Policy Studies Organization

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Some Dos and Don'ts of Journal Article Publication

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Some Dos and Don'ts of Journal Article Publication

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Here I cover some of the topics that graduate students might be interested in concerning what most editors are looking for in a publishable article – which should give some idea of which articles get published and which ones don’t. In addition, I devote some time to peer reviews—which graduate students will undoubtedly be asked to provide for one or more journals in the future—how to write good, useful ones and how to interpret ones that are written about your own work.

Disclaimer: Before we begin, clearly I cannot speak for all editors and some of what is to come might not be of importance to all editors of all journals. Politics and Policy is a generalist journal in political science and policy studies. It is not top ten, but is an up-and-coming journal in the field published by the prestigious Wiley/Blackwell publishers. Its reach is wide—P&P is read by over 3000 institutions and individuals worldwide. We publish an issue 6 times a year and are linked with several of the top journal in political science. My years of editorial experience speak to that context.

Our Problematic Today

So, first let’s set out the problematic that faces most junior scholars that we are dealing with today… you all need academic publications, especially in good journals. But the better the journal, the higher the rejection rate, the more difficult it is to get published (and the more prestigious it is to get your piece accepted).

I am now forced to reject 75% of all submissions at P&P- purely because supply of submissions is very high and the article places we have number just 28-35 a year (excluding programmed special issues). For some journals, this rate is even higher, even if the journal publishes more articles per annum. The excess of supply, of course, means competition for places is fierce and only the best of the best are seriously considered. So how do you give your paper the best chance to be considered?

WHAT NOT TO DO AND, BY INFERENCE, WHAT TO DO

First, the don’ts! Here is an article written by an editor of a paleontology journal that I seriously wish I had written myself! I make it a point to distribute this masterpiece to all the journal editors I know and it never fails to generate the same hysterics it did in me when I first read it. Truly funny, because it is so true!

Take a look at the various points Donovan lists that will alienate your editor!


Put this way, avoidance of most of these gigantic no-nos looks easy, but you would be truly surprised at how many submissions I receive that do one or more of these things. It is a good way into our discussion, so let’s take the funniest few as starting points.
1. **DON’T SUBMIT IN ANOTHER JOURNAL’S FORMAT OR ALIENATE YOUR REVIEWERS**

I have had quite a few ms submitted in another journal’s format and a couple that still bore the name of the rival journal on the front page!

A) As with bad punctuation, spelling, grammar, and persistent stylistic errors, this suggests to an editor that she could have a lot of editorial work to do if this article is eventually accepted. Never be fooled into believing that it is the journal editor’s job to polish the language, style, format or structure of your paper and its tables or graphs. It is YOUR job. As you can see, it is a prime candidate for alienating your editor.

B) Submitting in another journal’s format also could suggest that the author may not pay attention to detail. Again this can presage a lot of work for an editor to find and check nonexistent quotations and can even place the scholarship of the author, the veracity of her claims to originality or her methodological rigour into question.

C) It also suggests, of course, that the paper has been submitted elsewhere first. This is normal practice and does not mean that the editor will reject a paper just because their journal was not an author’s first choice. But there are some points to make here.

   a. First, do have several back-up publications in mind to submit your piece to if you are rejected the first time round. We all have been and, hard as it is, you will have to get used to it. Much depends on the luck of the draw of reviewers that report on your work. Some will love it, some won’t. Fair enough. But if you take this advice, be warned:

   b. Don’t double dip and send out to multiple journals at the same time or while it is still under review for one journal. This is not only dishonest, it can really get you into trouble with editors, and eventually with copyright law, if more than one offer to publish comes your way at the same time. We never forget authors who have done this (whether or not it gets to the stage where acceptance is given) and are unlikely to consider pieces from them again as a result.

   c. Journal editors actually know when double dipping happens far more than you would expect and it is the subject of much discussion when editors of ps journals get together.

   d. Reviewer pools are the most precious resource a journal has and editors do much to cultivate reliable reviewers, including not overburdening them with too much work and trying not to send out manuscripts that will almost certainly earn a reviewer recommendation to reject. Bear in mind that editors spend oodles of time finding the best reviewers for a manuscript and it often turns out that several editors from different journals will settle on the same three or four reviewers for a submission, especially if it is on a specialized subject like most Ph.D derived articles are. You will almost certainly get a recommendation to reject from a reviewer who has negatively reviewed your piece for another publication before. The reviewers will tell an editor exactly what was said before and where they have encountered the ms in the past.
e. Under this scenario, however, what is worst is if the reviewer has rejected your piece before and you have not changed a word according to the first review process. Avoid this at all costs. Reviews take a considerable amount of time and effort on the part of all involved. If your piece is good enough to be sent out for review, then you have an obligation to rework the piece in light of at least some of the comments.

