

How to Get Research Published in Journals

Second Edition

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GOWER

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Why Not Publish?

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I am often impressed with the effort many publishers make to encourage publication even amongst the least inexperienced. Many journals offer prizes specifically targeted to students. The Editorial Advisory Committee of the *Australian Journal of Botany*, for example, offers an annual student prize for the best student-authored paper published in the journal. The rules state:

‘To be eligible, the student must be the lead author of the paper, and the paper must be submitted for publication while the student is enrolled for a higher degree, or within two years of graduating for a higher degree.’

The material benefits are generous – a 1-year personal print/online subscription to the journal, and a \$(Aus) 250 book voucher from Csiro Publishing. But, my hunch is that the recognition which comes from the prize is unquantifiable. Simone Farrer, Managing Editor, agrees. She told me that: *‘Apart from the monetary value, it is considered a very valuable thing to have on one’s CV.’* She explained that she introduced the *Australian Journal of Botany* student prize in 2002, to encourage young researchers to publish their work in the journal, and subsequently introduced the student prize for the other journal for which she has responsibility, *Australian Systematic Botany*.

If previously unpublished students have the self-confidence to submit papers to an academic journal, what’s stopping everyone else? The central issue is ‘going public’: the word ‘publish’ derives from the Latin *publicare*, to make public.

It is not without reward, and it is not without risk. Today, it is becoming less of an option and more of an expectation, whilst at the same time the competition is increasing and the standards are rising. Fortunately, the process is well understood and can be managed.

There remain, however, as many good reasons not to publish as there are to publish. When I run workshops on getting published, I always make sure people in the audience tell me all the reasons they know not to publish as

well as the reasons they should. That's because it is often more useful to discover why we don't do things we want to do than it is to nag ourselves with all the reasons we should. One approach makes us feel guilty and apathetic while the other may help remove the obstacles and spur us into action.

FEAR

Fear is the most common reason people give for not publishing. There may be many more excuses, but when they really clear their throats and decide to be honest, it's fear that they admit to. Every time I ask people at workshops why they don't publish, they answer with all sorts of compelling reasons, such as those I review below, before finally adding 'and fear'. That admission is guaranteed to generate a ripple of nervous laughter throughout participants. Although it may be one of the last reasons we are prepared to admit, it is almost always the most powerful. This is reasonable! Your research is important to you; it means something. You don't want to put yourself in a position where someone might dismiss it.

What if people laugh? What if they say that all the work we feel so good about is actually completely off-base? What if someone has done it all before?

Everyone has fears about all sorts of things, and some of the fears we have are ancestral and useful. A rush of fear if we're alone in a dark house and hear someone moving around downstairs is useful, but it's not so good if the house is silent, we've never yet met a burglar, we've locked all our doors and yet we still lie awake night after night worrying.

A field in psychology called cognitive behaviour explores how people convert thought to emotion and back again. Therapists try to help people distinguish between irrational thoughts creating inappropriate emotions from rational thoughts which reflect a more balanced view of the issue. The objective is to test the thoughts that are creating the emotion, giving them a 'reality check'. What lies behind the fear people have about getting published? Can we subject these fears to a reality check?

There's a simple exercise you can apply to test your own fears. On a sheet of paper, note the precise thought you have when the fear of publishing sweeps over you. Is it that you are a bad writer? Is it that you think people will dismiss your work outright? Is it perhaps a fear that they will criticize it for being shallow? Or that maybe they will steal your ideas and claim them as their own? Now, how strongly do you believe these thoughts right now? 100 per cent? 70 per cent? Write it down.

Recording your fears is a positive step in your own publishing development. It means you are no longer procrastinating meekly, but are actually taking

steps to overcome the most significant inhibitor facing new authors – fear. Make sure you use the opportunity to commit all your fears to paper, however foolish they may seem. Some day, when you feel like sharing them, you may be surprised to see how many of them appear on other people’s lists.

The next step is to examine each fear more carefully and subject it to analysis. Let’s take a few of them and see how they might stand up to closer inspection.

‘I CAN’T WRITE!’

How bad a writer can you be? You got through school and into university, didn’t you? Have you ever managed to express yourself on a birthday card or in a love letter? Did the recipients understand the message? Of course they did. Did you fail every essay or paper sent in for marking, on the grounds that they were incomprehensible? Of course you didn’t.

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So what exactly is the problem? The word ‘bad’, at the very least, might be changed to ‘mediocre’ or ‘inconsistent’. Is that what you must accept?

NO.

Perhaps writing doesn’t come easily to you; perhaps you don’t find the words miraculously flowing from your fingertips. That’s okay. No one else does either, not even professional writers. There are only three attributes which separate good writers from mediocre writers:

- preparation
- practice
- patience.

