

“What Editors Want: Paving the Way to Publication” Do’s and Don’ts When Submitting Papers

Prepared by Pat Walsh and Tom Mommsen; Co-Editors in Chief, *Comparative Biochemistry and Physiology* for the 2007 SICB Student/Postdoc Affairs Committee Workshop, Phoenix, AZ.

Do...

...examine the scope of the journal and description of its contents before submitting.

You might be amazed at the number of “inappropriate” papers we receive and have to rapidly “desk reject” (without review, or after a quick examination by an editorial board member) simply because they don’t address the interests of our audience. Some good questions to ask yourself in this regard are: Do papers like yours appear in the journal? Have you cited papers that have appeared in the journal or similar journals? If still in doubt, send only the title, authors and abstract to the journal office for a quick opinion on appropriateness, or even the whole paper. In the case of *CBP* specifically, we are often asked “Part A, B, C, or D?”. The same advice above applies.

...format the paper appropriately.

There is the tendency amongst authors to say “I’ll format the paper and reference style later, after it has been accepted”. This is especially true if a paper has previously been rejected by another journal whose format is “similar”. If you pay attention to the details of the appropriate format for the journal you are submitting to now, you will have one fewer thing to be criticized about by both the editorial staff and referees. In a paper that might be “controversial”, poor format could just be the straw that breaks the camel’s back and tips a referee to “reject”.

...look into whether the journal has page charges or submission fees, or fees for color illustrations or photos, or reprint charges, and clear the expenses up front with your advisor.

You want to avoid the “good news your paper is accepted, bad news you owe us \$700” scenario. If you are “broke”, many journals have an “as affordable” policy that might subsidize some of your costs if you plead poverty. Can’t hurt to ask. [*Commercial: CBP* has no page charges or submission fees, and we often grant free color “if scientifically justified”, and always in the case of review articles and contributions to special issues.]

...prepare a cover letter that not only says we are submitting the paper

Not only do you want to state that the paper is not being considered elsewhere, you have the permission of all the co-authors (and all that formal stuff), but you should include a sentence or two that describes the novel finding, why you are so totally stoked about your work (the “newsworthiness factor”), and why you think it would be appropriate for the journal. Make sure you have appropriately addressed the cover letter! You would be amazed at how many letters we receive that are addressed to the Editor of another journal (obviously the last place the paper was rejected). Strike One!

...suggest potential referees (up to 5 or 6) and a member of the Editorial Board

Of course it is the Editor’s prerogative to assign referees, but the reality is that journal staff members are overworked. If you can do a little background work to help them, it will be appreciated. Also, although journal editors and editorial board members tend to be broadly trained and interested, they do not know all fields equally well. By suggesting *appropriate* referees, you maximize the chances that your paper will get an appropriate review and not something out of left field. Of course, avoid the obvious conflicts of interests (folks from the same institution, folks who are very close collaborators of yours, folks who are simply “your buddies”). A good question to ask: “Have I cited papers by the people I am suggesting as referees?” This gives you confidence you have chosen appropriate people, and of course, human nature being what it is, the referee will be chuffed that you have cited him or her (assuming of course that you have appropriately and fairly represented their published findings!).

Brownie points.

Do...

Same goes for an appropriate member of the editorial board. Often, when a paper comes in, the Editor will directly assign it to an editorial board member for a quick read (to see if it's appropriate) and to ask for referee suggestions.

You don't want to make a habit of this, but: you can in fact suggest people who you do not want to review your paper, due to a personal conflict, because they are an extreme competitor (not quite so much of a problem in our comparative world), or simply because you feel from prior experience that they are so opposed to your ideas as to not be able to give a fair evaluation.

There is no guarantee that the Editors will use any or all of your suggestions, but there are times when we look at these lists and say: "great list, couldn't have done better myself, let's use them all".

Don't...

...assume that everything is hunky dory once you hit the "submit" button.

CBP receives well over a thousand papers a year to be reviewed, and our sister journals get large numbers as well. Despite our best efforts, stuff just falls through the cracks sometimes, electronic or otherwise. If after a few days you don't get an acknowledgement that your paper was received, email the journal office. If you don't hear about the status of your paper in 6 weeks to two months, contact the journal to ask how the review is going. Most journals have electronic communication with referees, so your paper should have found suitable referees within a couple of weeks (sometimes it just takes longer to track people down though) and referees usually have a 2-4 week deadline.

...interpret the editor's decision letter too literally.

Unless of course the letter says something like: "all referee reports said 'accept as is', and we have sent your article to be typeset for page proofs" (don't hold your breath, this has probably happened to us once in our careers), or "your paper is most definitely rejected". Usually there are qualifiers in the decision letter like: "We can only accept your paper after major revisions" or "Your paper is not acceptable in its current form. Should you choose to revise your paper....". These are generally statements that are leaving the door open for you to revise, rebut and resubmit.

