

An Editor's Advice: How to Increase Your Chances of Publication in an Academic Journal

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As the editor of a journal, I'm often asked how people can increase their article's chances of publication. Having served as editor (and acting editor) for five years now, I've read over a thousand readers' reports and written many hundred decision letters. Over the course of adjudication of submissions, I've noticed patterns of omission and problem areas that are consistently noted across reports. I have learned what peers read for and where critical emphasis often lies in peer review. I also know that most academics occupy the double role of being both writers and evaluators. So, when I conceived of the idea for this editorial, I thought it would be useful to reach beyond my own observations and to consult my academic community. On Facebook, I asked my colleagues across fields for "useful tips/editorial feedback that you've been given or that you have given to others." They, in turn, offered their advice (thus all the people quoted below shared their comments in that social media venue. I am grateful to all). Interestingly, almost all the comments were ones I have seen before in peer review readers' reports. Such crowdsourcing loosely illustrates that while sub-fields may vary, what readers seem to value as publishable scholarship often shares certain features.

This editorial advice column is aimed at scholars of all levels and not just emerging ones, where advice is often directed. We all need to work on finding optimal ways to communicate our research. I want to emphasize that this is not meant as a gatekeeping exercise, either. I am not saying that there is any one formula for a successful article. In fact, I would argue that articles that creatively break with expectation are often the most engaging (especially if

they tell us why). There are, however, certain elements that successful articles share and that make them a pleasure to read: a strong argument, a clear logic of organization, and an audible authorial voice, for a start. My comments are ordered in three categories: before submission, the article itself, and after you receive a report. Every point (save for a couple) begins with a comment, in bold, that I have made in a decision letter. None of my points will be particularly earth shattering and yet every single one comes from having had dozens of submissions that do not follow it.

Before Submission

1. **“Follow submission guidelines.”** Seriously. Every journal has citation guidelines and word limits. If it says MLA 8, follow MLA 8 (no matter how egregious MLA 8 is). Submitting with another style and a note saying “I’ll change it later if accepted” signals that you don’t actually see the paper as a good fit in the journal. Similarly, the solution to a paper that is well over the word limit is not to submit it with a note “allowing” the editor to trim it, or saying that you’ll work with the readers’ reports and cut it if it is accepted. That’s just being explicit about how you expect others to do your work for you. The solution is revision. Further, editors, as a rule, generally don’t appreciate being guilt-tripped over not giving you “enough” extra words to make your point. A haiku can be brilliant. Longer is not necessarily better. Here’s the reason for word limits at our journal: every issue has 190 pages of 450 words. Every 450 words over the 7,000-word article limit is like asking for one extra page. Note that one page is the space of one review or one poem. An extra 450 words takes away space from other people and perspectives.
2. **“Know the audience of the journal.”** A good rule of thumb is to submit to the journals you read and cite most often. You are already engaging in their ongoing conversations. You will also know approximately what level of expertise and knowledge your readers might have. Judith Paltin says this: “I’m working on a review right now in which confusion about audience is really evident. The article would neither satisfy specialists in the (single) author, who would be irritated by the extensive foregrounding of seminal scholarship (in postcoloniality, in this case), nor a more heterogeneous audience who still has to wade through a lot of other voices to hear the author’s argument. In short—stop putting other people’s voices ahead of your own as an author.” I absolutely love the final point here so I’ve underlined it for you.

3. **“Who are you writing for?”** No audience for any one publication is fixed. As Mary Bryson says, “Interdisciplinary work by definition needs to imagine and build its own audience.” If you are imagining an audience, imagine out loud. Make it clear who you are talking to and what you bring to the table. This is part of opening up the scholarly conversation.
4. **“Peer review is not problem solving.”** Do not submit your article because you are stuck and you are really looking for feedback. This is where you should share drafts with trusted friends or colleagues rather than journals. It is not the job of the editor or your peer reviewers to break your impasse. Pilar Cuder-Domínguez explains a key component of peer review: “a well-balanced structure going from introduction through analysis to fully-developed conclusion is essential, and as a peer-reviewer very often my job is helping authors reach that balance.”
5. **“There are too many typos and grammatical errors in this paper to go forward to peer review.”** Submit polished, professional work. As Anna Guttman notes, “careful proofreading is a must. It may seem obvious, but it certainly doesn’t always happen.” Do not just assume that copyeditors will fix it for you. While finding typos is oddly satisfying, I don’t really relish fixing comma splices.
6. **“Sharpen your abstract.”** Spend time polishing the abstract that you submit with the article. It should not be the first five sentences of the paper itself. It should summarize the article’s intervention, spell out the core research questions, and note the central objects under consideration. The abstract is the article’s first impression. Make it a good one. Make it snappy. If you can’t articulate your argument and your contribution to the field clearly in the abstract, you might not have been clear enough in the article either.

