Editorial

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How to write a good article

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Abstract
This article presents the main challenges of academic writing and publication in scientific journals. It reveals some of the most common mistakes in the process of manuscript submission and review, and offers some possible solutions.

Keywords
Academic journal, academic writing, internationalization, relevance

During the XVIII International Sociological Association World Congress in Yokohama last July, Jennifer Platt (former VP of publications) organized two sessions for ISA editors. The main purpose was to explain the editor's tasks and to give editors the chance to explain details about the different publications to potential authors.

My task was far from easy. I was commissioned to describe what a good article consists of –and I had exactly 15 minutes to do so. In this short editorial, I would like to share some brief advice on the difficult task of publishing in an academic journal.

How to write a successful article

First of all, there's no such a thing as 'a good paper.' This is because a good article is defined not just by its content, but more specifically by a writing approach geared towards publication. The number one secret is: you have to produce a specific piece for a specific journal. There is no 'generic' good article that could fit in any journal. Before you start writing, then, the most important task is to choose the journal. You have the research that you have been working on for several years. Setting, data, conclusions, etc. will be the same in almost every paper you are going to produce. But *where* to publish will define *what* to publish and *how* you publish your research.

Let me insist on one point: a good article is always good for a certain journal. As a result, you should read the journal you have in mind and observe its main features. Successful authors are the best readers, so in order to win in the 'publish or perish' game,

you must begin by reading potential journals. In order to determine different strategies for different publications, I would like to emphasize three key features you should consider when preparing your paper.

First, check the *geographical or idiomatic scope* of the chosen journal and decide if it is national, regional or international. In some cases, the geographical scope appears in the journal's title, when they explicitly refer to European, South Asian, Latin American, or African studies. But in many cases, the journal name does not inform and can even be misleading: almost every country has a national journal called 'Sociology,' 'Sociologies' or 'Sociological Studies,' and though you would think that such journals would be open, most are in fact run by national associations which are focused mainly on developing local debates. Next, go to the aims and scope of the journal, and discover what the editors are interested in publishing.

Second, pay attention to the *journal scope*. There are generalist journals like *Current Sociology*, which publishes a wide variety of sociology-related issues. Or they can be specialized, limiting their contents to certain areas, subfields, theoretical discussions or even geographical contexts. For generalist journals, you should keep your articles more open and jargon-free than you would for a specialized one.

For instance, *Current Sociology* is a generalist journal with a very international readership. Contextualization is thus fundamental to make your case understandable for a reader who is not familiar with the social reality you are describing. Finding a common ground for discussion in literature review will help to create bridges to this global audience and make your topic relevant to them.

What would a reader from the other side of the world learn from my paper? Authors from the core countries and, in many cases, scholars from the peripheral ones often forget to ask this question. In either case, if it goes unanswered, the relevance of your work can be reduced. On the one hand, the scholars from hegemonic academies assume that everything they do is relevant, since they are 'core.' Thus a descriptive article on a survey with 500 cases in Central Europe or the US should be enough to get published. On the other hand, on the periphery, the lack of publications about a certain country or the simple application of a concept to analyze a remote case is deemed original enough. Both of these assumptions are wrong: as I will show below, mainstream, interesting or curious does not necessarily develop into something relevant to the readers.

Last but not least: the *paper's format*. We can find two main styles in academic journals. The *IMRaD* style is the one most textbooks on scientific writing teach, and it has become the hegemonic model for scholarly publication. IMRaD is the only style used in the hard sciences, having been used since the 1950s in physics and in biomedicine since the 1980s. IMRaD articles are structured as introduction, methods, results and discussion; the idea behind this structure is to better organize the idea and to consolidate the theoretical arguments that need a more flexible relationship between methods, results and discussion. In the social sciences, this model is more common in US journals, and is better suited for descriptive papers and quantitative analysis.

On the other hand, narrative articles are most common in Europe and in regions with a higher European influence in their academic culture. Narrative articles are more suited for qualitative analysis and for developing theoretical/conceptual discussions. Even though *Current Sociology* does publish some IMRaD papers, the journal privileges

theoretical discussions, so you would find that most of our articles have a narrative form. Basically, because this format is more flexible, it is better adapted to the argument and helps to build it.

The narrative style is based on the so-called IBC model: introduction, body and conclusion. In order to have a well-balanced article, I suggest you keep the introduction to around 15% and the conclusion to a maximum of 10% of the entire paper. The main body of your article would take up the rest of the space, and ideally should be divided into chapters or sections that help you build the argument and help the reader follow the flow of your ideas.

Common mistakes that everybody knows and everybody makes

There are many textbooks on how to write for academic purposes and how to write and submit to academic journals. There are also many tips on the Internet: publishing houses, blogs, specific sites for scholars and diverse online resources offer advice to anyone who knows how to use a search engine. Some of these recommendations are just common sense. But curiously, when it comes time to submit an article, authors frequently made little mistakes that jeopardize their chances of being published.

