Advice on Writing Scholarly Manuscripts[*]

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A few caveats . . .
1. I'm assuming that you've already completed your data collection and analysis.
2. I'm assuming you are writing up the results of an empirical study. Much of the following advice may still be relevant for theoretical or conceptual thinkpieces, review essays, and so on.
3. My objective is to help you publish a high quality article that others will view as valuable and important—and not to help you merely get just any old thing published.

Before you begin writing your outline (and you should definitely outline your paper before you begin), you should be able to answer the following questions.

1. **What is your hook?** That is, are you empirically testing competing theories in a head to head fashion to see which one has more explanatory power? Are you solving a heretofore confusing empirical puzzle that has stumped others? Do you have a novel, high-quality dataset that you are showcasing? Are you performing some new, sophisticated analytical technique? Are you creating new, or synthesizing existing, theories for offering fresh explanations of phenomena? Are you testing an idea in the literature that has not yet been addressed empirically or at least not with the kind of methods you are using? Are you doing two or more of these things simultaneously? All good articles have a clear, convincing hook. Typically, if you don't have a hook, your manuscript will not get published. In fact, if you aren't able to answer "yes" to any of the above questions, maybe your manuscript is not worth writing.

2. **What is your (theoretically guided) research question?** Be sure to place it front and center in your introduction. The "story" in your introduction should lead up to the statement of your research question. The readers should be convinced that this is a worthy, interesting, and important research question.

3. **How are you situating yourself with respect to others' work?** Who are you engaging with? Who are you not engaging with? It is fair and expected that you bracket out groups of works to make your literature review manageable. Still, you have to state that you are doing so, and this statement needs to be convincing to others (even others who may have a different interpretation of the literature than you). Keep in mind that journal editors will largely draw reviewers from the pool of people you cite in your references section.

4. **What, very clearly stated, is the contribution (or contributions) of your study?** Here I am not talking about your specific findings or results. Rather, I am referring more generally to how your study contributes to existing work on a theory, concept, empirical question, case, and so on. With your manuscript, you are trying to participate in a scholarly conversation about something. So, it will help you very much to be able to clearly communicate what you are adding to that conversation.

5. **To whom are you writing?** You need to be clear in your head who you're writing to, as this will influence what you foreground and what you background and/or bracket out. For instance, if you frame this paper as about X and not really Y, then you will review works and engage with scholars on X and largely bracket out stuff on Y. When considering your intended audience, you will also need to think intentionally and strategically about your choice of scholarly journal (which I'll address on the next page).

[*] Special thanks to Tom Dietz for feedback on an earlier version.

6. **What is/are the strength(s) of your study?** How can you highlight them so readers will surely appreciate them?

7. **What is/are the weakness(es) of your study?** How can you clearly state them in a way that helps you manage the expectations of the readers? It is much better for you to tell your reviewers about the weaknesses of your study than for them to tell you about them. Don't think you can hide them or that readers won't notice. Once published, your article will be out there for all to read. All weaknesses or limitations will eventually be found out.

Here are some pieces of advice that I have accumulated over the years from some intelligent, productive colleagues; from my own experiences; and from other scholars' public writings. I have arranged these in roughly chronological order throughout the publication process. Again, this is primarily advice about writing empirical manuscripts (and not about writing grant proposals or conducting your empirical research). Some of this is general advice, while some of it contains specific suggestions. But, I believe that all of it will be helpful.

Before Writing Your Manuscript

1. Know yourself and know your process. Be self-aware and reflective about your process. Think about the last major paper you wrote, and thoughtfully answer the following questions:

- How did you prepare to write?
  - Why do you think you did this?
  - Is there anything else that you could have done to help you prepare better?
- On the day you actually began to write, how did you initiate the actual writing process?
  - Where were you?
  - Was that the best place for you?
  - What was happening around you?
  - What resources do you have?
  - Did all of this work well for you?
  - Why or why not?
- How many drafts did you write before the final version you submitted?
  - Do you think that number was sufficient?
- Were you satisfied with the finished product?
  - Was this the best you could have written within the parameters of the assignment and the time allowed?
  - Why or why not?
- What do you think is the hardest part of the writing process?
  - What do you struggle with the most?
- What do you think is the easiest part of the writing process?
  - What do you think you are pretty good at?

