TO: Editorial Boards and Managing Editors of Online Literary Journals
FROM: Madison Hogan
DATE: May 3, 2025
SUBJECT: Recommendation Report on Improving Submission Guidelines

The purpose of this report is to address a common yet overlooked issue in literary publishing: the difficulty many new and emerging writers face when trying to understand and follow submission guidelines on literary journal websites. Through primary survey research and secondary analysis of journal guidelines, this report identifies the key barriers that contribute to confusion and discouragement among writers. It offers three practical, research-based recommendations that literary magazine editors and staff can implement to improve clarity, increase accessibility, and ultimately encourage broader participation in the publishing process.

Research Findings

To better understand the challenges that new writers face when submitting to online literary journals, I created a Google Forms survey targeting individuals who had submitted or attempted to submit creative work for publication within the last one to two years. The participants were specifically chosen based on their limited experience with the submission process. Six individuals completed the survey.

The survey results reveal consistent patterns of confusion and discouragement linked to unclear submission guidelines. When asked to rate the clarity of most literary magazines' submission instructions (on a scale of 1 = "Very Unclear" to 5 = "Very Clear"), 50% of respondents rated them a 2 or lower. Only four people rated them above a 3. This trend suggests that the majority of new writers perceive submission instructions as difficult to interpret.
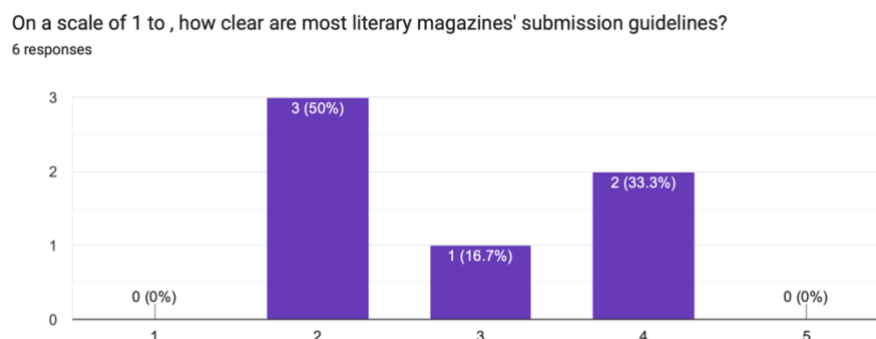

Figure 1. Aspects of Submission Guidelines

Another key result came from the question: *"Have you ever abandoned a submission because the guidelines were too confusing or frustrating?"* Six out of ten respondents answered yes. This suggests that unclear submission pages don't just confuse writers—they actively deter them from completing submissions.

Have you ever abandoned a submission because the guidelines were too confusing or frustrating?
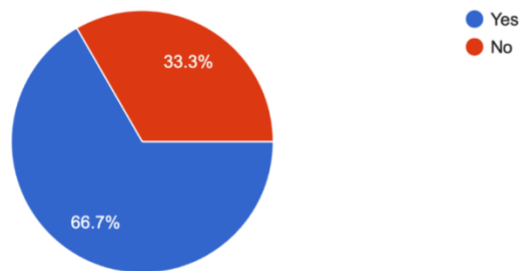6 responses

● Yes
● No

33.3%

66.7%

Figure 2. Responses to Abandoning a Submission Due to Confusing Guidelines

Open-ended responses resonated these concerns. One participant shared, "I spent over an hour trying to figure out what format they wanted before I gave up." Another wrote, "I don't even know if I submitted it correctly. They didn't confirm anything."

To complement these findings, I also reviewed the submission guidelines of ten different online literary journals. The results were inconsistent—some journals required PDF files while others only accepted .docx, and formatting preferences like line spacing or word count limits were often buried in dense paragraphs. These secondary findings reinforce what the survey data already made clear: vague and non-standardized submission instructions are a real barrier for emerging writers.

Analysis of the Problem

The data gathered from both survey responses and secondary research points to a clear and recurring issue: the submission process for literary journals is not user-friendly for new writers. The problem is not simply one of unfamiliarity, but of systemic inconsistency, poor communication, and a lack of standardization across platforms.

Root Causes and Contributing Factors:

- **Inconsistent Requirements:** Journals vary widely in their formatting demands, accepted file types, word count limits, and genre-specific rules. For writers who submit to multiple publications, this inconsistency creates unnecessary confusion and frustration.
- **Poorly Designed Guidelines:** Many submission pages present information in dense blocks of text, lacking headings, step-by-step instructions, or visual aids. Even seasoned writers may struggle to extract key details.
- **Lack of Confirmation or Feedback:** Several survey participants expressed uncertainty about whether their submissions were received or formatted correctly. When confirmation messages or status updates are missing, writers are left in the dark.

