

# Tips for getting published in scholarly journals

## Strategies for academic librarians

by Robert V. Labaree

There is a plethora of literature offering guidance on how to get published. In general, it encompasses either didactic works providing detailed “dos” and “don’ts”<sup>1</sup> or, the literature represents the anecdotal musings of authors and editors outlining their own tormented journey to first authorship.<sup>2</sup> Early career librarians and soon-to-be-graduating library science students planning to enter academia may find this literature overwhelming and often conflicted. For those librarians carrying faculty status, the need to publish original research as part of the tenure and promotion process can be perceived as an especially daunting responsibility.

Below is my contribution to an in-house workshop held last year at the University of Southern California, where several published members of the library faculty shared their insights with colleagues about the processes, procedures, and the pitfalls of becoming an author of peer-reviewed research. Whether you must publish as part of your institution’s promotion process, or you simply want to disseminate your research to a broader audience, future authors may find the following strategies helpful.

### Read the professional literature

Subscribe to electronic content alert services, such as *The Informed Librarian*,<sup>3</sup> and the table of contents alerting services of journals in your areas of interest. Monitor their contents for gaps in the literature where the insights of an academic li-

brarian could be of value. Pay particular attention to the call for papers section of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and other publications in higher education for opportunities to present a conference paper that could eventually lead to a published article.

### Become a good writer

The fastest track to getting published is to be a good writer. However, becoming an accomplished writer is rarely something you can achieve, but more representative of a continual process of reflexivity and practice. For example, thanks to the advice of an early career mentor, I volunteer to write abstracts for *America: History and Life* and *Historical Abstracts*. The material benefit is that you receive free issues of the journal you abstract. Intellectually, writing abstracts forces you to read and carefully analyze scholarly literature, thereby gaining a better understanding of the style and jargon of “academic speak.” The act of synthesizing a dense, scholarly article into a 300-word abstract also requires developing and enhancing skills important to good writing, such as identifying a study’s research problem, presenting a pertinent review of the literature, and understanding how to link main findings to the methodology used.

• *Write book reviews.* I currently write reviews for *American Review of Books*, *Annual*, *Choice*, and *Review of Higher Education*. I began writing book reviews by simply contacting the editor and vol-

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unteering my time and expertise. Send a letter to the editor of your favorite journal expressing a desire to write reviews. Describe your qualifications and areas of academic expertise. Writing book reviews will help you become a better writer, and, as an additional incentive, you often get to keep the books, which can then be donated to your local public library.

- *Revisit papers from your academic past.*

Consider papers you wrote as an undergraduate or graduate student. These works may not have been written with an intent to publish, but reread them and think about opportunities to publish in relation to specific journals. Use your skills as a librarian to conduct further research about the topic of your paper (or a subtopic imbedded within) that can help bring the manuscript to publication quality as a result of additional research and writing.

- *Read new publications.* Competition is fierce, and most new journals cease publication within their first few years, but publishers of new titles may be more open to consider a manuscript to help ensure the publication's survival. This does not mean editors of new journals will accept works of lesser quality, but the fact is their journals have yet to build a strong reputation. Therefore, it is unlikely that they will have a large backlog of manuscripts waiting to be reviewed. Always look for announcements of new journal titles at professional conferences and in the mail.

- *Review journal manuscripts and conference papers.* Contact the editors of your favorite journals and ask to be considered as a manuscript reviewer. Often these are invited positions. However, target new titles and look for opportunities to meet editors at professional conferences. Ask if any openings are available for additional reviewers. Some journals maintain a large pool of reviewers because the scope of research disseminated within the journal is so broad. Target them. Also, look for announcements requesting volunteers to review conference papers. Reviewing papers submitted for presentation at conferences gives you an opportunity to read and evaluate what is currently being studied before it is published, and it will help enhance your writing skills because reviewing papers forces you to critically evaluate the writing of others. Critiquing journal manuscripts gives you an inside track to publishing in that journal because you see firsthand what is accepted and rejected.

- *Professional education journals.* In most disciplines there exists at least one journal devoted to examining the development and improve-

ment of pedagogical practice. For example, in my areas of academic expertise, there are the *Journal of Planning Education and Research* (urban and regional planning), *Perspectives on Political Science*, and the *Journal of Public Affairs Education* (which focuses on examining the scholarship of teaching in public administration). These journals offer a good opportunity to get published because a topic that has been broadly treated in the field of academic librarianship, such as information literacy, may be viewed as relatively groundbreaking in the professional education journal of another discipline.