We all have a process that works for us. Sometimes that process changes over time, and often we find that we don't always abide by that process (because of time pressure, resource scarcity, or other distractions). But, the better you get to know your process and why it works well for you, the easier the writing process will become.

2. Strengthen your weaknesses before you continue honing your strengths. We all have strengths and weaknesses. It is easy to fall into the trap of simply focusing on, and depending on, your strengths at the expense of ignoring your weaknesses. Try hard to turn your weaknesses into your new strengths.

3. Talk to your colleagues about the scholarly journals you are considering. See what sort of positive or negative things they have heard about these journals. Is the journal notorious for taking a long time with reviews? Are the editors of the journal new and possibly anxious to fill upcoming issues? Are the editors coming to the end of their term? Are they looking for manuscripts to fill open slots in their final issue(s), or do they have a backlog of manuscripts already committed to several issues into the future? Is the journal having a hard time finding reviewers? Ask them to suggest alternatives that might be more appropriate for your manuscript.

4. Almost always avoid writing a manuscript tailored highly or solely for a single journal. If that journal rejects your submission, then you are in a rough spot of having to totally overhaul the manuscript for another journal or abandon the manuscript altogether.

5. Ideally, you will have a good sense of the several scholarly journals you want to target. Order the journals from your first choice for submission to your last choice. Later, if you happen to get rejected at your first choice, then you will simply go right to your second choice, and so on.

6. Once you have identified your first choice journal, be sure you have cited some articles from that journal in your manuscript. Editors like to see numerous citations to their journal in the references of submitted manuscripts.

7. Aim high with your journal selection if you can afford the time for a likely rejection and resubmission elsewhere.

8. Become comfortable with rejection, because it will happen a lot over your career. In all likelihood, your manuscript with be rejected at the first journal you submit it to—or you will receive a "revise and resubmit" that feels like it is an outright rejection (and that may still eventually result in a rejection). Anyone who submits a lot of manuscripts for publication receives a good deal of rejections. But, don't let rejections shake your confidence in your writing. If you have good answers to the seven questions above, then your manuscript likely will be published in some scholarly journal. It just may take a bit more time than you have anticipated, and your manuscript may eventually get published in a journal lower on your ordered list than you had hoped.

When Writing Your Manuscript

9. In general, you should not try to deviate from normal conventions of your targeted journal and/or of the standard empirical article in your discipline (e.g., page length, the ordering of sections). Don't get cute. Editors and reviewers typically do not like unorthodox things. Rather, most editors and reviewers like scholars to "follow the rules" of our scholarly publishing conventions. What are these conventions, you ask? Quickly skim 10-15 empirical articles in your field. Look for common, recurring features of articles. Those are the conventions.

10. You should understand that part of your job as an author is to make the editors' and reviewers' jobs easier. Follow the journal's submission requirements. Abide by manuscript formatting guidelines. Follow directions and attend to details. Do what you can to help guide readers through your manuscript.

11. Never promise big and deliver small. Do not frame your manuscript as answering an acutely puzzling question, offering a major contribution, or settling a major dispute if you really cannot achieve such results with your study design, measurement, sampling, or analyses. It is much better to be modest and then exceed editors' and reviewers' expectations rather than to bluster and boast, only to not meet editors' and reviewers' expectations.

12. Be kind and diplomatic in your review of the literature. When in doubt, remember the Golden Rule. Everyone's work is flawed in some way, and literature reviews are often where we discuss those flaws and limitations. But remember that science is quite difficult, and we never conduct our work under perfect conditions. We never have all the time, resources, personnel, etc. to conduct what we think would be the best study. Instead, we satisfice and make compromises to get our research done with what we have available. Also realize that the very scholars you are critiquing are often the ones who will be asked to review your manuscript.

