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PRACTICAL GUIDES

How do I submit a paper to a scientific journal?

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Maxine Clarke takes us through the processes involved in submitting a paper to a scientific journal.

Before submitting a paper to a scientific journal, two factors should be kept in mind. The first is the need to ensure that you have a clear, logical message. The second is to present your paper in the correct format for the journal to which you intend to submit the paper.

The first of these is the most important. However careful and beautiful the presentation, a paper will not be published unless it has a clear, sound conclusion (editors of reputable journals will always be happy to advise authors whose scientific conclusions are publishable but who have difficulty in presenting these conclusions in, say, a foreign language).

Before submitting a paper, therefore, be sure that you have something important and publishable to say. To know this, you should discuss your results with others working in the field, both in your own institution and elsewhere.

The best way to do this is to present your results at scientific meetings — if you can get to them. An additional (or alternative) strategy is to join an email list relevant to your field, and use that to obtain feedback about your research plans, and learn about results from others in the field.

Discuss your ideas and proposed paper with people whose work you respect and admire. It may be a good idea to send one or two key scientists a brief summary of your paper, and ask them to send you some informal comments on whether it is worth your while writing a full paper, or if whether you should to do some more work first (and if so, what).

Use the Internet and email if you cannot speak to people directly at meetings. If you can discuss your work by telephone, then do so; but send the recipient a synopsis or draft of your proposed publication first, so that you have something concrete to discuss.

Writing a draft

When you are sure you are ready to write up the paper, prepare a first draft, including the figures, and repeat the consultation process. Ask people at this stage which journal they think would be most appropriate for publication of your work.

Once you feel you have a solid conclusion to present, you need to prepare a final draft of your paper (see "How to write a scientific paper") in the format of the journal to which you intend to submit.

In deciding on the journal, you should bear in mind the advice you have received from others in the field (some of whom may be academic editors of journals and referees themselves, and hence experienced at judging which journal is most appropriate).

You should also be aware of which journals are publishing similar papers to yours, and whether the journal that you have selected has any rules that make it particularly easy — or difficult — for you to submit.

For example, some journals impose page charges (although many do not), which are typically US\$50–100 per page but vary greatly. A journal will state its page charges in its instructions to authors. If your institution cannot pay these, you should ask the journal before you submit whether it will waive the charges — many do under such circumstances.

Another factor to bear in mind is that although some journals allow electronic submission via the Internet or by email, others only allow 'hard-copy' submission by post. This may affect your decision about where to submit.

Most journals or their publishers (for example, a scientific society) have websites containing information that will help you to make this decision. Alternatively you may be able to look at the journal of your choice in your library.

Follow the guidelines

Make sure you read thoroughly the journal's editorial policy, guidelines to authors and any other relevant information — for example, which people in your scientific field are on the editorial board — before you submit.

Author information of this type is usually on 'free access' areas of journals' websites, even if the content of the journal is only available to subscribers. But if your library does not subscribe to the journal of your choice and that journal has an online version, it is worth sending the journal an email saying that you are planning to submit a paper, and asking the journal if it will arrange for you to have online access to its contents for a limited time.

This will allow you to look at the level and format of published papers, information that will be helpful when you prepare the final version of your own paper.

Submitting your paper

Once you have read the journal's instructions to authors and prepared your paper, you must submit it according to the journal's instructions.

Different journals have different rules about number of copies of papers to submit, how to prepare figures and tables, whether to include other information supplementary to your paper, whether all the authors have to sign the letter of submission (known as the 'cover letter') or just one, and so on.

When you submit your paper, the cover letter should contain:

- Your name, address, phone and fax numbers and email address;
- Alternative contact details if you will be away for any length of time;
- A brief statement, in a sentence or two, why you think the paper is important and why the journal should publish it (in other words, state the main conclusion of the paper);
- Names of anyone in the field who has commented on the paper previously particularly if they are individuals of high standing in the field and/or if they are on the editorial board of the journal;
- Suggestions of a particular person you would like to referee the paper (although you must be confident that the person is independent, in other words does not collaborate with you or have any other reason to be biased in your favour);
- Details of anyone you would not like to review your paper because you think they would not give an objective assessment; and
- Any other details you think are relevant.

It is important to keep this cover letter as short as possible, as the editor who will read it probably receives many papers, and will find it easier to assess yours if you can be succinct.

Reacting to a journal's response

When your paper has been submitted, the journal will probably acknowledge receipt. If you do not hear anything from the journal for a couple of weeks, send the editor a short email asking for an acknowledgement of receipt of your paper, a reference number, and the name of the editor who is handling it.

Use this reference number in any subsequent status enquiries. A journal usually provides an email address on its list of staff (known as the 'masthead') that is published in each issue, usually on the front or the back page.

When the journal has assessed your paper (usually with the help of referees, who are independent scientists in the field selected by the journal's editors), the editor will write to you with a decision about publication, and enclosing referees' reports.

Sometimes an editor's letter will be clear, and it is obvious how you should revise your paper for resubmission. If the letter is not clear, write back to the editor (by email) explaining what you do not understand, and ask for an explanation — for example if the referees' comments are difficult to understand, or you are not sure what the editor means in his or her instructions for revising your paper.

What to do if your paper is rejected

If the journal declines to publish your paper, it is usually a good idea to discuss this decision with a colleague in the field, showing them the reports and editor's letter, before proceeding further. It might be worth appealing the decision, or it might be better to submit your paper to another journal.

If you do decide to appeal the journal's decision, send a letter stating your case, sticking to scientific points (for example, those parts of your conclusions that may have been misunderstood or not appreciated).

Do not send angry or abusive letters, as this will not help your case.

What to do if your paper is accepted

If your paper is accepted for publication, ask the editor immediately, certainly before the paper is published, about the journal's policy on copyright and reprints, and whether there are other conditions of publication.

A journal may provide you with some reprints free of charge if you do not have funds to pay for them. But it is important to ask about this before your paper is published; the journal may not be able to provide free reprints after publication, as they are much more expensive to produce than reprints made at the time of publication of your article.

Alternatively the journal may be prepared to waive its standard copyright restrictions. But you will probably need to ask for such concessions, explaining your circumstances.

When you are given a publication date for your paper, tell your institution so that it can include this information in its annual report or other documents promoting its research.

Finally, remember to thank personally all those who have helped you in preparing the paper, letting them know that it will be published and in which journal.

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This article was previously part of SciDev.Net's e-guide to science communication and has been reformatted to become this practical guide.

<http://www.scidev.net/en/practical-guides/how-do-i-submit-a-paper-to-a-scientific-journal-.html>

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