Special Report: How to Get Published

Publishing an academic paper requires persistence, calculated risk-taking, diplomacy, and a very thick skin. This report describes the major impediments to getting published, time-tested strategies for overcoming them, and the practical advice of a seasoned journal editor.

Topics:

I. The Three Categories of Research Papers
   A. Papers that represent major advancements in their field. These will be published by even the most prestigious journals. Because these are very rare, this report will not deal with them.
   B. Papers that are of publishable quality but are often arbitrarily rejected (see III below). Research shows that most rejected papers fall into this category. Below, you will find strategies to help you increase your number of published papers.
   C. Papers with major problems that would be rejected by any journal (see IV below). This report provides several strategies to help you prevent and/or fix such problems.

II. How to Respond to the Rejection of Your Paper

If you want to enjoy long-term success with the publication process, you must deal both on a motivational and practical level with the rejection of your papers.

   A. On the Motivational Level: **Do not become disheartened.** Even if your paper is very good, it will often require three submissions or more to be accepted by a ranking journal.
B. On the Practical Level: **Do not wait more than a month from the time your paper is rejected until you resubmit it elsewhere. If you delay, you will only lose interest in your paper.** Calmly consider whether your rejection was due to:

- Seriously flawed research
- Flaws in the presentation (poor language quality, poor organization, problems with analysis or conclusion)
- Submission to an inappropriate journal
- More subjective reasons (tastes of an individual editor, recently published articles on what was felt to be too similar a subject, etc.).

If your research is not seriously flawed, consult the strategies in the following sections to improve your chances of acceptance.

If your research is seriously flawed, you still have several options for salvaging your work. These might include resubmitting to a non-peer-reviewed journal, conducting supplemental research, or changing the hypothesis or purpose of your study (e.g., to a methods paper, a hypothesis-generating study, a case series, or a literature review with preliminary findings). The steps you take will depend on the nature of the problems, and you should seek the guidance of an experienced colleague. Most important is to learn from your mistakes. Especially if you are still new to the publication process, whether or not you learn from your mistakes will determine your long-term success.

### III. How to Get a Sufficient Number of Your Papers Accepted Despite Journals’ High Rejection Rates

Research shows that the majority of rejected papers do not contain major flaws; they are rejected arbitrarily. Because acceptance is only somewhat dependent on the content of your paper, a number of other factors should be considered to increase your acceptance rate. The following strategies show you how to reduce the element of chance in the publication process:

**A. Have a Critical Number of Papers Under Review at All Times**

The best way to overcome the arbitrary element of the acceptance process is by turning it into a numbers game. First, if you can, determine what your personal acceptance rate is. If you do not yet have enough experience to calculate this number, estimate it from the average acceptance rate for your field and for the specific journals to which you will be submitting. We strongly recommend that you take the time to research these rates. This information is available for most disciplines and many individual journals. **Remember, however, that these average acceptance rates are only estimates; it is imperative that you calculate your own personal acceptance rate on an ongoing basis and apply it to the strategies below.**

**NOTE:** since the response time for journals can last anywhere from six months to a year, you must have several papers under consideration simultaneously. Also, the more you submit, the more experienced you will become with the publication process, which will improve your chances of publication, increase your speed, and toughen your skin.

Once you have estimated your personal acceptance rate, consider how many articles your career goals require that you to publish per year. Finally, determine how many papers you must submit to reach the critical number of publications. **Constantly maintaining your personal submission quota will ensure your academic survival.** Below, you will find an overview of submission quotas based on various acceptance rates.
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<th>Your Estimated Personal Acceptance Rate</th>
<th>Goal: 1 Publication Per Year</th>
<th>Goal: 2 Publications Per Year</th>
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As this table shows, for low acceptance rates an impractical number of articles would need to be under review. If you fall into this category, you should focus on improving your personal acceptance rate.

