Getting Published: Strategies for Moving Forward

Richelle M. Allen-King, University at Buffalo & Steven Wojtal, Oberlin College

A mixture of ideas from different sources that draws heavily on portions of a 'tomorrow's professor' posting about publishing[1], as well as Boice's research, colleagues and our own experiences.

Description: We often hear talk of the pressure to publish. That characterization of this vital aspect of your career does not acknowledge that we are drawn to our work by curiosity about the world and find great satisfaction from completing a research project and seeing the work published. Nevertheless, a laundry list of obstacles, which include a myriad of other 'urgent' obligations, limited time to devote to writing, feelings that your work is inadequate or incomplete, and negative reviewer responses, can add frustration to writing and contribute to the pressure mentioned above. In this session, we will discuss several practical strategies for preparing manuscripts and seeing them through the review process.

Support your Writing

- Be aware of your writing rituals and make them work for you.

- Read and study quality manuscripts in your field regularly. There is nothing like an enlightened description of a well executed study to inspire your inner author.

Just WRITE

- Set aside a regular time without interruptions for writing. The more you write, the easier it is to write.

'*Many scholars believe that writing requires big blocks of time. They're wrong. Research shows that scholars who write daily publish far more than those who write in big blocks of time. The problem with big blocks of time is that they're hard to find. In contrast, when you write daily, you start writing immediately because you remember what you were writing about the day before. This leads to impressive production. In one study participants who wrote daily wrote only twice as many hours as those who wrote occasionally in big blocks of time but wrote or revised ten times as many pages (Boice 2000:144).*' (Tomorrow's professor[1])

- Refuse frustration and 'defeatist' attitudes.

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, your writing time will be usurped. If you don't write today, don't let that snowball grow! Make an appointment with yourself for tomorrow and KEEP it.

- Record time spent writing and report your progress regularly.

'To write daily you will need to keep a daily record of your writing, and share those records with someone weekly. What difference does keeping records make? Robert Boice led a series of workshops for scholars who sought to improve their writing productivity. Boice stressed the importance of writing daily, keeping a record of the minutes spent on writing, and being accountable to someone weekly. Participants were divided into three groups: (a) The first group ("controls") did not change their writing habits, and continued to write

[1] Msg. #661 PUBLISH AND FLOURISH; BECOME A PROLIFIC SCHOLAR from tomorrow's professor list serve. An archive of all past postings (with a two week delay) can be found at: http://ctl.stanford.edu/Tomprof/index.shtml. The particular posting to which I refer was a summary of the book titled Publish & Flourish: Become a Prolific Scholar written by the author, Tara Gray (2005). Italicized text throughout the listing is from her summary. NOTE: Anyone can SUBSCRIBE to the Tomorrows-Professor Mailing List by addressing an e-mail message to: <Majordomo@lists.stanford.edu. Do NOT put anything in the SUBJECT line but in the body of the message type: subscribe tomorrows-professor.

occasionally in big blocks of time; in 1 year they wrote an average of 17 pages; (b) the second group wrote daily and kept a daily record; they averaged 64 pages; (c) the third group wrote daily, kept a daily record, and held themselves accountable to someone weekly; this group's average *was 157 pages (Boice 1989:609). Without records and someone to share them with it is too easy to convince yourself that you will write "tomorrow." But "tomorrow" never comes-or at least it doesn't come very often.'*

Consider forming a 'writing club' – like a book club but you have to read the book! Informal discussion with a past participant identified such a club that worked!

- Start writing as you collect and analyze data. Writing can help you to identify coherence or lack of coherence in a set of observations, and it can help you enumerate a framework for inferences.

'*Write from the first day of your project-as soon as you have a research idea-and keep writing throughout the project. Don't finish the research first; research as you write, and write as you research. Not all writing must be formal and polished. Some writing is done simply to generate thought and to keep a record of ideas, however crude, so they can be reviewed and revised later. The roughest draft can be valuable precisely because it can be saved, reviewed, and revised. Physicist Dallin Durfee (Brigham Young University) explains how writing this way improved his research and saved time:*

> *I've begun to write about my physics experiments while they are still in progress, allowing me to see weaknesses in our experiments and realize what data will be most useful in making cohesive arguments early on, before research time has been wasted on unfruitful ideas.*

Organize it

- Make use of larger blocks of time to cut the project into manageable pieces (can be done in outline form, but this is not required)
- Post key 'data' where they are easy to view and write to them.
- 'Organize around key sentences. '

