

Special Concluding Essay: Writing for Academic Journals

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Abstract

Writing for academic publishing is a unique professional challenge. It is enriching and fulfilling; at the same humbling as well as frustrating. In this article I propose to examine the challenge and offer guidelines necessary in the Indian context, where the "publish or perish" syndrome has just arrived. Academics like to publish, but often lack the expertise. This article begins with the question, "Why write for journals?" The paradox that writers want to write but don't is also investigated. A positive approach to writing is examined. Guidelines on what one should do before, during, and after writing the paper are presented.

The Issue

Academics all over the world have to face the challenge of the "publish or perish" syndrome. For sheer survival, they have to write articles for reputed journals in their field. This is a professional challenge that many of us are not ready to meet. The experience of writing is full of contradictions. It is enriching and fulfilling, at the same time it is often humbling as well as frustrating. Seeing one's article in print, finding it recognized and accepted as worthy of publication is indeed a very satisfying experience. However, when the editors sits in judgment on your *magnum opus* or ask you to revise the article, it is indeed a humbling experience. Repeated rejections frustrate you, and you stop making the effort.

Why should you write for journals? This is a pertinent question we need to ask ourselves before setting out to write. As Braine (2007) puts it:

[I]nitially a requirement for promotion and tenure in the United States and Britain, scholarly publications are now recognized as a notable sign of professional growth and a requirement for jobs and promotion in most other countries too. (n.p.)

Publication of an article satisfies our urge to share and disseminate what we know, and thus forms a significant contribution to knowledge in the field. Fellow researchers benefit from our findings. Above all, it publication confers academic status on the writer. According to Muirhead, "Writing for publication represents a wonderful opportunity to interact with the others and make a positive contribution to the academic community" (2002, n.p.).

There are plenty of reasons for us to write. Upon initial consideration, we need to raise some pertinent questions:

1. Do you enjoy writing? If you hate writing, you should not expose yourself to this traumatic experience.
2. Do you have self-discipline and can you persevere? Most often, we start writing but stop halfway through because there are other priorities. And, our article is put into cold storage, never to be retrieved.
3. Can you set deadlines? If you can't, your article will never see the light of day.
4. Do you have an enquiring mind?
5. Are you capable of working by yourself? Writing can be a lonely venture that demands constant self-motivation.

The mantra is "Write only if you want to."

Most of us want to write, but don't get down to it. We have trouble getting started, and we come up with various excuses. The most popular excuse is, "I have no time, due to pressure of work." But, strangely enough, the more work you have, the more you are able to accomplish. Some are afraid of rejection and are twice shy, once bitten. Others suffer from an inferiority complex, and escape saying that they are deficient in writing skills. Yet others don't write because their colleagues don't write.

Before starting to write, a lot of preparation is essential. First and foremost, read many articles critically, reflect on them, and analyze them. This is essential in understanding the latest thinking in the field and being up-to-date with theory and ideas. You may otherwise be reinventing the wheel. It is a good idea to identify the journal for which you want to write, as each journal has a different approach and offers different guidelines. Start with several possible topics before finally narrowing down and focusing on a specific area. The topic chosen should be current, relevant, and interesting. Experimentation, data collection, and reporting will follow. It would be useful to establish a rapport with the editor and one way of doing it is to observe deadlines.

The next question is, how do you organize your paper? Most editors require an abstract in about 100 words, giving a summary view of the main research questions and content. The introduction should state the problem, establish the relevance of the research, and present the aims and scope of the study. The hypothesis has to be stated and important terms defined. A short paragraph on theoretical framework should follow, reviewing critically the thinking available on the topic. A discussion of the field study, analysis, and interpretation of data follows. The article should conclude with your findings and their

implications. Complete and accurate references are important to help readers and other researchers understand the framework of your research.

The *how* of writing is as important as the *what*. If the style is unreadable, no one will enjoy reading your article. In considering the guidelines for good style, consider a text which won a prize in an international contest on "bad writing."

If for a while, the ruse of desire is calculated for the uses of discipline, soon the repetition of guilt, justification, pseudo-scientific theories, superstition, spurious authorities and classifications can be seen as the desperate effort to 'normalize' formally the disturbance of a discourse of splitting that violates the rational enlightened claims of its enunciatory modality. (Cited in Myers, 1999).

The basic criterion for a good style is that it should be reader-friendly. It is better to use simple, plain language and avoid flowery, difficult, or demanding vocabulary or syntax. The aim should be clarity, not obscurity. Don't confuse the reader with verbiage. Emotional overtones should be avoided in an article. Don't use words like unfortunately or luckily, which show the reader your biases and conclusions. Avoid sweeping statements; they suggest a lack of scholarship. Quotations are important, but don't over quote; it creates an impression that you can't think for yourself. And do feel confident about your views. Visuals add clarity to your presentation. Avoid obscure jargon as much as possible, for it can irritate and confuse the reader.

Andrade (2007) compares publication of an article to climbing a summit. She exhorts us to "reach greater heights-one step at a time," adding, "Leave fresh footprints."

About the Author

V. Saraswathi is Professor Emerita of English, University of Madras. She is currently the Editor of *The Journal of English Language Teaching*. Her areas of special interest are teacher development, materials writing and testing. She is the author of nearly fifty coursebooks at various levels. She has guided a number of research scholars in their Ph.D. work, and served as an expert at the Teleconference for Teachers in English organized by the British Council, Chennai.

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