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In the Profession: Choosing the Right Journal for your Manuscript

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As the editor of *Language in Society*, I'm often asked about the journal's acceptance rate. The short answer is that *Language in Society* eventually accepts a little under 20% of the manuscripts that are submitted to us. The longer answer is more surprising. Of the 100 or 120 manuscripts I receive each year, I reject about half out of hand, without sending them to reviewers, because they are quite plainly inappropriate for *Language in Society*. This surprised me when I became editor, and I continue to find it frustrating. Other editors report the same experience with their journals.

Why do so many people send manuscripts to journals where they have no chance of being published? In my view, the principal problem is that would-be authors often do not pay sufficient attention to identifying their potential audience. They do not think carefully enough about exactly whom they wish to reach, and they do not ask themselves which journals these people read. This is an easy mistake to make, particularly at the beginning of one's career, when what seems paramount is getting published in the journals that count, and actually having one's work read may seem like a pleasant but inessential side-effect. However, thinking about who will want to read your work is a key step in deciding what journal to send it to, and choosing an appropriate journal will greatly increase the chances of having your work published. Here are a few suggestions about how to go about this.

Be able to articulate the contribution your work makes, and to whom. What is new about what you're doing? What's important about it? Who will care about your findings? For example, say you have done a study that explores whether the officially mandated communicative pedagogy for the teaching of English in Thailand is actually reflected in what goes on in English classrooms there. You have found that students are in fact doing relatively little real communicative work in their classes, spending time instead on exercises that require them to recite memorized material. Who will be interested in this study? To decide, it is useful to ask yourself three questions:

- First, ask yourself who will be interested in the **topic** of your research. One possible audience in his category consists of people interested in evaluating and improving English teaching in Thailand: English teachers, school administrators, and educational

policy-makers involved with the government. These people should be interested in what you found in this particular setting.

- Second, ask yourself whether you are making a new contribution when it comes to **methods**, and to whom your methods will seem novel or significant. Did you conduct the study using innovative methods, or a new combination of methods adapted to your particular research setting? If so, then people who do the same sort of research as you, exploring what goes on in English classrooms, should also be interested.
- Third, ask yourself whether you're making a new **theoretical** contribution. Is there a new theoretical finding here, a finding that challenges or supplements current theory about how things work in your field at large? For example, would scholars of second-language acquisition or language teaching be surprised to find that there could be a mismatch of the sort you are describing between educational policy and educational practice? Do your findings suggest something new about how educational policy should be implemented in other settings? If so, your audience might consist of a larger group of people, those interested in instructed language learning in general.

Very few articles make contributions of all three kinds, and few journal editors would expect yours to. What is important, before you choose a journal, is simply to be able to describe what is new about what you are doing and to whom it is new, and to be aware of what is not new. Many research projects make primarily topical contributions. Using existing method and theory, they explore a familiar concept or process in a yet-unstudied setting. There is nothing wrong with doing this, as long as it's acceptable to your advisors and evaluators. It does mean, however, that the journal you select to submit your work to probably needs to be different than the one you select if you're making contributions to method or theory. Again, you will have a much better chance of having your work reviewed and eventually accepted if you choose a journal that is meant for the audience you are writing to.

Know the journals. Never send a manuscript to a journal you have chosen solely on the basis of its name. Many journal names (including *Language in Society*) label a very broad swath of possible study. There are many, many, lines of research, in many academic disciplines, that touch on "language" and "society". Most of these lines of work are not actually represented in the journal *Language in Society*, which was founded to publish work by people in a specific set of intersecting research areas in linguistics, sociology, and anthropology. Likewise, there is a great deal of research that is about English linguistics in one way or another but is not appropriate for the *Journal of English Linguistics*. Other journal names may not seem to specify any particular research field. What sorts of research would you expect to read in a *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, for example, or a journal called *Language*?

The only way to find out what kinds of research a journal publishes is to do some research about the journal. Do read the journal's editorial policy, which is almost always available online. Far more importantly, however, read the journal. Look carefully at as many back issues as you can to get a sense of what kinds of work are published there. What topics are represented? What sorts of contributions do the authors make, topical, methodological, theoretical, or all three? What academic fields are the authors affiliated with? Have you already read articles that appeared in that journal in connection with your own work? Would the authors who publish in that journal be interested in reading your work, and why? Journal editors have to keep their own audiences in mind: we need to make sure people will keep reading our journals, so publishers will keep publishing them. So even the most brilliant piece of work may not be appropriate for a particular journal if that journal's readers would not find it interesting.

If, even after doing this research, you are still unsure about whether your work is suitable for a particular journal, you can ask the journal's editor. Don't be discouraged if you receive a form-letter message in return, though. Many editors will simply encourage you to submit your manuscript so they can see it before deciding whether it is appropriate for the journal. If you have chosen the wrong journal, you will simply have wasted the time it takes for the editor to read your manuscript. And, since you can only submit a manuscript to one journal at a time, and some editors take a long time to make decisions, you will have wasted your own time, too. So do your own research about the journal first.

Ask for advice and use it carefully. Talk to your advisors, mentors, supervisors, and colleagues. Find out where they have published their own work and what journals they read. Ask them which journals they would recommend for your work. Keep in mind that not all advice is equally realistic, though. If you are advised to send your first graduate-student term paper to the top journal in your field, you may really be the most brilliant student ever, or your teacher may be a little over-enthusiastic. No advice can substitute for doing your own careful research into journals and what they actually publish.

Write for your own colleagues. If you are a linguist, publish your work (particularly your early work) in linguistics journals. If you are a psychologist, talk to psychologists. And so on. Particularly at the beginning of your career, and often throughout it, the people you need to share your work with are people in your own discipline. Writing for people in another discipline is difficult, and outsiders who claim to have new, important things to say to insiders tend to have to work very hard to establish their right to do so.

The same rule applies when it comes to sub-fields. If you are working in the history of the English language, for example, think about publishing first in a journal that specializes in English linguistics or historical linguistics, rather than in a general-linguistics journal. After all, the contacts you most need early in your career are people in your own sub-area, people who really understand your work. Aiming for a specialized audience, and having your work accepted and read by that audience, is a crucial step on the way to publishing in the “top” journals, which are less specialized and require that you make a much larger contribution.

Good luck!