- **No Central Standard:** Unlike academic or technical publishing, the literary journal world does not follow a unified system for submissions. This leaves writers starting from scratch with each publication they approach.

Impact on Stakeholders:

- **Writers:** The primary burden falls on emerging writers, many of whom reported abandoning submissions entirely due to confusion. This not only limits opportunities for publication but also discourages new voices from participating in the literary community.
- **Journals and Editors:** Journals may miss out on quality work due to unclear expectations, as potential contributors opt out rather than risk being rejected for technical oversights.
- **The Literary Community:** Barriers to entry reduce the diversity of published voices and may contribute to the perception that literary publishing is inaccessible or elitist.

Recommendations

Based on the survey data and a review of literary journal submission practices, I propose the following three recommendations to address the recurring issues with unclear and inconsistent submission guidelines. Each recommendation is designed to improve clarity, reduce confusion, and encourage more writers to complete submissions.

Recommendation 1: Implement Step-by-Step Submission Instructions

Description: Journals should revise their submission pages to include a clearly worded, numbered list of steps. These steps should be concise and organized in the order the user needs to follow them, such as how to format the file, what to include in the bio, and how to confirm submission.

Justification: Survey participants indicated difficulty locating and interpreting essential information. Presenting instructions as step-by-step tasks will help writers avoid formatting errors and improve overall compliance.

Feasibility: This solution is highly feasible and low-cost. It requires only a reformatting of existing guidelines using headings, lists, and simple language.

Recommendation 2: Provide a Visual Example of a Proper Submission

Description: Journals should include a sample document or screenshot that shows a properly formatted submission, including title placement, file naming conventions, and author bio examples.

Justification: Writers expressed frustration with vague formatting expectations and uncertainty about elements like bio structure. A visual reference helps reduce misinterpretation and offers a model for new writers to follow.

Feasibility: Moderately feasible. It requires creating one or two example documents and uploading them to the submission page. This could be done in-house or with minimal design assistance.

Recommendation 3: Use an Automated Submission Confirmation System

Description: Journals should set up an automated confirmation email system to reassure writers that their work was received. The message could include a checklist of common submission errors (e.g., wrong file type, missing bio) for final review.

Justification: Writers noted that a lack of confirmation left them unsure whether they had successfully submitted. A simple follow-up message increases transparency and professionalism.

Feasibility: This solution depends on the platform the journal uses. For journals on platforms like Submittable, this can be configured with existing tools. Others using manual email may need to implement simple automation through email services.

Implementation Plan

To improve the submission experience for new writers, the most immediately actionable recommendation is the creation of clearly formatted, step-by-step instructions on literary journals' submission pages. This solution requires minimal resources and can be implemented quickly by journal editors or web managers.

Timeline & Key Milestones:

Timeframe	Milestone
Week 1	Identify confusing or dense areas in current submission guidelines
Week 2	Draft new step-by-step instructions using plain, direct language
Week 3	Format guidelines into a numbered list with bolded headings and clear labels
Week 4	Publish updated submission page and test clarity with a small group of writers

Resources Required:

- **Human**: One editor or staff member to revise existing guidelines
- **Technical**: Access to the journal's website backend or content management system
- **Optional**: A writer or designer to help create the visual submission example (Recommendation 2)

After the initial step-by-step revision is completed, journals could begin implementing the other two recommendations. A visual example of a correctly formatted submission could be added in

Week 5 or 6. Automation for confirmation emails may take longer depending on the submission platform but could be tested on one platform or publication first.

By addressing the most feasible change first, journals can begin improving accessibility for new writers immediately while preparing for more technical improvements later.

Conclusion

Clear, accessible submission guidelines are essential for ensuring that new and emerging writers feel empowered to share their work. As this report has shown, many literary journals unintentionally create barriers through unclear language, inconsistent formatting requirements, and a lack of support for writers navigating the process for the first time. The survey data and secondary research reveal that these issues discourage participation and lead to avoidable submission errors or abandoned attempts.

By implementing simple yet impactful changes—such as step-by-step instructions, visual examples, and confirmation emails—journals can foster a more welcoming and efficient submission process. These changes not only benefit writers but also enhance the professionalism and reach of the journals themselves.

I strongly encourage decision-makers and editorial teams to adopt at least one of these recommendations in the next publishing cycle. Doing so would create a more inclusive and transparent literary landscape, helping ensure that good writing isn't lost due to confusing logistics.

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