Perishing to Publish: An Analysis of the Academic Publishing Process

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Publish or perish? It is a question to be kept constantly in mind for anyone unlucky enough to be stuck spinning in the revolving-door contract system so popular with Japanese universities. As a form of academia's golden rule applies even in Japan, university job postings typically call for applicants to have at least three publications. Of course, most scholars working here have the advantage of getting something published in the in-house journals that every university in the country seems to print, publications that are usually neither refereed or even edited. Regrettably, the fact that no one bothers to read these presents a major drawback.

For scholars who want others to actually read their work, and who want to put something worthy of recognition on their resume, the ultimate goal remains publishing in refereed journals. However, submitting papers to reputable journals containing articles by prominent scholars can prove intimidating. Therefore, this paper analyzes the academic publishing process to help demystify the procedures for inexperienced scholars. While the process remains far from being straightforward, persistence and patience are undoubtedly the key elements for successfully publishing academic articles.

After finishing a paper and deciding on a journal to trust with your baby, preparing acceptable citations presents the first step in testing an author's determination. Despite the fact that as disciplines applied linguistics and TESOL supposedly abide by the *Publication*

Manual of the American Psychological Association, every journal forces writers to adhere to their own byzantine citation standards. In order to frustrate young scholars and encourage them to tear out their hair, journal editors require a different treatment of author names as well as a unique arrangement of periods, commas, colons, semi-colons, italics, underlining, and spacing when citing and referencing. Thus, submitting any article entails investing long hours in making meaningless cosmetic changes. Feelings of frustration at this point are normal, even for experienced authors.

After fiddling with citations, actually sending off the paper presents the next step. Luckily, modern technology and email have helped to make this step of the process much simpler. Unfortunately, some journals, such as *JACET Bulletin* and *Asia Pacific Journal of Language in Education*, continue to resist the 21st century and insist on as many as five paper copies and floppy discs or CD-Roms mailed to the editor. Others, including *Applied Linguistics*, puzzlingly require submissions to be made as both an email attachment and multiple paper copies sent through the post. Still others, like *The Journal of Second Language Writing,* on their websites call for mailed, paper submissions but will accept emailed submissions if you ask nicely. But, of course, experienced authors know that the time and effort spent on mailing submissions is almost meaningless in the big picture.

After submitting a paper, the next stage in the publishing process is waiting. And waiting. Then waiting some more. While most journals quickly send a notice of acceptance upon receiving a paper, it generally takes three or four months to receive the reviewers' first critique, though one should not be surprised to wait more than half a year. If the reviewers require revisions (and they almost always do), authors should look forward to even more waiting after submitting a revised draft.

Of course, even the lengthy waits described above remain a best-case scenario, as almost inevitably some quirk delays the process

further. In fact, our laziest students could learn a thing or two about excuses from journal editors. In more than a decade of academic publishing, only rarely have I enjoyed a completely smooth process. Personal experience includes papers delayed due to: editor computer failure, lost submissions, slow referees, lost referee reports, journal staff taking sabbaticals, errors at the printer, and an editor suffering from a debilitating illness. Probably the only excuse I have yet to hear is that the dog ate it.

Receiving no reply at all also proves common. For example, after submitting a paper to the *RELC Journal* it took ten months and several unanswered emails before I finally received the reviewers' comments. Reading them provided no clues as to whether my article might ever be published since they came to a grand total of four sentences: three questions and one observation. More than a year after the original submission, and more unanswered emails, the editor still failed to inform me if the article had been accepted. Only the fear of how much time it would take to start the submission process anew with a different journal prevented me from pointing out that fourteen-year-olds ran my junior high school newspaper better. Finally, a new editor took over and began to expedite the process. I am happy to report that the article appeared on the second anniversary of the original submission. I am unhappy to report that I have been waiting three months to receive my complimentary copy of the journal.

Finally receiving notification of acceptance for publication makes all this waiting worthwhile. You will have plenty of time to cherish and re-read the acceptance letter because the next step in the process is - yes you guessed it - more waiting. It typically takes a year or two after receiving acceptance before one's article actually appears. For example, in July 2005 I finally received notice from the *ELT Journal* that my article had been accepted for publication: in June 2007! Considering how long the process has taken (research began in the summer of 2003), I can only hope the English language will not have

changed too much by the time fellow linguists can read the paper. Of course, applied linguistics and TESOL are not the only disciplines to suffer from a publishing pace similar to the movement of glaciers. In most of the academic world the supply of publishable articles far exceeds demand.

Another reason for the tortuously slow pace of the academic publishing process is the need to protect a journal's scholarly reputation by having two or more senior scholars review all submissions. Dealing with these reviewers requires additional reserves of persistence. Most journals use the double-blind system, authors never know the reviewers' names and reviewers do not know the authors' names. That is, of course, until reviewers see the article in print. Not knowing reviewer identities need not be intimidating as they are all pretty much the same. They seem to train by watching detective shows on TV and nearly always follow a similar good cop and bad cop routine. One reviewer will be as encouraging as possible while pointing out the flaws in your research design or inability to grasp simple statistics. The other will unleash excoriation as harsh and belligerent as possible, destroying your will to live, let alone write again.

In addition to whatever purpose they serve in protecting academic standards, blind reviews have the unfortunate drawback of encouraging offensive and unwarranted rudeness. Elsewhere, reviewers have been described as "pit bulls guarding the queen's jewels" (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995, p. 75). For unexplained reasons, many reviewers consider snide remarks an integral part of the critique process. Once, a reviewer (whose grammatical errors obviously identified them as a non-native English speaker) complained about "contrived" and "unidiomatic English" in a paper I submitted and advised me of the necessity to have my writing checked by a "native English-speaking linguist."

A native English-speaking linguist colleague subsequently read the paper and, after a considerable deal of thought, identified the problem.

In an attempt to avoid tired clichés I had included a few unusual turns of phrase, a beginner's mistake. Lesson learned: inexperienced academic authors must never forget to persist in following the accepted scholarly standards. Referees and editors fervently replace any creative use of language with the proper stifling academic conventions. Academic journals feel it necessary to level the playing field this way to allow contributions from scholars who tragically suffer from an inability to produce readable prose. The success of this affirmative action policy becomes obvious to any regular reader of academic journals.

Authors new to the academic publishing process must not feel bad if the reviewers reject a paper or call for revisions. Rejection proves common, and one observer of academic publishing estimates reviewers reject between 80-95% of submissions to journals in the arts and humanities (Swales, 1990). Reviewers' demands for revisions prove even more frequent. Those serving on a journal's review board rarely hesitate to exercise their power to demand changes to a paper. Frequently, these changes actually improve an article. Just as often, however, reconciling the reviewers' comments leads to additional revision steps in the academic writing process. Typically, different reviewers will give completely different feedback as to how a paper needs to be improved. This begs the question that if a paper's shortcomings were truly significant, would not all of the reviewers have noticed the same problems? Even worse, reviewers will frequently provide advice that directly contradicts each other. Rarely does an editor pick up on such inchoate guidance, leaving the author to interpret and incorporate the suggestions as best they can.

To the uninitiated, academic publishing may seem intricate and intimidating. It is not. Virtually every journal follows the above-described academic publishing process. Thus, the essential ingredients for academic publishing success become persistence, patience, and an ability to maintain an interest in a paper while waiting the several years the whole process takes, from research, to writing, to revising, to

final publication.

References

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