...take the referee comments too personally.

Most seasoned referees avoid personal language, but sometimes it slips through (human nature again). Be assured that most editors don't take that stuff too seriously. Remember, we *know* who reviewed your paper, and we can often say "oh, that's referee x, he/she always has an axe to grind about issue y".

...procrastinate about revising and resubmitting your paper.

Unless of course the referees have asked you to gather more data, or undertake a months' long reanalysis of your data. Get on it right away and strike while the iron is hot. Most journals have a two-month rule. If you don't resubmit within two months, it is considered a new submission and it *will* go out for re-review. By turning the paper around quickly, you can often avoid re-review (usually this decision rests with the referee though, as they often have a box they can tick or not that says "this paper really needs to be re-reviewed" or "I'd like to see a revision please"). Also, while the paper is still fresh in the referee's mind, you might get a better reception to your revisions.

Do...

...make a compelling case for why your revised paper should be accepted.

Assume that the referee will see your response (though often this does not actually happen) and write it as though you are specifically responding to them. Be courteous (if there was a personal attack, or an otherwise inappropriate comment, take this up separately in your cover letter to the editor), Thank them for their input, and respond to every single point with a “we did this, see page x, line y” or a “we respectfully disagree for the following reason(s)”. Spell it all out carefully and logically (remember that overworked journal staff) so that the Editors don’t have to fish about for whether or not you adequately addressed the issues.

...see point #1 under “Don’t”

...bask in the glory when you get the acceptance letter, and change the paper on your *c.v.* from “submitted” to “in press”.

...follow up to make sure you get page proofs in a timely manner and *carefully* check everything, including every number value and decimal point in your tables, figure axis labels, legends, GenBank entries, etc.

...a victory dance when your paper shows up online, and then another when the print version comes out (hey, it’s what we live for, right?).

...send reprints to your family.

...consider writing a review article. Many junior scientists think that they shouldn’t be writing review articles until they are old and grizzled. Fact is, after having written a dissertation, or that first grant proposal, you have reviewed and understand an enormous body of literature. You probably have some way fresher perspectives than the veterans as well. But, before you do this, contact a journal editor with your idea, maybe even send a summary or abstract, and ask permission (or to ask to be invited). This is *not* crashing the party. Journals love to have great review articles with fresh ideas and perspectives (and if not they will let you know in tactful manner). These are often the type of articles that will be highly cited and improve the journal’s Impact Factor. You might also find yourself being asked to review for that journal, maybe eventually be invited to the editorial board, etc. Be proactive!

Do's and Don'ts, From Kim E. Barrett, Ph.D., Professor of Medicine, University of California, San Diego

Do ensure that all requested items are submitted to the journal office; you do not want to make enemies of the editorial office staff or, worse, the Editor.

Do try to enlist the help of a native English-speaking colleague to assist with the preparation of your manuscripts if English is not your first language.

Do read your manuscript carefully prior to submission, and preferably ask a number of individuals to check the typescript for errors. Familiarity breeds "typo-blindness"!

Do conduct your experiments with a view to their ultimate publication. Thus, don't waste too much time with a series of studies with minor variations in design, only to have to go back to make the required number of repetitions of an experiment to allow for statistical analysis.

Do state the hypothesis of your study prominently in the introduction section.

Do read the instructions!

Do consider starting to prepare your manuscript even before all of the experiments are complete. Often, outlining the results section will alert you to gaps in the reasoning and additional experiments that can fill them.

Do provide all authors, including students, an opportunity to comment on the manuscript before it is submitted. Indeed, many journals now require a signed statement to the effect that all authors have seen and approve of the manuscript's contents.

Do try to make your study complete. Resist the temptation to submit your work as LPU-s (least publishable units).

Do try to allow your students and fellows to develop their own writing style, while maintaining quality control over the output of your laboratory.

Do participate in the peer-review process of journal manuscripts to the greatest extent possible. It is a wonderful way to learn what works (and what doesn't).

Do be willing to accept constructive criticism from trusted colleagues.

Don't include data that has been published previously, other than in abstract form. Prior publication includes symposium proceedings and the like that are not peer-reviewed, even if the data are only in preliminary form in the prior work.

Don't rely too heavily on the spell-check feature of your word processor (but do use it!). Don't include titles on figures intended for publication.

Don't feel that you cannot call or write to the Editor for clarification, if points raised in the review process seem unclear. Note, however, that some editors will only accept such inquiries if made in writing.

Don't give co-authors unlimited amounts of time to comment on the manuscript. Set them a deadline after which you will proceed with submission with or without their input.