Agony Aunt
How to master publishing

Wisdom of the Crowd

Our resident Agony Aunt offers guidance on the key questions bothering early-career researchers, with additional advice crowd-sourced from Twitter. In this edition: Publishing!

BY RACHEL HARRISON

Arguably, aside from teaching the next generation of researchers, publishing is **the** defining feature of a career in academia. It's how we share our results, engage in debate, and develop new theory. It's also terrifying. But never fear! Cultured Scene is here to give you the tips you need to succeed.

Before you can even begin to worry about those pesky editors and reviewers, you've got to actually write the manuscript. Now, the research is your own problem, but we can give you some tips for a (relatively) stress-free writing experience.
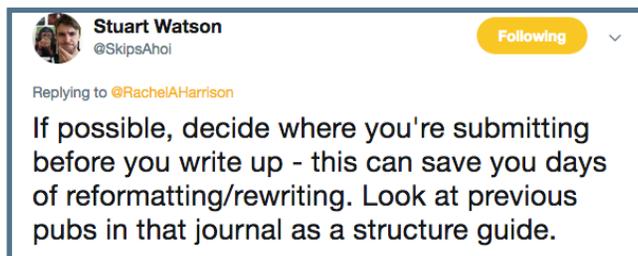
Stuart Watson
@SkipsAhoi
Following

Replying to @RachelAHarrison

If possible, decide where you're submitting before you write up - this can save you days of reformatting/rewriting. Look at previous pubs in that journal as a structure guide.

@skipsahoi suggests you pick a journal before you even start writing. You can use previous publications as a guide, and also make sure you follow the journal's style guide – it will be available on their website. This also means you can tailor the paper to the journal somewhat – if it's a journal for publications about all non-human animals, you may want to reference a broader literature than if it's a journal only for primate research, for example.
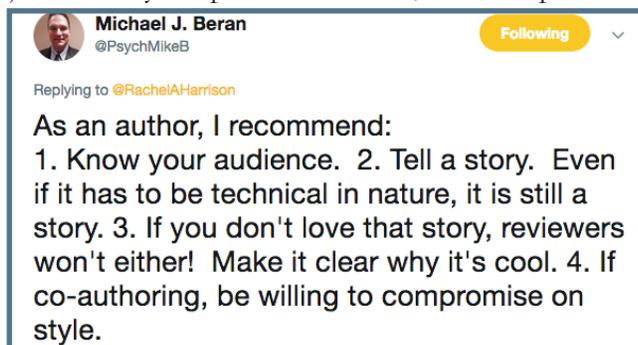
Michael J. Beran
@PsychMikeB
Following

Replying to @RachelAHarrison

As an author, I recommend:
1. Know your audience. 2. Tell a story. Even if it has to be technical in nature, it is still a story. 3. If you don't love that story, reviewers won't either! Make it clear why it's cool. 4. If co-authoring, be willing to compromise on style.

A wealth of advice from @PsychMikeB! Know your audience – like fitting your manuscript to the journal, you also need to fit it to your audience. Figure out the 'story' your research is telling, and then tell that story in a compelling way – make the reviewers love the story as much as you do. Writing with co-authors can be tricky – you may not get everything your own way in terms of style (my own love of em dashes rarely makes it into the final manuscript! Luckily I can use as many as I like in Cultured Scene).

So you have your manuscript. Time to edit! @AlbaMotes1 suggests checking the basics. Do your figure and table numbers match the text? Have you got multiple "Figure 3"s floating around, lying in wait to confuse and annoy a reviewer?
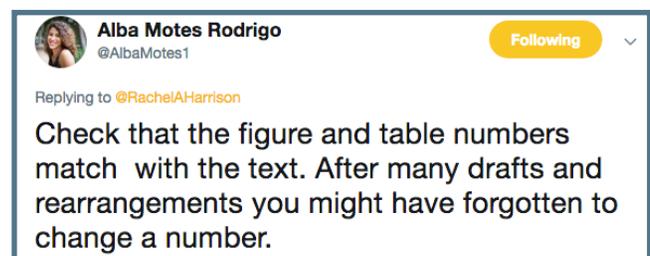
Alba Motes Rodrigo
@AlbaMotes1
Following

Replying to @RachelAHarrison

Check that the figure and table numbers match with the text. After many drafts and rearrangements you might have forgotten to change a number.

With a little help from Sum 41, @skipsahoi reminds us that academic success may indeed be "closer than it is too far" – if you take a step back and hand your precious manuscript over to someone dispassionate for a final check. A fresh pair of eyes will pick up any remaining errors you missed in your edit, and someone new to the paper will ask you to clarify all those things that seem obvious to you, the world's only expert on your paper, but are completely incomprehensible to someone who wasn't in the room while you collected your data.

Stuart Watson
@SkipsAhoi

Following

Replying to @SkipsAhoi @RachelAHarrison

YOU'RE IN TOO DEEP

Get someone not involved with the study to read through a draft, they will spot things that don't make sense to someone who hasn't been swimming in the methods & data for the last 12 months.

@PsychMikeB concurs – get some outside feedback before you subject your manuscript to peer review. As an editor, Michael also highlights the importance of the cover letter. Don't make an editor root through your entire paper to work out what your keys findings are and why they matter, tell them! Give them the information they need to find great reviewers who will help you improve your manuscript and get your research out there.

Michael J. Beran
@PsychMikeB

Following

Replying to @RachelAHarrison

As an editor, I would add:
1. Know the formatting requirements and follow them exactly! 2. Sell your story in your cover letter. Make me want to find supportive reviewers who are open to what you have reported. 3. Get feedback from others before you send it to us.

Now, on to those reviews. The scariest thing about publishing is receiving that first batch of reviews back. Of course, getting others to read your paper and comment *before* you submit it for peer review will help to catch any major issues before the dreaded reviewers get their hands on it. But nothing is ever perfect, and your reviewers may well request significant changes. @VervetJenny suggests putting the reviews aside for a few days, and coming back with a fresh outlook. Don't revise in anger! Negative comments, even about minor issues, can feel really upsetting – after all, you've been perfecting this manuscript for months! Take a step back, follow Jenny's advice and eat some

Jenny Botting
@VervetJenny

Following

Replying to @RachelAHarrison

As an ECR, I know that negative, yet constructive, comments are the backbone of science...but that doesn't make them any easier to read! Even the slightest negative review can be disheartening to a newbie. I recommend reading the reviews through once, then stepping away.../2
... for a day or two (potentially eating large amounts of chocolate) and then coming back with a fresh and determined outlook. On the second read through, the comments always seem less scary and much more manageable! 😊 💪

chocolate, and then make your edits. You'll end up feeling the paper is that much stronger.

@AlbaMotes1 has some pragmatic advice for managing your revisions. Colour code away, and deal with the easy stuff first. Once the ball gets rolling on making edits, you'll find you fly through them.

So that's our crowd-source wisdom on publishing. Safe travels, my early-career friends, and may the gods of publishing smile upon you and your manuscript.

Alba Motes Rodrigo
@AlbaMotes1

Following

Replying to @RachelAHarrison

About reviews, I color code the reviewers' comments: green=easy to solve, yellow=a bit difficult/will need some time, red=tough one. I get rid of the green ones first and normally don't do more than a red a day, unless deadline is very close.

One final piece of crucial advice though – once your paper is published, don't forget to do one of our Pitch of Publication interviews or write an article on it for Cultured Scene! ☐

Do you have a question for our Agony Aunt? Email Rachel at journalsec2@eslr.co.uk and tap into the wisdom of the crowd.