'*Readers expect nonfiction to have one point per paragraph. The point of the paragraph should be contained in a key or topic sentence, located early in the paragraph and supported by the rest of the paragraph. A key sentence is to a paragraph like a street sign is to a street: it helps the reader to navigate by showing what is to come. A key sentence announces the topic of the paragraph (Williams 1990:97-105). It must be broad enough to "cover" everything in the paragraph but not so broad that it raises issues that are not addressed in the paragraph. To test this idea, ask yourself the (key) question: "Is the rest of the paragraph about the idea in the key sentence?" The key sentence should announce the topic without trying to prove the point-the rest of the paragraph serves that function. It should include the key words; that is, if the paragraph is about Napoleon, then "Napoleon" (rather than "he") should be the subject of it!'*

- Write, and then continually revise and update and outline. If you (or your students) are bogging down, dissect the document.

Re-outline the troubled section by identifying the key sentence or idea of each paragraph. This also provides a good means of focusing attention on dysfunctional paragraphs – e.g. those for which it is difficult to identify one key idea! Such a dissecting process can reveal locations where the outline presents leaps in logic or where ideas do not flow. Reorganize as needed. Note that I find WORD heading 'style' formats can be used on the identified key sentences, then generating a table of contents in WORD 'instantly' creates your extant outline.

'*To examine the organization of your writing, list the key sentences-and headings-to see an after-the-fact outline (Booth, Colomb and Williams 2003:213, 188). Now, read the list and question yourself about the purpose and organization of the writing.'*

Preparing manuscripts – some general comments

- Write with a specific journal or other outlet in mind.

- Separate observations from inferences.

Reviewers are more likely to recommend your work for 'revision and resubmission' or 'publication after major/minor revision' instead of outright 'rejection' if they recognize that the manuscript contains significant new data. Editors rely upon those recommendations to make their judgments, but make their own assessments on similar criteria.

- Use standard writing conventions.

It is imperative to write simply and clearly when introducing and explaining complex ideas. It is better to limit the work you ask each sentence to do than to write long, complex sentences that extend for several lines of typescript. Readers prefer sentences in which they can easily identify the subjects and predicates. You risk 'loosing' your reader when subjects and predicates appear in unusual positions in the sentence. Adding long and flowery introductory clauses to your sentences or placing one or more modifying clauses between the subject and predicate of the sentence is more likely to confuse than impress the reader (see Gopen and Swann).

- Write to convince an imagined adversarial reader; try to anticipate and answer their criticisms.

- *Introduction* and *Discussion* sections are key elements in successful articles.

Try to use the Introduction to situate your approach, data, or analysis. Try to use the Discussion to explain fully the relevance of your approach, data, or analysis and results.

- Write concisely and clearly, respect your reader's time.

- Make sure that your figures, images, and tables convey information critical to moving your argument forward.

- Write a cover letter to accompany your submission in which you situate your argument within the field and highlight your conclusions.

The letter probably should not exceed two pages, but it should be long enough to help the editor see the relevance of your work and to aid them in choosing appropriate reviewers for it.

Some common shortcomings that you should avoid

Problem: The manuscript does not fit the content or style of the journal to which the author has submitted it.

Solution: Select a journal that is appropriate for the work you intend to report. Then read and adhere to the Guidelines for Authors.

Problems: There are logical flaws or rhetorical leaps in the text. Critical arguments appear too late in the text, or figures are cited out of order. New observations, data, or interpretations appear in the *Summary* or *Conclusion* sections.

Solution: Let the manuscript sit for a while (a few days to a few weeks) before your final edit for content. In this way, you can often recognize problems in organization, logical flaws, rhetorical leaps, mixing of observations and inference, etc. that were not apparent during the initial writing or as you cut and pasted together portions of the manuscript.

Problem: There are annoying problems such as missing figures, incorrectly cited references, figures not cited, spelling errors, etc. Some reviewers are naturally curmudgeonly, but many others only become curmudgeons as they work through a manuscript.

Solution: Check for conformity between text and figures, and make sure that you check spelling after the final edit.

Problem: There are so many citations that the manuscript reads like a dissertation or masters thesis discussing the literature.

Solution: Be generous in citing other work, but stick to the critical references.

How do you know when a manuscript is ready for submission?

- Aim for substantive contributions, not the smallest publishable units.
- No work is flawless; no manuscript is perfect.

