide specific and detailed predictions, that will come later once due consideration has been given to previous research and theory, rather this is a global statement. This will provide the reviewer with a clear idea of the direction of the article and will provide a point of reference for his or her subsequent reading. A very good example of this in *Health Psychology Review* is presented by Thoolen et al. (2012) in their meta-analysis of interventions for anti-microbial research. The researchers outline the background to the research in a brief initial paragraph and then begin with their statement of purpose: “This study reviews the content and effectiveness of interventions aimed at patients to reduce their antibiotic use” (p. 93) –simple but effective. There are many other examples of a clear overt statements of purpose appearing early on in the introduction of reviews in HPR (e.g., Beaudoin & Zimbardo, 2012; McEachan, Conner,

Taylor, & Lawton, 2012; Smith, 2011a; Stavri & Michie, 2012). An even more brazen approach is given by Glass and Contrada (2012) whose opening line of their abstract is a statement of purpose!

Statement of Originality and Contribution

A key criterion that all reviewers are looking for when evaluating the worth of a manuscript is the contribution it makes to the literature above and beyond what is already known. In HPR reviews must demonstrate how they advance knowledge and thinking and develop new, original perspectives on the nexus between psychology and health (Hagger, 2012b). The reviewer should not have to ‘hunt’ for what’s new and what’s novel, so my advice would be to get straight to the point as early as possible. Flag the original contribution boldly with a bold, unambiguous statement of contribution. Sometimes I read manuscripts by authors who seem to feel that a more subtle approach is necessary and attempt to weave the statement of contribution into their narrative in an elegant, subtle way. I have previously referred to this as akin to engaging the reviewer in game of ‘Poker’, keeping him or her guessing until the very end (Hagger, 2012a)! I disagree with this approach and advocate tackling the issue head on: don’t be afraid to make the statement loud and clear. To illustrate an HPR article that does this well, I return to the article by Thoolen et al. (2012) who state very early on in their review: “The present review expands upon these previous reviews in three ways. First, it focuses on patient-oriented interventions to reduce antibiotic use. This review thereby aims to provide more insight into the content and potentially effective elements of this specific group of interventions.” (p. 93-94). This is very good practice and I would strongly advocate such an approach. Another example of good practice is to include a subheading identifying the original contribution as in the reviews by McEachen et al. (2012) and DiMatteo et al. (2012) that contain have subheaded sections early in the manuscript with refer to the “focus” of the review.

Methodological Rigor

Another feature of a ‘good’ empirical article or review is the strength of the approach and method used. It is important to make the methodological approach and source material on which the

analysis is made very clear, no matter how rudimentary the literature search or perusal of previous research or source material. Reviewers frequently comment to me in my capacity as *Health Psychology Review* editor that authors do not outline their method with sufficient clarity when reporting their literature search or review. For empirical articles, it is clearly essential to outline all aspects of the methodological approach – one way is to adopt a ‘theory of mind’ of the reviewer and try to second guess the kinds of information regarding your method that they would need to know. Frequently omitted material includes questionnaire detail, intervention content, and details on CONSORT or MARS reporting guidelines for randomised trial reporting and systematic reviews and meta-analyses. It is also strongly encouraged that all data is made available either as supplementary files or as online supplemental material so that secondary analyses and complete transparency exists (Hagger, Conner, & O’Connor, 2013; Peters, Abraham, & Crutzen, 2012). Articles abound in HPR of those that reporting their methods with accuracy and clarity, because this is a major criterion for acceptance. I direct readers to good examples for meta-analyses (Taylor, Conner, & Lawton, 2012; Virués-Ortega, Pastor-Barriuso, Castellote, Población, & de Pedro-Cuesta, 2012), systematic reviews (Dodd & Forshaw, 2010; Dombrowski et al., 2012), and narrative reviews (Hagger, Wood, Stiff, & Chatzisarantis, 2009; Smith, 2011a, 2011b).

Evidence Base

By definition, empirical articles and reviews must remain ‘true’ to their data and not speculate wildly when the evidence is not there to support a particular effect. The author must, therefore, tread a fine line between interpreting their results, linking them with current theory, and making modifications or updating knowledge accordingly without making broad, sweeping statements that are not supported by evidence. If there is speculation, then the author would be wise to clearly label it as such. Although often not a ‘fatal’ flaw, a systematic review, meta-analysis, or empirical research article that persistently makes interpretations that overreach the limits of the data, may sway a reviewer’s opinion toward rejection. A frequently-occurring example of over-speculation is the inference of causality from correlational data. Much of the knowledge base in

health psychology and behavioural medicine has been built up through countless correlational studies, and health psychology researchers are all too familiar with the problems of these kinds of data when it comes to the causal nature of relationships (Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2009). Adopting appropriate language that refrains from making causal statements is essential to avoid this problem. The empirical review by McEachen et al. (2012), whose source material is largely correlational, does well in taking care not to over-extend the bounds of their data. Finally, narrative reviews must always build on what is currently known in a particular field and must, therefore, delineate the scope of the research, make clear bounds in which their new theory or model lies and state careful what evidence would be required to support the proposals. Good examples of this appearing in *Health Psychology Review* include the theories proposed by DiMatteo et al. (2012) and Hoffmann et al. (2011).