## **Look at professional development activities**

Any professional development meeting, any poster session, any panel discussion, any volunteer opportunity you participate in can either provide you with a framework for developing a research article, or give you ideas for developing one, as a result of working with someone or hearing them speak. For example, a paper I published in *Advances in Qualitative Organizational Research* (JAI Press, 1999), examining the discursive strategies university administrators use when confronting a public relations crisis, was first formulated as a result of attending a meeting at the American Educational Research Association conference in 1997.

Active participation is key, but think strategically about targeting professional activities that maximize your chances to realize publishing opportunities because, let's face it, you are a very busy person. One way to think strategically about linking professional development activities with publishing opportunities is to target activities that relate to current issues in librarianship and higher education. This will expose you to the ideas and opinions of others who are prolific writers, and it may help lay the conceptual groundwork for formulating your own ideas about a research project. Always look for opportunities to publish in areas of study outside of librarianship when you are participating in professional activities.

- *Attend "How to Get Published" panel discussions.* Make it a priority at conferences to attend these types of sessions. If one is not scheduled, suggest to the chair of the organization's conference planning committee that a "how to get published" discussion forum would be of value to you and others, then offer to help organize it. Editors participating on these panels often provide helpful suggestions for getting published, and not just in general but as it may relate to the specific journal they are associated with.

## Know your audience, know the journal's audience

It is important to write in different styles for different audiences. Therefore, identify early in your research which journal you are planning to submit the manuscript to after it has been completed. Read articles in that journal covering the past few years and pay particular attention to what has been published during the tenure of the current editorial board. This will help familiarize you with what type of articles have been published while they have served as editors. If you are unsure whether your research topic is appropriate for the publication's primary readership, contact the editor and ask. If the editor indicates that the topic is out of scope, ask him or her to suggest another journal that may be more appropriate. If your topic is deemed appropriate for the journal's audience, you have already succeeded in demonstrating to the editor your interest in publishing with them and they may be on the lookout for your manuscript as a result.

- *Talk to publishers at professional conferences.* Walk the exhibit hall at professional conferences and make note of the publishers in your primary areas of interest. Speak with publisher representatives about possible new journal titles that may need additional contributions from an author or manuscript reviewer. Ask them to identify editors within their company whom you can speak with about your research ideas.

## Collaborate

This is closely related to the strategy of viewing every professional development activity as an opportunity to publish. With an idea in mind, seek out people with like interests and gauge if you can collaborate with them on a writing project or a professional activity that could then lead to publication. Take advantage of your outreach activities on campus when pursuing opportunities to collaborate. However, in these cases, be prepared to do the initial leg work, because your faculty liaisons may consider you a valued colleague, but not necessarily someone they would consider co-authoring an article with. Writing a rough draft of the paper or a detailed outline of the proposed research study can demonstrate that you are sincere in collaborating with them.

## Have others review your manuscript

This is very important. Journal editors always encourage potential authors to have their manuscripts reviewed by others before submitting them for

possible publication. Identify colleagues who possess good writing skills as a result of being a teacher, a writer, or an editor. Ask them to review your paper in exchange for a free lunch, for example. They may be brutal in their assessment, but the end result will be a much better paper more likely to be of publication quality. Always follow the journal's publication guidelines precisely and always point out in your cover letter that several people reviewed your manuscript.

## Rejection

Most peer-reviewed journals include comments from manuscript reviewers regardless of whether your paper has been accepted or rejected. If the editor does not send them to you, request that they do so. If your paper has been rejected for publication, consider the reviewer's comments and suggestions carefully. It is part of becoming a better writer. Remember that a "not acceptable as is, needs major revision" statement is *not* a flat out rejection of your work—do what the reviewers tell you and resubmit it. If you follow their suggestions, the chances of eventually publishing the paper will be increased. However, provide a detailed explanation in the cover letter accompanying your resubmitted manuscript describing precisely how you have addressed the concerns of each reviewer. And remember, if you are able to join a journal's pool of manuscript reviewers, you can avoid these pitfalls ahead of time because you will have seen others.

## And finally . . .

You are a librarian! You have been trained in the arts and sciences of employing effective research strategies, understanding the processes involved with critically evaluating scholarly research, and thinking interdisciplinarily about issues and topics that intersect the field of academic librarianship. Use those skills to manage a research project and ask your colleagues to provide the feedback needed to ensure that your paper is of publication quality. Good luck!

## Notes

1. A. Yuksel, "Writing Publishable Papers," *Tourism Management* 24 (2003): 437–46.
2. Kevin R. Murphy, "Getting Published," *Rhythms of Academic Life: Personal Accounts of Careers in Academia*, edited by Peter J. Frost and M. Susan Taylor (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996), 129–34.
3. *The Informed Librarian*, [www.infosourcespub.com/ilofreesubscribe.cfm](http://www.infosourcespub.com/ilofreesubscribe.cfm). ■