All of those are skills you can develop, and this book will show you how. Now, if you can see that your writing can’t be truly bad, but may need developing, and you can see that there are ways to develop it, what does that do to your fear?

Note again on your paper the key points that helped reduce your fear and make a note of how much you now believe your first statement: *‘I can’t write’*. 20 per cent? 10 per cent? Finally, note the action or actions you plan to take. We waste far too much time worrying about our fears.

‘THEY’LL DISMISS MY WORK OUTRIGHT!’

Will they? Why should they? Is it a poor piece of research? What do your colleagues say? How did your supervisor or client or sponsor like it?

In Chapter 4 we will see how to determine the real implications of your research. Authors often fail to describe them because they have not seen them themselves. For now, examine as you did in the first question exactly why you are afraid. Once again, subject this fear to analysis. Are people in your field really confident that they know it all? Would they not read with interest another person's contribution? Didn't your supervisor say it was good, and haven't they seen many more before you? Haven't your colleagues supported you? The answer to all these questions is likely to be 'yes', for even a reasonable piece of work. That it may not change the world is not the point right now. If it helps people to look at it a little differently, that's enough.

If your piece of research really is substandard, or if your new conceptual framework hasn't grown beyond the rough sketch stage, you may be better off not publishing right now. You must, however, test that assumption thoroughly with trusted colleagues, because you may be underestimating your own work. That's very different from publishing, say, a paper about a common error you made in your research, from which you are learning and which you are willing to share with others.

One of the benefits of electronic publishing is that you can receive prompt feedback from other people, most of whom you have never met. If you are still nervous about the quality of your research, consider submitting a short note to one of the electronic journals or conferences available on the Internet. It's likely that you will receive at least some email about your piece. Internet fora are good places to test and share ideas. You may find another researcher on the other side of the world interested in your work.

Finally, remember that learning from criticism is one of the arts of academic life. Everyone learns to use critical reasoning powers, and therefore it would be unusual for someone not to look on your work critically, as you look on the work of others. But, that does not mean they will reject it outright, although it does mean they might, even should, evaluate it critically. Would you expect any less of your peers or your students? We know from our own experience of evaluating research that we are not criticizing the person when we criticize the work. We can therefore rest assured that criticism of our own work will be fully in the spirit of academic enquiry. If we have done all the right preparation and have passed the final review stages, we do not need to fear that anyone will dismiss our work at a glance.

Review now how strongly you believe your original statement that people will reject your work outright. It probably isn't a reasonable fear, once you think about it. What's it worth – 10 per cent? What is your plan of action to further reassure yourself?

'PEOPLE WILL STEAL MY IDEAS'

As we saw in Chapter 2, this fear forms part of the 'publish as you go' debate. Fear of theft by unscrupulous ideas burglars can probably be left to disturb the sleep of a scientist who is about to discover the cure for AIDS and therefore stands to gain riches and international prestige in the process. For the rest of us, we can generally assume that other people are busy working out their own ideas and, however brilliant and original we think our ideas are, they think theirs are too.

We reviewed earlier the idea of concurrent publishing as an integral part of many people's publications strategy. As long as you present a paper at a conference or discuss your thoughts in a discussion group, you are publicizing your ideas. At least by publishing them you can lay claim to them and increase the possibility that anyone who refers to your ideas or research will at least credit you accordingly.

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It seems that the real issue is the matter of attaching one's name to the research findings. With a clear strategy worked out, which we will explore in later chapters, you do not have to fear that people won't credit you for your work. After all, we know exactly who discovered the three laws of motion, who created the law of relativity, where the term 'pasteurized' comes from and the name of the man who first mass-produced cars.

'I DON'T KNOW WHERE TO START!'

This fear relates to one of our oldest and most primitive – the fear of the dark. How can we push ourselves into an abyss, into a huge gaping black hole called 'publishing' when we don't know enough about it? How will we know that our papers will stand up to the scrutiny of the editor and their review board? How will we even know to which journal to send it? How will we start to write? How long will it take? Will we ever finish it? Few people take pleasure in being lost. Publishing is a mysterious process, but it is one that anyone can understand, learn and master.

This is the central thesis of this book, but it isn't your only source of help. Attending writers' workshops, meeting colleagues who have published and talking to people who edit and review journals will help demystify the publishing business and help you write the kind of papers which will eventually be published. For now, the answers to the following questions are brief:

How can I push myself into an abyss ... ? You don't. The first rule of a successful publishing strategy is to do your homework. Most papers fail because the writer has not considered the needs of the journal and its readers. The following chapters will show you how.

How will I know that my papers will stand up to the scrutiny of the editor and review board? By following the straightforward guidance of reviewers, editors and other authors, either by contacting them directly, or learning from their ideas distilled in the pages of this book.

