Getting Started on Academic Publishing with the JALT Peer Support Group

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In Japan, one expectation many higher education employers have is for language teachers to conduct and publish research. The implication is that hiring committees expect evidence of academic research and publications when hiring for language teaching positions (McCrostie, 2010). This can be problematic for language teachers whose backgrounds, training or specializations are often not research-based. For many then, the task of writing and publishing peer-reviewed papers is a daunting one. Fortunately, there are people who can help. The JALT Writers' Peer Support Group (PSG) is a team of writers and teachers, called peer-readers, who collaboratively assist other writers to develop their manuscripts to a (hopefully) publishable level. It is associated with JALT, but is available to help any writers who are looking to publish with any publication and, since the PSG is staffed entirely by volunteers all of our services are free of charge.

What is the PSG and What Does it Do?

Whether you are an old hand or just starting out, academic writing is a difficult and time-consuming process, and a single paper may need several reviews and rewrites before it is ready to be submitted for publication (Belcher, 2007). The peer-readers at the PSG help writers at all levels of proficiency and experience to manage that process. They work with authors to develop overall writing skills, provide feedback on general organization and identify areas that need further

development, additional research or which need to be more tightly focused. Usually, grammar and style are not discussed in detail although writers are encouraged to submit subsequent drafts to the PSG so that, as papers progress, sentence-level issues can be addressed more specifically.

Currently, we can only read papers written in English, although for many of the writers who utilize the PSG's services English is not their first language.

Getting Started

Although the peer-readers are happy to work with writers at any stage of the writing process, it is helpful for us if the writers have completed a fairly complete draft and have some ideas about what their end-goals are. Specifically, this includes consideration of which journal they would like to submit the paper to, how soon (i.e., a timeline) and for what purpose.

However, the hardest part of writing is often just getting started, finding a suitable topic, deciding and formulating a clear research question and figuring out how to collect your data (Beaufait, Edwards, & Muller, 2014). One useful pre-writing technique is to start by reading other papers that are written on a similar topic or in the same style as the paper you hope to write. A great place to start is with JALT publications. Archives for *The Language Teacher*, *The JALT Journal* and past conference proceedings can all be accessed online at <jalt-publications. org>. Not only can reading some of these papers give you an idea about writing style and format, but they are also excellent places to find literary sources for your research. Furthermore, if you have an idea about which journal you would like to submit your paper to for publication, it is very helpful to read articles from that journal and, if possible, to cite some of their previously published articles in your paper too as this shows you are aware of their current research and are a part of their readership. (Beaufait, Edwards, & Muller, 2014).

Another sticking point for novice writers is how to use and cite sources correctly. It is recommended that anyone planning on writing for academic publishing obtains a copy of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 6th edition (2010), or the abridged *Concise Rules of APA Style* (2010). Alternatively, a list of other APA guides is available at <http://jaltcue.

org/>reference. It is a good idea to write a working bibliography that you can update as you go along, which lists all the sources you have looked at, used in your paper, or think are interesting, along with all the pertinent reference information. If you intend to do a lot of academic writing, then consider acquiring Endnote (http://endnote.com/). It is an excellent software application that helps you to store and organize your literary references, import them easily in to your papers as you type and also quickly switch from one bibliographic referencing style to another. Try to build this working bibliography using APA style as much as possible as this is the system most commonly used in journals. It is easy to produce a reference list by deleting unused sources from a complete bibliography, but getting to the editing stage of a paper and realizing that you cannot find the complete reference information for a key quote or passage is quite frustrating.

How the PSG System Works

When you have a draft ready for someone else to read, you can send it to the PSG coordinator at <http://jalt-publications.org/psg> along with a brief description of your writing process or experiences so far, your plans for the finished paper and, if possible, some ideas on what areas you are having the most trouble with or would like a peer-reader to focus on. Once the coordinator receives a paper from a writer, she alerts the group and places the paper in a file on Google Drive. Peer-readers can then look at the paper and decide if they are interested in the topic and feel able to provide feedback on it. With a growing number of peer-readers becoming involved in the PSG, the increasingly varied areas of expertise available makes it easier to match authors and readers. Once two readers are found, the coordinator contacts the author again to let them know the paper is in the system and gives them a time frame for the reviews to be finished. When both reviews are finished and added to the file in Google Drive, the coordinator contacts the author again to give them access to the file along with the reviews. In that way, the author can ask direct questions to the peer-readers through the online system and vice versa. The whole process usually takes between four and six weeks.

Unlike with the review process for publications, the PSG reviews are not anonymous. We strive to keep the review process open and collaborative in

order to build a sense of community. We are not publishers evaluating a piece for publication; we are peers helping colleagues to improve their writing. In order to access the Google Drive file, you will need to provide the coordinator with a Gmail address. If you do not have one already, it is easy to set up.

PSG at the JALT National Conference

This year, the PSG has been invited to present at the JALT National Conference in Shizuoka. Members of the PSG will share information on finding appropriate publication venues, the basics of writing academic papers and preparing them for publication and, finally, talk about services the PSG provides and how writers can get help raising their writing to a publishable level. We hope you can come and join us! Also, stop by the publications table to get more information on working with the PSG, either as a writer looking to publish or as a volunteer peer-reader.

Join Our Team

We are always looking for new volunteers and there are many benefits to becoming a peer-reader with the PSG. One of the biggest is the personal, professional and academic development that it confers. By helping others in their writing and publishing endeavors, you enhance your own skill set and knowledge base.

Another benefit is that you discover other teachers and writers who are interested in the same topics as you and build a writing network that could lead to collaboration in the future or provide you with valuable insights into your own research.

We use a collaborative review system that allows less-experienced readers to work with more experienced ones. It also gives new readers a chance to read finished reviews in our archives to help them see which areas of a paper to focus on, the style the review should be written in, and other aspects of writing formative feedback to writers. Since the PSG does not actually publish papers, there is less pressure to get it right. All papers submitted to the PSG will still be reviewed and edited by the publication where they are submitted.

When you sign up with the PSG, the coordinator will add you to the PSG mailing list and post a welcome message to the group. When you respond to this

message, the coordinator will then be able to grant you access to PSG resources on Google Drive, which include some resources for readers, such as a worksheet with tips for writing reviews, a number of papers currently being reviewed and an archive containing papers that have been reviewed and returned to writers.

As of July, 2014 there were approximately 20 active peer-readers. The PSG receives, on average, one to two requests for review a month. We ask peer-readers to try and review at least two papers a year. As the goal is to have two peer-readers comment on each paper, we usually ask for a two-week turn around so that the author can get the comments within a month of initial submission. As a PSG member, you are also invited to help with the PSG Writing Conferences at the JALT National conference this fall, as well as future conferences.

If you are interested in becoming a peer-reader, please contact the coordinator at <jalt-publications.org/psg> and she will get back to you as soon as possible.

References

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Author Bio

Loran Edwards currently teaches at Kansai Gaidai University in Hirakata, Japan. She has been a peer-reader for the PSG since 2005 and became the coordinator in January, 2013. Her hope is that more people will be able to find publishing success through services such as the PSG. loranedwards@mac.com