

Rules of Thumb Series

*Submitting & Publishing Articles*¹

Handout for DPhil Students

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Version beta

Writing articles, submitting and publishing them is the central business for an academic.

Being an academic and not submitting manuscripts - and, therefore, not publishing them - is like those parents, at the playfield sidelines, yelling at the coach or at the kids how they should play the game. Either you start spending time on the playfield yourself or invest better your own time in other activities. But let's not rush into other possible activities, let's think about the publishing articles playfield.

If you believe those published papers you have read were immediately pretty when they were born, you never saw newborn babies. They are beautiful, at the start, only for their parents. Then, they grow and with parental care and attention, they (can) become beautiful kids. It is going to take time, care and tears for those papers to become pretty.

Those papers you see published are at the best of their "polishing and shining", but you don't know their dark trajectories. You don't know when the author had that idea for the first time, you don't know how many half-baked papers are still

¹ Notice: This is a rough, unfinished and highly opinionated handout. There are typos for sure, I know. I just don't know where they are. Thanks to Vincenzo Bove, Stefano Costalli, Fabrizio Coticchia, Ursula Daxecker, Juan Masullo, Francesco N. Moro, Jessica Di Salvatore and Chiara Ruffa for trying (and failing) to help me making this handout more professional. Comments are welcome: andrea.ruggeri@politics.ox.ac.uk.

collecting dust on his/her desk². You don't know how much "pushback" that paper got at conferences. How many times that manuscript was misunderstood, and how many times that was the author's fault for poor writing or presenting the evidence in a cluttered way. And you don't know how that published article relates to the manuscript that entered the "publishing circle"³. And, most importantly, you don't know how many rejections that paper got.

Hence, you need to be aware of the "publishing circle" for articles. I won't cover the preliminary steps on writing the paper, but only the steps just before submitting and also a word on dealing with resubmissions. Moreover, I don't cover on "where to submit", it is in another handout. Another handout -but nothing in here -will be on the "publishing circle" for academic books.

And of course dealing with rejections – but for that, you need to build a "thick skin". This "thickening" is part of the process, like when you learn playing the guitar. It doesn't need to be painful, knowing that we all go through it but also talking openly about rejection could help.

The "publishing circle" tends to be a solitaire business, or shared with co-authors, but as with all professional activities you will improve by doing it. To be frank, we all are nervous to submit a manuscript, but a manuscript must be submitted to become a published article.

² Good old school printing. It is necessary printing a manuscript and read it again before submitting.

³ Sometimes you will get the impression that the "publishing circle" seems more a "publishing circus". It is not an impression, it is a fact. H/t Ruffa.

Just before submitting your manuscript:

- 1) Sexy titles are catchy, but “key words”, “question” or “answer” titles are better.
- 2) An abstract absolutely needs: research question, brief theoretical argument, data/methods and findings.
- 3) From your first page the editor and reviewers need to find, at least, your research question. Try to have your contribution as well (“situate yourself”).
- 4) From your introduction the editor and reviewers need to know what your paper is about: research question, theoretical argument, empirics and findings. Drafting and re-drafting the introduction is essential.
- 5) State your contribution. Don't overstate (and understate) it, be precise and real. This is hard.

Ruffa's tip: You need to know and identify your audience to be precise about your contribution. If you are navigating different fields (or combining them) that is even more difficult, but more crucial to think about audiences.

- 6) Over-submitting, submission to “top” journals, is not a sin. Under-submitting is a sin.

Masullo' rephrasing: “there's the sin of under-submitting (and the mistake of misplacing), but there is not such as sin of over-submitting”.

- 7) Your manuscript's references suggest you where to submit. And which reviewers you're likely to get (pay attention to the first pages' references).

Bove's caveat: “age of references” really matter to understand where to submit, be sure the journal is still interested on that topic/issue.

- 8) Read the submission guidelines where you are submitting (word limits are a pain for authors, but a life-saver for reviewers. And if you are a good citizen you should be both.).
- 9) It is not necessary to write a cover letter when submitting. If required, you should highlight there why the paper is a good fit the journal. But no more than two paragraphs.

- 10) If you feel you the need to communicate something to the editor(s) write it in the cover letter (e.g. possible reviewers with conflict of interests or with whom you had skirmishes).
- 11) English, dammit, matters⁴. Do everything you can before submitting to have the most polished, clear and well-edited manuscript.