The Article Itself

7. **“How would you assess this article?”** When a reader agrees to assess an article for peer review, we send the following instructions: “Would you please read the enclosed paper, and recommend whether or not *Canadian Literature* should accept it? In formulating your comments, which are meant to aid the author in preparing the article for publication, please keep your criticism constructive, using professional and courteous language. Please comment considering the following criteria: Soundness of Scholarship, Quality of Style, Coherence of Argument.” Not surprisingly, then, most of the comments in the readers’ reports follow these three categories. You should ask yourself about these categories before submitting your paper. Be honest.

8. **“Who cares?”** According to Patsy Badir, you should “let your readers really see how this text or issue interests you: what’s paradoxical? What’s puzzling? What’s surprising?” She continues, “I am less interested in being told why I, the reader, should care. I am, on the other hand, delighted to know why the writer cares.” Jennifer Andrews expands upon this: “as a reader, not only show me why I should care but what is at stake in caring.” In the same vein, I can’t stress the significance of **“So what?”** enough. Life is short. Why should I spend an hour of mine reading this article? I want to know the answer in the opening paragraphs. Don’t leave me in suspense until the conclusion. We all teach students these two fundamental questions. We should keep asking them ourselves.
9. **“You need to hook the reader.”** I write this statement in decision letters almost weekly as I send back articles with a request to make the introduction more immediately engaging and to show why it is urgent at the outset. Why now? Is it imperative that people read your work? It should be. Epigraphs are your good friends. Ask core questions up front. Write with a fire (but not purple prose) that explains how these are important questions you are asking or issues you are addressing. Note that the knowledge gap (“no one has done this, so I am”) is never enough. People haven’t combined pickles, cherries, and siracha before but that doesn’t mean that someone should now. If you do, you need to explain that this combination would make a sweet, spicy, and sour sauce that could transform a baked chicken.
10. **“Who are you in conversation with?”** While your original article is not a place for an extensive literature review, it is a good place to demonstrate what ongoing conversations you are jumping into. This should be a page or three, not half the article. Lorraine York points out that she’s looking for “a confident sense of intervention in an ongoing conversation. In the most successful articles I read, I feel the excitement at joining that conversation and potentially steering it in a fresh direction. At the same time, that previous conversation shouldn’t overshadow the author’s voice.” Self-confidence doesn’t mean that you have to be dismissive of other voices and it doesn’t mean posturing or arrogance. It does mean that you believe that you have something significant to add.
11. **“Clarify your citational practices.”** I return to my three favourite questions: Who speaks for whom? Who listens? Who benefits? Be generous. Sandra Tomc tells us that “the willingness to cite scholarship is probably most important” in her assessment of articles. If research articles are incursions into ongoing conversations in the field, whose voices are being heard? Cite

minority voices. Look around at a variety of perspectives and engage them, not only contrapuntally. Don't just cite the usual suspects.

12. **“Reader A is concerned that there is not enough real critical engagement with existing scholarship on X.”** I have written this statement dozens of times. Critical engagement is key: not just citation and quoting those who support your point but actual engagement and contextualization of scholarship is necessary. This includes how well the author has engaged with existing scholarship, how up-to-date (all from twenty years ago?) and historically deep (all from last year?) their references are, how extensive their research is (all online? all from one collection?), and how they have entertained a range of views (counterarguments, existing criticism).
13. **“Stop putting other people’s voices ahead of your own as an author,”** as Judith Paltin says. Avoid name-dropping, particularly theorists. If the work of Jacques Rancière is central to your argument, by all means bring it in. However, don't just cherry pick a term (“what Rancière calls ‘X’”) without a discussion of where Rancière coined the term, how he uses it, and to what end. Is it really worth the necessary space to use the term? The cherry-picked word/name-drop is pervasive in articles and it is a form of showing off erudition that often backfires. One peer reviewer recently counted the number of theorists referenced in an article and concluded that it was impossible to truly engage in a sustained fashion with all fifteen of them in 7,000 words. He recommended rejection because there was no room for the author's own voice in the cacophony of theorists. A theory soup is always muddy.
14. **“What is your contribution to the field?”** I often paraphrase readers' reports by saying, “on the whole, many suggestions sit under the headings of self-positioning and argumentation. Take a bit of time in the opening pages to emphasize your contribution to the topic/field.” Alyssa MacLean comments, “in the case of some papers that are recovering material or assembling some sort of innovative archive, it can be very easy to see a contribution to the field—in fact the shape of the field can literally be changing thanks to that work. But many papers (especially ones in contemporary literature) follow a let's-apply-this-theory-to-this-text pattern that can be underwhelming when the essay basically confirms that the theory applies to the text and doesn't explain the stakes of the intervention.” It is necessary at some point early on to explain what field(s) you believe you are contributing to. This is part of announcing yourself in the scholarly conversation you are joining.
15. **“Avoid theme-spotting.”** Enough said.