13. When revising, pay particular attention to improving the quality of your sentences. Always ask two questions about each sentence. What am I trying to say? How can I say it more effectively, clearly, and succinctly?

14. Do not invent your results tables from scratch. By the time you are ready to write up an empirical study, you have probably seen dozens to hundreds of results tables. Use templates based upon these existing tables. Keep in mind that some fields and/or journals have particular norms about the design and formatting of results tables.

15. Think about adding a figure. A figure might be an analytical model, a flowchart, a graph, an illustration, or a photo. A really good figure that captures the essence of an argument or a main finding can often help guide readers through your manuscript. Once published, this figure may be more important for publicizing your work than any of the text you have written.

16. Writing is a social process. When possible, share your relatively polished draft with others who know the field but who may not be experts in your exact topic or question. You can ask them to carry out a simulated peer review (and volunteer to do the same for them when the time comes.) To get the most from this process, provide the reader with specific, standard questions that nearly all peer reviewers are expected to answer.

When Submitting Your Manuscript

17. Write a brief, clear cover letter. You should convey the following in this cover letter:

- accurate address of the name of the editor and title of the journal;
- the full title and author list of the manuscript which you are submitting;
- the category of manuscript you are submitting: e.g., research article, research note, letter, forum, etc.;
- a brief description of the contribution(s) and major result(s) of the study;
- a statement that the manuscript has not been published before and is not under review at any other journal; and
- the name and full contact details of the submitting/corresponding author.

18. Be sure to recommend potential reviewers (and, if necessary, recommend scholars you with to not review your manuscript). Reviewer recommendations are now a standard feature during more journal submissions processes; indeed, they are mandatory as some journals. Often you will be asked to identify why or why not some scholars should serve as reviewers. Be honest and straightforward.

After Submitting Your Manuscript

19. Get back to work on your other manuscripts. At any point in time, you should have several manuscripts forthcoming or in press, several others under review, still others you are actively writing, and a few others that you are just beginning to prepare. Maintaining a solid level of productivity over time (and protecting yourself against the whims of lagging reviews, editorial discretion, and publication delays) means that you should be "juggling" multiple manuscripts/projects at once. Of course, this will seem quite daunting at first, just as novice jugglers can't imagine they will someday be able to handle 7-8 balls at once. But, if you ramp up incrementally, adding an additional paper at a time to your workload at a time, you will be able to do it.

20. If you have not received a decision on your manuscript in two months or so, drop the editors a polite, brief e-mail inquiring about the status of your manuscript. Nothing more is needed. They know you are anxious, and they get these e-mails regularly. They will know how to respond.

21. If you get a straight-out rejection, immediately get your manuscript back under review at a different journal. (You may feel that your manuscript got unfairly treated. Fine. You may want to raise a special appeal with the editor. Don't. Such appeals almost never result in a favorable decision, but they do take time.) First, skim the reviews to see if the reviewers found any typos, missed or wrong citations, things that are unclear, or other glaring errors that you can easily address. Select the next journal on your list, reformat the manuscript according to that journal's style and guidelines, and submit the manuscript to that next journal as soon as you can. I think it is a fool's errand to significantly revise a manuscript given the substantive feedback of reviewers' who chose to reject it. Instead, give the new set of reviewers at the next journal a chance to review your manuscript the way you initially wrote it.

22. If you get a "revise and resubmit," read the editors' and reviewers' feedback carefully. Put the reviews away and then come back to them fresh after a few days. Identify the specific critiques and suggestions offered by the reviewers. Prepare a carefully detailed, point-by-point response to this feedback—documenting what you have (and have not) revised and why. Be positive and thankful in this response. Always assume that the reviewers' are intending to provide you with constructive feedback (because most are). If you think it is clear that a reviewer "did not get" what you wrote, then take that as evidence that you simply were not as clear or as convincing as you had thought. With experience, you will become skilled at parsing reviews and editorial comments. That is, you will become more adept at identifying the most important critiques that you must convincingly address and the secondary or tertiary points on which you can reasonably push back.