So what is the moral of this point?
Do show the academic integrity, scholastic care and professional attention to detail that an editor would expect of any academic worth investing their time and effort in.
Do check and polish your submission for errors of spelling, punctuation and written style and do show that you have read the journal’s submission guidelines and followed the instructions for format and style of your manuscript’s citation and referencing.

2. DO UNDERSTAND THE KIND OF ARTICLE YOUR TARGET JOURNAL IS LOOKING FOR AND GIVE IT TO THEM!

A) Read the articles in several issues of the journal and form a good idea of what the editor might be looking for in terms of form as well as content.

B) Form: My favourite of Donovan’s PITA game rules is “Write at length no matter how trivial your subject”—Oh, how we could all do that! But that is precisely what gets your submission filed under B for Bin in two important senses.

C) It is your job to keep the article length down (I always try to submit no more than 32 double-spaced pages total) and will not consider any MS submitted to P&P with more than 36 on the first review. You can then add without too much trouble if required to do so if invited to revise and resubmit. Most journal submission guidelines will indicate an acceptable page range but this is generally representative in most PS and IR journals except those that focus on highly empirical studies.

D) It is also YOUR job to explain carefully and early in the paper why your research question and responses are NOT TRIVIAL either to the reader specialized in your area, or to the more generalist area of political science, IR etc. I call this the justification of importance paragraph or page and it is the one thing that I never publish an article without, and the one thing that authors fail to provide the most. Spell it out why your research question is important, to whom in the scholarly lit it is likely to be most important, whose ideas or conclusions it could challenge and why those in other areas should be interested (i.e., what it says across subfields and the kind of impact your work might have there). And Beware the straw man. Justification of importance/relevance paragraphs are of little use unless you do the research and name names.

E) Content: Most good PS journals are NOT looking for lengthy pedagogic articles whose main merit is that they could be used to introduce students to subjects, events or approaches that you deem worthy. Detailed book chapters are for that kind of
information and approach, save it for them. Articles in good journals need to be shorter and are first and foremost to **present original research to other members of the academic community and to stimulate critique and advancement in the field.** The exception is the good review article, which I will talk about later if we have time. In our discipline at least, pare down to the absolute minimum any long historical diatribes, tedious background information or painstaking explanations. If in doubt, leave it out. Concentrate on original data interpretation and analytic discussion and argument. When in doubt, justify soundly the inclusion of the material you do keep in.

F) To help you do all this, **state clearly and concisely** in the abstract, the intro and reiterate in the conclusion, **what the article tries to do,** why doing this can be **argued to be important, and to what areas, theories or approaches it is relevant (and why) and exactly how it can be seen to be original.** Usually I base my first impressions of all articles on how well this has been done. If an article is vague, passive or silent on this, it is not likely to reach review stage. You have very little time to convince the editor, so be succinct, specific and persuasive on this point early on in the paper. It is the reviewer’s job to let the editor know whether your claims to originality are, in fact, plausible within the specific literature of your subfield, but there must be a relevant point to the article that extends its usefulness beyond this.

G) For both specialist and generalist publications, my suggestion to do this in the quickest and most punchy way is to **spend time setting up the problematic that your manuscript answers (and the lit it responds to) with some care.** Specialist papers will focus more on the lit it responds to and how it speaks to the counter arguments, approaches or datasets of other scholars in the field. Papers hoping to publish in more generalist journals will focus on contextualizing the problem so that scholars who do not have a background in the particular field would understand, learn from and enjoy the paper - and hopefully take something away from it to apply to their own area.

H) **If possible, view the journal’s reviewer guidelines to see what your submission will be tested on**
The review process takes much time and effort on the part of all involved so it is in everybody's interest that submitted manuscripts fit P&P’s profile as far as possible as early as possible. For this reason, P&P makes no secret of its reviewer guidelines. Here are ours. **It is always worth checking these things out for your target journal, but many of our points are representative.** If online reviewer guidelines are unavailable, you could even ask editors if you can see the guidelines that journals ask reviewers to follow, or at least for some pointers so that you can see what they will be looking for - and hopefully head off some potential criticisms of your papers before they arise.