16. **“This paper is overly ambitious.”** Your article is not your dissertation in synopsis or a preview of your upcoming book. Significant contributions to scholarship can be minute and still have impact. Robert Rouse notes that for him, “a great article is one that changes how I read/ understand/ teach a text, or a moment in the text. Basically it is something that moves my understanding along.” Really, that’s what we are trying to do: move understanding along. It can be incremental. That’s how knowledge is mobilized in the long run.
17. **“The logic of organization in this paper is unclear.”** Katja Thieme points to the value of what in writing studies is called “forecasting.” It is “so crucial in establishing a sense of trust in the project that there isn’t just the big bold argument or claim or question that the article asserts, but also and right away, at the beginning, a clear roadmap. These are the materials I’m using to make this argument and here’s the way in which I will analyze this evidence in the following sections.” If written in a way that is not simply a cataloguing of what is to come, the roadmap can lead to the wonderful sense of “ah ha! I see where we are going. Let’s go!”
18. **“Pick up the pace.”** Jeffrey Severs comments on pace and the need for an article to have “sustained energy all the way through, in terms of argument, demonstration, and rhetorical effort and purpose. You tend to see a lot of things that do a good job at announcing the intervention and situating in the field, because that’s important, but there’s not a matching/proportionate strength in, well, whatever the enactment or meat of the article consists of (often readings or particularized explorations/extensions) and the article’s end.” Yes. Don’t forget the protein.
19. **“Make room for sustained intellectual and analytical engagement with quoted primary texts.”** Some authors rely too heavily on quotations (from primary or secondary works) to make their points for them. It is the author’s job to walk the reader through the implications of the passage at hand and to relate it to the developing argument. Don’t be afraid to slow down and dig in. While paraphrase is unnecessary, specific detailed engagement of the passage is vital. I expect roughly as much space dedicated to commentary on the passage as the passage takes up itself.
20. **“Write directly in the active voice.”** Quality of style is about delivery and accessibility. Julie Rak simply asks us to “write clearly about complex things.” Let the ideas give weight, not the sentence structure. On one hand, you should avoid multiple multi-claused sentences piled onto each other. While a thirty-six-line sentence may be grammatically correct, its content is likely to be virtually impenetrable (and realistically, its grammar is likely to be

off too). On the other hand, you should also avoid sentence fragments for “effect.” Further, one of my pet peeves is the phrase “this paper argues” when it is really the author who is arguing. Paper is inanimate and metonyms don’t speak directly. Another writing peeve is the (unfathomable) popularity of the (weak) verb “suggests” at the moment. Avoid it unless you have an actual suggestion. It is emphatically not a synonym for “states.”

21. **“What do you want your reader to remember the most?”** (Hint: this is likely your contribution to the field and this should be signalled in the abstract). Conclusions are not just summaries. At the end of an article, you need to make sure that your reader leaves with a take-away message/point/question. What brief notes would you make if reading your own article? Be honest, again.

After the Report

22. **“Don’t panic.”** You should read “Revise and Resubmit” neither as a pre-acceptance, nor as a pre-rejection. It is most common to receive a RR decision letter. Last year at our journal only one article received two recommendations of acceptance on the first round. All the other submissions were either rejected after the first round or asked to revise and resubmit. To put it another way, 23 of 24 published articles went through RR.
23. **“Take the readers’ reports as advice.”** Reports are advice to the author, not non-negotiable instructions. Peer readers are well-qualified experts, to be sure, but they have spent hours with the work that you have spent months/years on. They are generously offering their opinions and making suggestions for improvement. Mainly, they are signalling places of confusion, contradiction, omission, or points that need clarification or elaboration. Do not completely rewrite according to the recommendations of a single report and in the process lose your own voice. This is heartbreaking to see upon resubmission. I always say, “Please read the readers’ comments and address the ones that make the most sense to you. When you return the paper to the journal, please include a letter to me noting the changes you have made, the suggestions you have taken up, and explain the ones you have chosen not to engage.” (Even if the editor doesn’t invite this specifically, I recommend including such a letter upon resubmission anyway.) Your name is on the article, not the name of the anonymous reviewer. You have to stand by it.
24. **“Why didn’t you read the peer reviewers’ recommendations?”** If a reviewer suggests reading something, you must read it. This signals that they think that you are missing a key part of the conversation. You have

to listen. If it doesn't fit, then let the editor know in the letter you return with the revisions. The letter will likely be shared with the original reader if, upon submission of the first report, that reader has agreed to review the revised article again. They often do not, especially if they are highly critical. (Don't forget that you are welcome to ask that the revised article not be sent back to Reader B.) More articles get rejected on the second round by the original reader with the comment that "they didn't even bother to follow up on my recommendations and the holes are still there" than with any other comment.

25. **"Onwards!"** Everything we do is a work in progress. If your article is accepted, you still have to work with the editor to polish and tighten it. If it is RR, then breathe deeply and dig in. Early in my career, I put an article in a drawer after a stinging RR decision and time passed. It is still not published and I regret that. If your paper is rejected, take it as a sign that the article is not ready yet, and don't give up. See above.