Here are some of the most common blunders:

Too school-ish submissions or articles formatted as a dissertation. Sometimes papers looks like mid-term papers or school research projects, with subtitles such as 'Aims and scope' or 'Hypothesis.' Others even present a bulleted list copy-pasted from a PowerPoint presentation, without any editing. In some cases, authors believe that a dissertation chapter (or an abstract), a research report or a conference paper *just need a few cosmetic changes to become a journal article.* Everyone has heard that five dissertation chapters can easily become five articles. Although this is possible, and it is always a good idea to disseminate your dissertation in the form of journal articles, each paper should always be written from scratch. Consider the specific journal you are submitting to, and don't just copy-paste an excerpt from the introduction and an excerpt from the conclusion. You can't just give it a stir and *voilà*! For referees and editors, this kind of rehashing is always painstakingly evident and, if not rejected, in most cases you will be asked for a major revision. Therefore, you'll save time on the review process by properly preparing the first draft of an article, and also increase your chances of getting published.

Descriptive articles without a comprehensive sociological question. Most textbooks on academic writing highlight this, because it is a common problem. You have presented your research, explained the methods, shown the results, and compared them to relevant literature. However, your article should still provide a proper answer to the question: 'So what?' Make sure your manuscript answers this question by bringing out the links to core sociological issues.

Not adhering to submission guidelines (or word limits!). As authors, we are usually very protective of our texts and we believe that our ideas need more space to be developed. In *Current Sociology*, I receive requests to exceed our journal's word limits almost on a daily basis. In a few cases, this request is valid – especially for review articles, which is why the *Current Sociology Review* has doubled the word limit for its articles.

And *Current Sociology* tends to be flexible in cases when, during the revision process and considering the concerns of the referees, we find more space is required. But generally, limiting word counts is just a question of editing, eliminating redundancy and staying focused. The reference style, notes, images, tables and general layout should also keep to the journal's indications. Before submitting, read the guidelines: it will save you time and frustration, because editors tend to simply reject submissions that do not comply.

Submitting without being aware of the journal's remit or its editorial policy and treating the submission steps as mere formalities. Almost every journal has clear editorial policies, aims and scope, and guidelines for authors available on its website. There you can also find the name of the editor or the editor-in-chief, to whom you should also send a cover letter. This cover letter is your first contact, not with a metaphysical journal, but with the real people who work for that journal. Even though most submissions are now made through online platforms, there is always a human being on the other end. Normally, that person is the editor, who will decide whether your paper goes in for review. If you just address a letter to a random 'sir or madam' sending your paper to the editor's 'very prestigious journal,' editors may assume this is a random submission – and they're generally right. If you care about your submission, at least check to see who edits the journal, and address your cover letter and email to the person in charge. It is not just about etiquette: it demonstrates that you are genuinely interested in publishing in that specific journal. The editors and the editorial staff will appreciate it.

An abstract is just a copy-paste of the introduction – and you can throw in some references here. Most problems of academic writing stem from the indiscriminate use and abuse of copy and paste, based on a strange notion that nobody will know the difference. An abstract is a short text in its own right, and deserves time and effort to be properly written. At the submission stage, an abstract is even more important than the manuscript, since it is the only piece potential referees would read when they are invited to comment on your text. *The better you write your abstract, the more likely it is that your article will be selected by referees. This will reduce the time needed for revision; consequently, you will get published earlier. Therefore, taking time at the beginning of the submission process to write a good abstract from scratch is a good investment.*

An abstract must be clear and straightforward, considering (1) the journal's specific audience, and (2) the main point you are making in your manuscript. It must immediately convey your text's main contribution, aims and conclusion to the editor, the referees and readers. Beyond the specific case you are analyzing in your article, the abstract must clearly state the sociological question it is seeking to answer and at least clarify how answering this question will advance some field of sociological debate. Emphasize the originality of your contribution, and how you have built it –through specific data, methods, literature reviews, etc. Abstracts should only include issues that are analyzed in the paper – but not include rhetorical questions, quotations or references. Because it is the first impression on readers and helps them to decide if the article deserves to be read, you should also pay attention to include keywords so that your article can be found through online search engines once it is published.

The same paper can be submitted to different journals at the same time. Here we have a major problem. On the one hand, all of us operate under the 'publish or perish'

mandate, sometimes because we want tenure and in many cases, because we simply want to keep our job. This pressure has caused a great amount of unethical behavior, from plagiarism to 'salami slicing.' In this framework, simultaneous submissions don't look so serious. But it is, since it threatens the deeper core of academic publication, and neglects the silent and necessarily anonymous and unpaid work of referees. For each article, there are at least three persons, two referees and the editor, who are working with you and for you, for free, to improve your manuscript. And all three are expecting that at the end of the process, you will be published in that journal. Evidently, authors are entitled to withdraw their submissions, but considering the hard work that editors and reviewers put into each submission, it is regrettable when they are forced to do so just because the paper has been accepted elsewhere.