**B. Decide Whether to Improve Your Paper or Resubmit It as Is**

Though the rejection of most papers is arbitrary, improvements to a paper can still increase its likelihood of being accepted by another journal. At the same time, your paper might be accepted elsewhere without any changes. Determine whether your time would be better spent improving this paper or resubmitting it as is. Resubmitting it as is will allow you to work on other projects. Remember that no paper is perfect. **Do not let more than a month elapse between resubmissions.**

**C. Diversify Wisely**

**a. Find the Right Combination of High- and Middle-Ranking Journals**

Everyone would love to have all of his or her papers in top-ranking journals, but acceptance into these journals is extremely rare, even for the excellent papers of accomplished researchers. Acceptance into low-ranking journals is much easier, but one cannot expect to have a long career if all one’s work is published exclusively by these journals. The key to long-term success is a mix of top- and middle-tier publications. Also keep in mind that, while quality is important, quantity also matters, especially for less-experienced researchers. **Staying in the game is more important than fame.** Employ careful risk-taking. Talk to more-experienced researchers in your field for advice concerning where and how often to submit.

**b. Don’t Put All Your Eggs in One Basket**

For journals of a similar caliber, it reflects better on you to have several papers published in various journals than several papers in the same journal.

**D. Maximize Ideas, Minimize Length**

Rather than try to cover two or more topics in one long paper, give each idea its own paper. This will help you keep each paper concise and focused. Furthermore, having a higher number of papers under review at the same time will increase your chances of publication. **Short papers, particularly in the sciences, are more likely to be published** (although in certain specific cases longer papers are preferred). We strongly
recommend that you take the time to research which format is more suitable to your field. Editors require less time to consider shorter papers and are also less likely to misunderstand them.

NOTE: Verbosity

Researchers have a tendency to use too many words to describe their findings. Journal editors dislike excess words: journals have limited room and extra words mean extra printing costs. Determine, line-by-line, what can be cut without detracting from your paper’s clarity.

E. Collaboration

a. Less-Experienced Researchers—Collaborate with More-Senior Coauthors

Although you must eventually learn to be self-sufficient, you should collaborate with more-experienced coauthors at the outset. This may double your chances of publication. Also, more-accomplished coauthors can help you to build up a list of important contacts within your field. Watching others conduct research and compose a paper will give you invaluable insight into the process.

b. Advice for Collaboration

Before research gets underway, take time to allot different tasks to the various members of your research team. It is always beneficial to have a clear division of labor so that each person understands his or her responsibilities.

When it comes time to submit your paper, make sure that credit is divided evenly among the members. The order of names can be a touchy subject. In a long-term relationship, try varying the order of the names. You can also employ any number of randomization strategies to ensure fairness (draw names out of a hat, flip a coin, draw straws, etc.). Remember to be considerate of your coauthors’ feelings. Each person believes he or she might be contributing more than the others believe he or she is. If someone is lagging behind, bring this to his or her attention as diplomatically as possible. Choosing to remove someone’s name from a project is probably a not a good idea, even if the person did not fulfill all his or her duties. Don’t forget that your community is a small one, and that any insensitivity on your part can turn people against you in the long term.

F. Network

Make as many professional acquaintances as you can within your field. Attending and presenting papers at conferences is an excellent way to do this. Try to attend at least two conferences every year; in most fields, this will allow you to meet almost all your referees in approximately five years. Personal contact reduces the likelihood of an arbitrary rejection. But just meeting these people at conferences is not enough. Make sure to take down their contact information and keep in touch with them as much as possible without being too aggressive (for example, do not send your papers to them if they have not asked you to). In the future, they might also be able to help you in other ways, such as letters of recommendation. By attending conferences, you will not only make important contacts, but will gain insight into what is currently going on in your field. Furthermore, other attendees can offer you their thoughts on your presented paper, helping you to anticipate and address its weaknesses.

G. How to Deal with Bias

Though the quality of your paper should be the sole consideration for referees and journal editors, in some fields other factors, such as institution or nationality, may at times play a role. If you are concerned that this is an issue for you, consider the following strategies:

a. Join or create joint research projects with colleagues who are not subject to prejudices.
b. Contact a researcher who successfully overcame the same bias and ask how he or she did this. Most people who have worked against prejudices like to help others in the same situation, so don’t hesitate to contact the person even if you have not yet made his or her acquaintance.

c. Choose journals that have published researchers subject to the same bias as you. A list of a journal’s authors can be obtained directly from the journal or via a literature search.