Structure

A well-structured manuscript is essential for the clear and unambiguous reporting of research and a lack of structure is frequently a reason why manuscripts are rejected. What is meant by a clear structure? Most researchers will be fully aware of the organisational elements typically required by peer-reviewed scholarly publications: introduction, hypotheses or research questions, methods, results, discussion, and conclusions. As a journal editor, it is surprising that despite these elements, how many authors still confuse the sections including research questions in the results section, reporting results in the discussion, or discussing results before the discussion section. These are fundamental errors and can easily be eliminated by paying close attention to the structural elements. However, these problems are only skin deep, more serious problems relate to a lack of structure within the sections. For example, many articles are rejected because the introduction section is not sufficiently organised for the reader to arrive at the hypotheses or research questions posed at the end of the section with a clear sense of how the questions have come about and how they are linked to previous research. Often this is due to an over-descriptive narrative which does not pay attention to the 'bigger picture' or make clear, overt links between elements. A good

example, and a problem that is endemic in the work of many undergraduate students (and I include myself in this!), is the focus on describing intricate details of the background studies rather than abstracting and pooling the findings of multiple studies to make a key point fundamental to the argument. Subheadings may help in this regard and I would encourage authors to use these, albeit relatively sparingly, to guide the structure of their manuscript. Good use of subheadings to delineate the structure of an argument in the introduction section can be found in Taylor et al.'s (2012) review. Similarly, use of subheadings to guide structure in narrative reviews can be found in Cromby's (2011) and Stephens' (2011) articles.

Clear Summary and Implication of Findings

Readers of research articles frequently want a brief, clear, and pithy summary of the findings – a 'headline' message and perhaps an outline of the implications the research has for future studies and practice in health psychology and behavioural medicine. While it is not a requirement, reviewers often like to see a section that outlines the major findings, and implications for 'what comes next'. This is likely to be the final section they read and it is often the authors 'last chance' to persuade the reviewer that their work deserves to be published, so it is worthwhile making this count. In terms of good practice, the content of this final section should include statements outlining: the main 'headline' findings, what is new and innovative, how the research 'fits in' and extends what is currently known about the particular phenomenon in health psychology, and a how the research will have impact on the field and future research and practice. For prime specimens of good conclusion sections, please see the reviews by Stavri and Michie (2012) and Gibbons, Wills, Kingsbury, and Gerrard (2011).

Final Thoughts

Although not exhaustive, I hope the previous suggestions have provided some insight into what reviewers look for when evaluating an article. These tips are to provide researchers with some guidance as to how to perhaps best set out some sections of future empirical and narrative review articles (and empirical research reports) so that they will appeal to reviewers. Overt statements of

purpose and original contribution, clearly reporting of methods (particularly of reviews), making sure that the manuscript focuses on evidence and does not speculate further without clearly labelling it as such, paying close attention to structure, and providing a neat conclusion that captures the essence of the research and implications for the future should all be considered 'best practice'. This will not guarantee that your work will be accepted, but it will certainly make it harder for a reviewer to reject!

Health Psychology Review Supplement 2013

For the seventh volume of *Health Psychology Review* in 2013, the publisher, the European Health Psychology, and the editorial team are proud to present the current supplement in addition to the two regular issues of the journal. The supplement is double the size of a normal issue and illustrates the overwhelming success of the journal in the past two years. We have received an unprecedented number of submissions leading to a substantial online 'volume' of articles ahead of print. The current issue will ease this backlog and will pave the way for a much faster turnaround of articles. To minimise the extent of the backlog in future we have decided to impose a page limit on articles submitted to the journal. We recognise that reviews, particularly meta-analyses and systematic reviews, are generally much longer than normal research reports so the page limit of 40 pages is substantially more generous than that imposed by other journals with a focus on reports of original research. However, we also recognise that the limit may be restrictive, so we are now making extensive use of the online supplemental material option in order for excessively long items like meta-analysis tables and literature search protocols to be readily available to readers. This online repository is permanent, freely-accessible to journal subscribers, and a method that is being increasingly adopted by many journals to keep print copy to a minimum. The research reported in the supplement is extensive and varied, but they all have one important thing in common: a demonstrable excellence of scholarly enquiry into phenomena in health psychology and behavioural medicine held up to the highest standards through a stringent policy of peer review. We hope you enjoy reading them as much as we did.

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