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Float an idea and get them to bite

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You think you've written the perfect journal article but editors won't take the bait. That may be because there's more to reeling in interest than hurriedly scribbling down your musings, says Harriet Swain

So at last the article is finished and you've posted it straight off for publication. It is rather longer than most journal articles, but surely editors will agree that such an interesting subject deserves more room. And you've sent it off to quite a few - so at least someone should bite.

Wrong, wrong and wrong. Writing the last sentence should be just the beginning of a lengthy redrafting process if you are attempting to get a journal article published; going over length could ruin your chances of publication; and sending manuscripts off to more than one journal at a time is unwise. "Editors don't like it," says Jennifer Hunter, former editor-in-chief of the *British Journal of Anaesthesia*. "And they find out."

Hunter says you should expect to go over your manuscript again and again, asking other researchers to read it, no matter how senior you are.

"Never be too proud to do so," she warns. "This is creative work, which requires extraordinary effort."

Rebecca Boden, who includes a chapter on writing for academic journals in her co-authored book *The Academic's Support Kit*, says you should not be using journal reviewers to polish your paper. Her advice is to have a carefully articulated plan and to thoroughly understand the process of getting an article as far as publication. She says it is a seven-part process: research; giving conference and seminar papers; targeting a journal; preparing the paper for submission; waiting for it to be reviewed; having it accepted; and finally, if it is accepted, dealing with proofs and copyright.

Rowena Murray, author of a new book on writing for academic journals, says a common problem in producing a finished piece is expecting quality writing too soon. "There are many, many stages in the writing process," she says.

"Writers have to defer the quality question in initial stages, and those who can't will probably not write."

She too recommends internal peer review before submission. "Have the paper read by a range of readers, particularly those who know the target journal," she suggests.

Targeting a particular journal, rather than writing a paper and then finding a place for it later, is essential. Analyse papers in current issues of the journal and work out how your paper can join ongoing debates, Murray says. You will probably have to make your writing style more rhetorical and build in responses to potential counter-arguments. You must be clear about how your target journal defines contribution to knowledge and make sure you show how your article will make such a contribution.

She suggests contacting the editor by e-mail before you start - although you will need to find out whether the journal allows this. "Many editors appreciate this early discussion, as it helps them screen and shape emerging papers," she says. This early dialogue also helps writers to focus and stay motivated.

against distorting your work to fit a journal that would not suit it. She recommends looking at the list of editors and reviewers and excluding journals that regularly use reviewers likely to be unsympathetic to your work. Other things being equal, you should target the most prestigious journal in which you have a realistic chance of getting your work published.

Susan Bassnett, pro vice-chancellor of Warwick University and a member of journal advisory boards all over the world, says you should work out what kind of articles the journal prints, as well as finding out about house style.

"If they say they are only going to take submissions up to 4,000 words, don't send in something of 7,000," she says.

She also advises against using the first person pronoun - "It's very off-putting to read something all about I, I, I," - and against repeatedly promising your article will achieve something it never does.

A good strong opening is always impressive, she says. You need to state clearly on the first page what the paper is about and where it is going.

She also rates clear structure and use of language.

John Corbett, editor of *Language and Intercultural Communication*, says arts articles can sometimes refer to "... " because their arguments may be based on the individual perspective and insight of the scholar. But the first person should not be used when the article is arguing a case on the strength of robust experimental methodology.

He advises getting to know the style guide of the relevant journal, usually found in the journal or on its website and ensuring you include everything it asks for - such as abstract, keywords or references in a particular format. If you revise a rejected article for another publication, all these will probably have to be changed.

If your article is returned with referees' comments, don't be too precious, Corbett warns. "In my experience, second drafts that incorporate referees'

comments tend to be better than the first submission," he says. If the article is turned down, you need to think about why and then submit a revised version to another journal.

Hunter says that when making revisions you should answer each of the assessors' points in order, and verify that tables and figures are still numbered correctly as the revisions may have changed their order.

She recommends developing an eye for the layout of your manuscript, paying attention to headings and sub-headings recommended by the journal and aiming for symmetry in the layout of tables and figures. Check for repetition and spelling errors and make sure you have sent off the right number of copies and in the required format. In short, she advises: "Become obsessional."

Further information: Rebecca Boden, Debbie Epstein, Jane Kenway, *The Academic's Support Kit*, Sage, 2004 Rowena Murray, *Writing for Academic Journals*, Open University Press and McGraw-Hill, 2005

TOP TIPS

Target a journal before you start

Get to know the journal's guidelines thoroughly and stick to them

Keep to length

Ask colleagues for their comments

Draft and redraft

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