Dealing with rejections:

- 12) Submitting is a necessary but not sufficient condition for publishing.
- 13) Once submitted, your work could be rejected. Probabilistically speaking this is the most likely outcome for everyone.
- 14) Rejections are painful but do happen. To all of us. At every stage of the career.
- 15) Rejections are about a specific work of yours, they are not about you as scholar and person.
- 16) Zero rejections probably mean you're aiming too low.
- 17) We can learn from rejections; we don't always learn from rejections. You discover if you can learn something only after you have read careful the rejection letter and reviewers' comments.
- 18) After a rejection, discuss with someone the rejection letter. Write down a pragmatic do-list. Work on it. Then you resubmit. Get back on that horse!

Di Salvatore's tip: You don't resubmit always "lower", most likely if you have done some substantive work and rewriting, the paper is stronger.

Masullo's dancing tip: Move horizontally.

⁴ I wish we could just draw our theories and findings, but that's not the case. There is an unfair, but real, difference between native speaker and non-native speaker when facing the "publishing circle". Find you own tricks (and often the money for paying a proof-reader).

Dealing with R&Rs:

- 19) You always do an R&R. Always.
- 20) If something is unclear about the R&R don't be afraid to ask the editor.
- 21) Necessary time to tackle an R&R in a "better" journal is somehow the same necessary time in a "less good" journal. See point 6.
- 22) A specific, detailed and structured resubmission memo is a necessary condition (but not sufficient) for an acceptance.

Daxecker's desideratum: A memo should have a "general points section" and a section for each reviewer comments.
- 23) You must understand what are the "pivot issues"; a good editor will indicate them. Tackle them.
- 24) Not all editors are good, but all editors are gods⁵. Follow what they suggest.
- 25) Try to answer to all reviewers' points; but it is not necessary to do all what they ask you to do.
- 26) When replying in your memo: being dismissive is stupid, being passive is wrong. Be elegant but firm.
- 27) Take your time for managing your resubmission, but don't procrastinate and always be sure about editorial resubmission's deadlines.
- 28) It is good to feel good for an R&R.
- 29) Your R&R should be on the top of your do-list. Prioritize.
- 30) I buy you drinks for R&Rs.

⁵ This is my remodulation of a Ben Ansell's punchline.

Addenda

- I. *Academics, in terms of productivity, are divided in four species: mammals, oviparous, dead wood and unicorns.*
 - a. *Mammals: quality is the strategy. Few pieces, high investment, aiming high.*
 - b. *Oviparous: quantity is the strategy. Something will be published, somewhere.*
 - c. *Dead wood: don't produce, but they tell you how to produce.*
 - d. *Unicorns⁶: quantity AND quality is their strategy. Mythical creatures, but they exist.*

Different job markets reward different types and different career stages can be more favorable for some species. You can have mixed strategies over time. Only unicorns can have synchronically mixed strategies.

- II. *Reviewers are divided in 4 types: Challenger, Supporter, Asshole, Incompetent.*
 - a. *Challenger: they have good points (dammit!) and they mean well. Engage the challengers. They need most of your attention.*
 - b. *Supporter: they love your work, you love them. Get them as allies, do what they ask, do it well.*
 - c. *Asshole: it does not matter what you did and what you will do, they hate your work. Don't be dismissive, they love it. You just need to signal to the editor that you are acting professionally and tackling what is correct and feasible.*
 - d. *Incompetent: some of them declare their lack of knowledge (the good ones), others won't declare it but they will show it. Hard to tackle their points but signal an attempt. In case some points are not correct explain in a clear, but not condescending way, why you think so.*

The true nature of the reviewer is not always evident. Some type *c.* will write horrible things directly to the editors. But remember, you need to be concerned only with the stuff you can influence. Assholes are assholes.

⁶ Jessica Di Salvatore reminded me of the existence of unicorns, my Freudian slip. Francesco N. Moro gave me a list of unicorns.

- III. *Things you could think but you **cannot** write in a response memo.*
- i. "You say I cannot publish, I say you cannot review."
 - ii. "Ok boomer"
 - iii. "What manuscript did you read?"
 - iv. "I hope you will learn from the other positive reviewers"
 - v. "I have read and dismissed all the articles (of yours) you suggested".
 - vi. "All robust: in-your-face!"
 - vii. "You wish you wrote this."
- IV. *Quality of a manuscript does not necessarily correlate with number of rejections.*
- V. *Your favorite manuscript won't be necessarily the most cited.*

Further references

On writing abstract

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2011/06/20/essential-guide-writing-good-abstracts/>

Mirya Holman's pre-submission checklist:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1JwWmOgRhd2p-BI_RFEMnp04P0I2nNhOHw7jHdaLcyGs/edit

Arthur Spirling on Rejections

https://github.com/ArthurSpirling/Rejection/blob/master/rejection_spirling.pdf

Shadow CVs (because we see only successes in CVs)

<http://www.saramitchell.org/shadowCV.pdf>

https://www.princeton.edu/~joha/Johannes_Haushofer_CV_of_Failures.pdf