How will I start? By thinking through a few main points discussed later, concentrating on purpose, implications and the right target journal.

How long will it take? To do what? To write before undertaking the initial preparatory stage? A few months, maybe years, possibly forever. After spending some directed preparation time and then writing? A couple of days.

Will it ever be finished? The paper, yes. The ongoing quest for perfection, no.

THE NEED FOR PERFECTION

Recall the advice of the doctoral supervisor quoted in the previous chapter: *'There are only two types of articles; those that are perfect and never get published, and those that are good enough and do.'*

The need to be perfect inhibits many people who don't put their words to paper. There's always one more edit that will make it right, always one more piece of information, always one more question to answer. But, how can you create perfection if you don't create at all? All any of us can do, as my good old Dad used to say, is our best. 'Best' includes being aware of the sell-by date. The perfect article may indeed be perfect, 2 years after everyone else in the field has moved on. It might be so perfect that you can frame it page by page in your study. Indeed, why not think of other ornaments you can make with the pages of unfinished, nearly perfect articles? As we saw earlier, the competition in this market is fierce. As you are patiently perfecting your article, there will probably be two or three people submitting a paper similar to yours. They'll be published in 6 months while you're still seeking another reference.

WHAT'S THE WORST THAT CAN HAPPEN?

What if, with all your best efforts behind you, your paper is returned to you, either asking for revisions or informing you politely that it is simply not acceptable at all?

Even the best authors have been rejected. If that's the worst that happens, is it really so bad?

There's always the possibility that another journal might accept what the first has rejected, not because its standards are different but because the

needs at the time are different. And even if every journal rejects it, what does this really tell you? At worst it means you need to do some more work on the topic. That's no problem. After all, that's your job, researching and contributing to the body of knowledge. Just as not all of your students will get an 'A', so not all of your papers will hit the mark.

More likely, if you've done your homework, you will be asked to revise your paper before it can be accepted for publication. We will discuss this in more detail in Chapter 13, but the most important point is never to forget that the comments from an editorial review are free, honest and of high quality. Welcome the opportunity to revise as a learning experience; it's a positive activity, not one to fear or be embarrassed about.

PRIORITIES

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'I'm too busy!' you say. Of course you are. And so are the authors who are being published right now in your field. If being published is important to you, you will find the time. But first, consider what you mean by time. Is it time spent nervously staring at the word processor going nowhere? Or time, maybe an hour each day, putting your thoughts on paper and organizing your approach?

The Performance Group in Oslo (Bjelland *et al.* 1994) studied similarities amongst those described as peak performers – writers, musicians, politicians, academics and industrialists. Amongst their several shared characteristics was their ability to concentrate intensely on whatever they were doing.

They quote the then Nokia Chief Executive Jorma Ollila saying: *'If someone focuses on what they are doing, they can do in 15 minutes what would otherwise take them 4 hours.'*

Taking time to write necessarily means taking significant blocks of time, but it is more important to manage the quality of the time rather than the quantity. Successful, prolific authors are probably as busy as, or busier than, you are. They may only block out 1 hour every 2 days to work on their manuscript, but in that time they are able to concentrate on what they are doing. The question, therefore, is not: *'How much time do I have?'* but: *'How can I use the time I have most effectively?'*

The better time management courses don't simply teach about what letters to open and how to delegate. They teach about knowing what your priorities are and how to get on with them. If the project matters to you, you will find the time.

SUMMARY

These two chapters have drawn together some of the most common reasons people give for why they should, or should not, publish. Each point has a flip side: the benefits of people knowing about your work does open up the possibility that they may not approve of it. This, as we have seen earlier, is the nature of learned debate and not something to take personally.

Each of us has different incentives in mind and experience different constraints. Before going much further, you might like to note your own reasons for publishing and all the reasons which have prevented you so far. It is then a matter of concentrating on the benefits and seeing how you can minimize the risks. After all, people who have no fear are not brave, they are fearless. Bravery is having the fear but doing it anyway.

ACTION POINTS

Note any excuses you used for not turning your ideas into publishable papers. List no more than six and, for each one, note your feelings then think of a counter argument that you really believe, a conclusion about the barriers and the counter argument, and the action you can take to break through any fears you might have. For example:

- I can talk about my ideas, but I become stuck when I try to write them down (*thought*).
- That makes me feel worried about exposing something I've written to an audience (*feeling*).
- But the restructuring paper I wrote last year at work was very well received, and everything I argued for was accepted (*counterargument*).
- I can express my ideas if I care about something, and think carefully about my audience (*conclusion*).
- I need to start with something I'm really interested in, that will be of benefit to me, and consider carefully who will be reading it (*action*).