H. Acknowledgments

No matter what stage you are at in your career, it is vital to acknowledge those who offered support, be it advisory, technical, or financial. Make sure to specifically acknowledge the contributions of each person or organization. You must be sure to secure expressed permission from anyone you wish to acknowledge: he or she might disagree with your findings and may not want to be mentioned. Make sure he or she views the actual acknowledgement so as not to be unpleasantly surprised by anything in it (for example, inaccurate descriptions of his or her work, misspellings, etc.). It is especially important to acknowledge whatever financial support you may have received, as this information can greatly influence the credibility of your findings.

IV. How to Prevent and Fix Problems in Papers

A. Inappropriate Journal

The choice of the appropriate journal is crucial. Spend the necessary time to find the journals best suited to your paper. Especially if you are a less-experienced researcher, consult with more-senior researchers before you make your decision. Familiarize yourself with each journal you are considering (read several issues). Closely read the submission guidelines and follow them exactly.

B. Poor Study Design or Methodology

Problems include inadequate or inappropriate samples, confounding factors, unclear or inappropriate endpoints, and hypotheses that are not well thought out. Once made, these problems can be very difficult to fix. Avoid them by beginning with a detailed “blueprint” for your study.

C. Problems with the Presentation of your Study

Common problems here include not structuring your paper according to the journal’s guidelines, poor organization of information, insufficient (or excessive) information, straying from the topic, mixing results and discussion, not discussing all the findings, insufficient conclusion/analysis, and conclusions that do not follow from the results. Especially for less-experienced researchers, it is advisable to have an experienced colleague or mentor go over your paper with you.

D. Statistical Problems

If you are not well versed in statistics, have a statistician look at your study. It usually takes only 20–30 minutes per assessment. Use the services of statistics departments, which often offer free or discounted services to train their own students. If your institution does not provide such a service, consult the websites of statistical institutes at other respected universities. Try to obtain assistance from a doctoral student in statistics or post an ad to one of the many statistical websites (such as www.statsci.org/soc.html).

E. Unsatisfactory Language Quality

Research shows that there is a correlation between unsatisfactory English and rejection (see www.academicword.com/why.asp). Manuscripts with a greater number of errors in grammar or style distract
the reviewer and obscure the essential message of the paper. More importantly, such errors can create the impression that the research is as flawed as the presentation.

Great minds, even native English speakers, may not be excellent writers. If writing is not your strength, avail yourself of a person who can help with content, structure, presentation, and grammar. This is especially necessary for non-native English speakers, who must take additional steps (see below) to ensure that whoever is reviewing and/or editing their documents is doing a good job.

Who Should Edit Your Manuscript?

a. If You Are a Native English Speaker

i. Colleague or Mentor
This person must possess excellent English writing skills. Be aware that it will likely require several hours of full concentration to edit your paper carefully, so be certain that your colleague can devote the necessary time.

ii. Group-Project Editor
You may choose to join a group project with one excellent writer who does the final editing. There are additional benefits to the group-project approach, especially for less-experienced researchers (see III. E above).

iii. Professional Editor
Professional editors may charge from $8–$20 per 250-word page depending on the topic, writing quality, complexity of your work, and turnaround time. Realize that, in general, you get what you pay for. Look for an editor with experience in your area, who guarantees the work, and who will provide editing samples and references.

b. If You Are a Non-Native English Speaker

Many non-native English speakers overestimate their English-writing abilities. An easy way to judge your English writing is to give a sample to a native English speaker and ask for an honest assessment.