Holding yourself to a standard of perfection will ensure that your work is never ready for submission. Furthermore, it is of value to remember that good research leads to new questions. Therefore, no one manuscript should seek to answer all researchable questions.

- Apprehension about rejection is not generally a legitimate reason not to submit the work.

Remember that if you don't take the risk of submitting, you won't have the satisfaction of publishing. Your job is to write a quality article, to the best of your abilities, and send it to the journal. It is the function of the Editorial process and the very real people involved in it to decide if it is ready to publish. Publishing is a process, not an event.

- Your work is at a stage appropriate for publication when

- You have gotten good feedback on an oral presentation at a professional meeting or other forum.
- You have direct corroboration or contradiction of an important result in your field.
- You have significant new data or a significant new interpretation to report.

Given that these are admittedly subjective criteria, ask an advisor or a colleague to read your written work and use their feedback to help you to assess the status of your work (see also below).

Seek feedback at critical junctures!

Feedback can come from an expert in your field. However, don't forget about non-expert successful professional colleagues. In general, professional colleagues are capable of providing useful feedback whether or not they are from within your discipline. Furthermore, good hearted senior colleagues will do their best to provide comments to help you improve your work. Be aware of the time commitment for which you are asking and how busy they are by requesting focused feedback and preparing quality materials for review. In addition, you may find that if you ask for response to a 'quick read', you will get very helpful feedback rather quickly. Remember to use words such as 'I value your input and particularly seek your thoughts on xxx aspect of this work.' Provide a reasonable deadline (e.g. 2 weeks) as part of the context of your request, i.e. would it be possible for you to spend about 20 minutes on the introduction and send me your feedback during the next week or two? Also, remember the adage, 'if you don't want the answer, don't ask the question.' Sometimes critical feedback is hard to take or to understand. (See feedback below.)

Make the most of your reviews

Substantive reviews mean that the reviewer was interested enough in your work to spend time on it. That is a precious resource!

- Rejections

Nearly everyone has had one or more of their submissions rejected. Remember that it is the manuscript (not you and not necessarily the work) that has been rejected. The writing, the science, or both may not meet the standards of the journal. You can only understand the problem by carefully reading and interpreting the reviews.

Perseverance can pay dividends.

- Remember the story of the Vine-Matthews(-Morley) hypothesis.

- Read reviewer's comments with an open mind and 'learn how to listen'

Substantive reviews mean that the reviewer was interested enough in your work to spend time on it. That is a precious resource!
If necessary, take a few days or engage in constructive venting of your frustrations to calm down before you do this.
- 'Remember, when it comes to clarity, the reader is always right.'
"Clarity is a social matter, not something to be decided unilaterally by the writer. The reader, like the consumer, is sovereign. If the reader thinks something you write is unclear, then it is, by definition. Quit arguing" (McCloskey 2000:12).'

Often, readers do not express their concerns clearly. This can result either from your lack of clarity or their limited knowledge of the topic – assume that both contributed to some level. Give each reviewer a familiar personality and have a dialog with that person. Get to the bottom of their concern and respond to that concern.

'*The paper is usually read by several reviewers. Don't expect reviewers-or other readers-to make identical comments. It's tempting to conclude that, when reviewers don't make the same suggestions, they disagree. When researchers examined scholarly reviews, they found that reviewers gave good [specific] advice and did not contradict each other (Fiske and Fogg 1990:591-597). Generally, one reader will criticize the literature review, another will find fault with the methods, and yet another will take umbrage with the findings. If you make changes in response to each of these reviewers, you will improve the paper and reduce the chance that other readers will find fault with the manuscript. Think of each specific concern as a hole in your rhetorical "dam:" the more holes you plug, the better your argument will "hold water."*'

- Revise carefully, thoughtfully, and thoroughly.

- Take reviewer's and editor's comments into account in revising, but remember that you need not make every change requested by the reviewers or the editor. However, you must

- 'Respond to each criticism.'

When returning a manuscript, write a well organized (and polite!) cover letter that details the changes that you have made:
- Explain what changes (requested or not) you have made and why.
- Explain what requested changes you have not made and why you have not made them.

In general, my response letters are longer than the reviews.

Communication is the key

- Strive to communicate as clearly as possible in your writing – keep the exposition simple
- Use your cover letter to facilitate communication with the editor.
- In submitting a revised manuscript, you have an opportunity to answer criticisms and therefore 'communicate' with the reviewers. Although your letter is written to the editor, it may be shared with reviewers in a 're-review' process.

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