I) Also pay close attention to reviewer comments and, where possible, respond to at least half of them carefully. If editors have drawn your attention to any, then only omit a response if asked to RR if you can soundly justify your reasons for doing so **DO NOT BE FLIPPANT IN YOUR RESPONSE TO REVIEWERS AND DO NOT**
HANDLING REVIEWS

Develop a thick skin when looking at reviews of your own work. Pay close attention to the criticisms and don’t always expect any positive comments. Reviewers do not have unlimited time on their reviews and may not say even one thing good about your piece. However, if they have made some recommendations for improvement, even if they recommend rejection of the piece, the reviewer sees at least something worthwhile in your paper.

I am always sorry to see that the academic community magically requires its members to write copious reviews for no money and yet does very little to teach our PG students how to do it well. Have you had any formal tuition on this? If you have submitted a piece for publication already, the chances are you are likely to have seen some peer reviews. Anyone been asked to write them?

I have brought along comments from a few review panels of submissions to P&P for you to have a look at. They make less sense without a manuscript, of course, but the anonymity of the peer review process needs to be preserved.

We all have our own ideas about what constitutes a good critique, and there are many ways of creating one. However, several general points should be borne in mind:

- Good reviewers write a lot. They are careful and, at the beginning of your career, will probably take you a great deal of time to compile. Take it. The effort will be appreciated anonymously by the author, but will also be immensely appreciated by the editor, who is likely to remember you as a great reviewer if you ever submit an article for consideration. Reviewing the work of others also gives you a very good basis for tightening up your own work to render it less subject to potential criticisms for others. Practice doing it for your doctoral colleagues and you will see results in your own work.

- Good reviewers are tough but constructive. They give precise indications as to exactly where a piece needs to be changed or improved and concrete suggestions for how the author needs to go about doing so.

- In other words, when asked to review a piece, think about it practically as well as critically. How would you go about fixing it?

- Good reviews don’t merely perform a copyedit and identify editorial changes (though many good reviews contain some of these at the end). They also need to provide a level of argument and evidence themselves to support their perspectives
and criticisms of the material. Ensure yours do this and you should be on the right track.

And, as a final word on this, while tough, good reviews are not designed to be an ego boost for the reviewer—though I often have to pull reviews that have been used for precisely this purpose! Be polite and refrain from making personal or nasty comments about authors having cobwebs on the brain. They can, of course, be damaging to any academic—particularly junior scholars—and are just not necessary. Don’t pander, but don’t punch.

**Final words**, don’t give up.

**Much depends on the luck of the draw of reviewers that report on your work. Some will love it, some won’t. If the paper has the nub of a good article in it, then at least someone will say so in spite of other criticisms. Work on it and submit it somewhere else. Good luck!**

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**a) Review Articles/State of the Literature Papers**

These are very much en vogue right now and most editors really love to publish them. Many librarians also base decisions to renew subscriptions to journals based on their willingness to publish good review pieces. Sometimes, you can collapse your initial Ph.D dissertation chapters (which ought to contain your lit review and justification of originality, though they are likely to contain far more than this that needs cutting out) into a review piece with a little hard work. A couple of tips should help scholars writing review articles in procuring the best reviews possible.

1. First, remember that writing good review articles is probably even more difficult than writing original research articles. Don’t assume it is easy or permit your work to be sloppy because it does not necessarily fall under the heading of original research. Do make it explicitly clear in the abstract and introduction that your paper is a review article.

2. Second, ensure that the material reviewed is as recent as possible and contains at least reference to all major works in the field.

3. Third, spend a couple or three tight paragraphs near the beginning of the piece
   a) justifying the importance and relevance of the paper (most manuscripts do not contain a solid example of this when submitted and this is almost always picked up on by reviewers),
   b) linking the importance of the area to other areas for which it might be useful (i.e., cement the appeal of the article to those outside of your subfield... P/P is a generalist journal, so the wideness of appeal of each article is crucial), and
   c) demonstrating clearly and explicitly the originality/contribution of the piece given that there have not been other similar studies conducted or published recently with the
content and aims of this one. A critical component to the review paper is also often well-received by reviewers.

If there is time:

**Converting your Ph.D dissertation into publishable articles.**

a) Chapters are specialist and without exception will need some reworking to become anywhere near publishable as a journal article.

b) Bear the specialization level in mind when choosing target journal

c) Even for specialized publications do what you can to link the piece in the abstract, intro and initial and ultimate pages, to broader subject areas, problematics and questions

d) Needs to be stand-alone which often takes lots of work or collapsing of chapters into the article, rather than publishing each chapter as an article (since these often rely on arguments made previously)

**Explaining editorial decisions’ categories:**

Reject without review
Reject after review
Revise and resubmit (major), Revise and Resubmit, Revise and Resubmit (minor)
Conditional Acceptance