If you decide to have your manuscript edited, the following strategies will help you select an editor:

i. Native English-Speaking Colleague
How do you know if a colleague will be a good editor? Although your colleague may be an intelligent, well-educated native English speaker, he or she may not be a good writer. Good writing skills are a gift that does not necessarily go along with a strong academic mind. You might have a third party, whose English you know is excellent, examine a sample of your colleague’s writing. It should require only a few minutes to determine the language skills of your colleague. Only if the third party approves should you accept your colleague’s help.

After your colleague returns your edited manuscript, again show it to an English language expert to assess. Ideally, the person should also understand the content of the paper. This last quality-check is very important and should not take too much time. It is hard to expect perfection from someone who is volunteering, so you need to make sure your editor has put in the required effort and time—usually several hours.
ii. Group-Project Editor

You may choose to join a group project with one excellent writer who does the final editing. There are additional benefits to the group-project approach, especially for less-experienced researchers (see III. E above).

iii. Professional Editor

Professional editors may charge from $8–$20 per 250-word page depending on the topic, writing quality, complexity of your work, and turnaround time. Realize that, in general, you get what you pay for. Look for an editor with experience in your area, who guarantees the work, and who will provide editing samples and references. Be careful—simply because someone calls himself a professional editor and returns your manuscript with many changes does not mean he did a good job! Show the edited document to a native English speaker with excellent English skills and ask him or her to assess the work.

V. Practical Advice from a Seasoned Journal Editor

Jonathan M. Samet, former editor of the American Journal of Epidemiology, provided the following advice in an article entitled “Dear Author—Advice from a Retiring Editor,” which appeared in that journal in 1999.

I. Manuscript Preparation

A. What to Do

i. Review the manuscript compulsively before sending it to the journal; make sure that it fits journal specifications and that there are no embarrassing problems—forgotten tables or figures, for example.

ii. Run a spell-checking program; it takes minutes and avoids embarrassing sloppiness.

iii. Describe the study population in at least one table.

iv. Write an informative—but not grandiose—cover letter.

v. It may be useful to suggest reviewers, but it is distracting to indicate persons who should not review, unless truly warranted.

B. What Not to Do

i. Write a lengthy introduction that compulsively reviews all studies previously published. For example, a remembered manuscript cited 100 references by the end of the introduction!

ii. Make priority comments—almost no study is “the first;” the priority claim is more likely to indicate failure to review the literature.

iii. Repetitively describe results in the text that are already in tables and figures.

iv. Offer tables that may consume an entire issue of the journal through their length.

v. Provide only model results without first checking your data.

vi. Repeat findings in the Discussion. Use the Discussion to integrate new findings, to draw out implications, and to address limitations.
vii. Write a weak last paragraph. This is where authors often lose control, offering sometimes naive policy recommendations or generic calls for more research (possibly in support of their next grant). Manuscripts need an ending, but must go out with restraint.

II. Communication with Editors

A. What to Do

i. Write a “good” letter for resubmission, which might begin by politely acknowledging the reviewer’s “helpful” or “thoughtful” comments. The core should be a point-by-point response to all of the reviewers’ comments and to those from the editor...if I offer my own additional comments, then I consider a response to be mandatory.

ii. Treat the editor with respect. Avoid writing combative letters if your paper has been rejected.

B. What Not to Do

i. Call the editor directly (unless invited). Inquiries should be made to and through the journal office.

ii. Approach the editor personally with questions, comments, or rejoinders about a particular manuscript. When so approached, I typically find that my brain cannot retrieve the details of the manuscript from the many I am handling.

We hope that this report has made you more familiar with publication pitfalls and possibilities. We wish you the best of luck in your research and career. Please feel free to contact us with any questions or comments at questions@academicword.com

Best Regards,

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Editor-in-Chief

Michael Schlomowitsch
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Sources:

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For further materials, see also:

Communicating in Science by Vernon Booth
The Craft of Scientific Presentations by Michael Alley
The Craft of Scientific Writing by Michael Alley
Essentials of Writing Biomedical Research Papers by Mimi Zeiger
How to Write and Illustrate a Scientific Paper by Björn Gustavii
How to Report Statistics in Medicine by Thomas A. Lang and Michelle Secic
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