It's all about the relevance

This common mistake merits its own section: *believing that 'interesting' is automatically 'relevant.'* Even senior scholars could be caught on this tricky one. To be clear: there's no relevant paper per se. Relevance has to do with the audience you intend to reach, the authors you are debating with, and the specific bibliography that serves as a common ground for the discussion between you and your readers.

First of all, an author is someone who constructs relevance. Relevance doesn't 'come' with the issue analyzed, that is, the specific, exotic or widespread case discussed in the article. The fact that nothing on the topic has been published does not make it automatically publishable: this gap in the literature may instead indicate that the topic is not particularly relevant. The fact that your work refers to a country that is insufficiently addressed in the literature due to a geopolitical reason does not make the article instantly relevant, either. Similarly, international research with hundreds of cases is not automatically relevant. In contrast, an article about a life story or a case study could be quite relevant, if the author does his or her homework.

Relevance basically rests on three pillars:

A common ground or an encompassing debate that serves as a common language and enables a dialogue between authors and readers. Referees are your peers: they research the same subject as you and they are reading the same authors you do. Thus, you should use a literature review as your starting point. If you would like to include an unfamiliar reference, or an author who has not been translated into English, you need to build a bridge: introducing this author to the audience and relating his or her oeuvre to well-known authors and sociological problems will help you build relevance, and will probably spark an interesting debate within your specific field of research.

The journal's remit. As discussed above, take into account the geographical and idiomatic scope, but also consider whether the chosen journal is generalist or specialized, if it has a specific theoretical or methodological bias, whether its editors prefer shorter and descriptive IMRaD papers or if they publish longer, narrative pieces focused on theoretical discussion.

The journal's audience. It is possible to break down audiences into three groups: national, regional and international audiences. At each level, readers expect a specific discussion and a different contextualization. You will probably need more space to

explain and contextualize your data for an international journal than you will for a local one. In contrast, international journals open the possibility of including specific studies into a more encompassing debate.

In conclusion: What *Current Sociology* considers a good paper to be

As I stated above, no matter what journal you want to publish in, it is fundamental to be familiar with it before making a submission. So, let's consider *Current Sociology*.

Current Sociology publishes seven issues a year, including four regular issues, two monographs and the *Current Sociology Review*. Included among the regular volumes are special issues and shorter thematic sections: the special subsections. Submissions are open year-round through our Manuscript Central. You can send us your manuscript in any language and we will search for suitable reviewers. Before starting a submission, however, please contact the editorial office to find out if we can find reviewers in your language.

Articles in *Current Sociology* must between 6000 and 8000 words including the abstract, notes, references list, etc. In each case it is important to recall that the reviewers may suggest further additions or corrections that will add to the total word count of an article. As such, we recommend that authors limit their articles as much as possible during their first submission.

An ideal article for *Current Sociology* is on the cutting edge of sociological research, goes beyond the specific subdiscipline or topic of interest, and discusses theoretical and conceptual questions. As a result, narrative articles are preferred over IMRaD papers. An article could be a bibliographic review, a case study, an international comparative study or a theoretical discussion, among others. Whatever the case, the debate and discussion of concepts and theories should be central to the article. *Current Sociology* is a generalist journal and has a very international readership. Contextualization, in this sense, is fundamental: (1) to make your case understandable for a reader who is not familiar with the social reality you are dealing with, and (2) to make it relevant for an international discussion, bringing out links with core sociological and theoretical issues. Take a look at the articles recently published, see who is publishing and what is being cited. In case of doubts, write to the editor.

All submissions are initially reviewed by the editor and only papers that meet the scientific and editorial standards, and fit within the aims and scope of the journal, will be sent for external review. Papers will be double-blind peer-reviewed by an international panel of sociologists. At *Current Sociology*, we try to combine a referee from the geographical area you are dealing with, with a referee, say, from the other side of the world, in order to attain a real international balance.

All in all, there's no algorithm or recipe for writing a good article. There are a plethora of textbooks and tip lists, and even editor's advice like this one that tries to explain how to write and how to successfully publish. And basically, all of them say the same thing. But there is a *savoir-faire* that you only get in the field. To be a successful author, you should be a good reader and a committed reviewer. You need to be an active part of the collective sociology endeavor.

Résumé
L'article présente les principaux défis de l'écriture académique et la publication dans des revues scientifiques. L'article révèle quelques-unes des erreurs les plus courantes dans le processus de présentation et d'examen des manuscrits, et propose quelques solutions possibles.

Mots-clés
Ecriture académique, internationalisation, pertinence, revue académique

Resumen
El artículo presenta los principales desafíos de la escritura académica y la publicación en periódicos científicos. Revela algunos de los errores más comunes en el proceso de envío y revisión de manuscritos, y ofrece algunas soluciones posibles.

Palabras clave
Escritura académica, internacionalización, publicación académica, relevancia