Editorial

513

Improving your publication success: some tips

Academic journals are like studios or art galleries. They display new work from researchers in a particular field or discipline. Editors' role is to work as the curator of the art gallery – deciding what is worthy of display. What would attract more viewers and customers (readers) to the art gallery (journal)? What would increase the reputation of the art gallery (journal)? The editorial team, including associate editors and reviewers, serves as the gatekeepers to the world of recognized new knowledge. While authors are the original producers of new knowledge, the editorial team, including the editor, associate editors and reviewers, scrutinize the knowledge production process and validate the new knowledge. Publishing houses, whether they are for-profit or not-for-profit organizations, undertake the production process of the journal.

The most likely outcome of journal submission is rejection! Even the most brilliant minds in a field, even the Nobel laureates, receive or have received rejection letters. Seminal papers in many fields often have been rejected by one or more journals for one or more reasons. This is the reality. The space in the art gallery is minimal! Suppose you received a rejection letter for a submission. You may want to rework the paper addressing concerns raised about it and showcase it to another journal (art gallery), throw the paper in the trash bin or forget about it.

It hurts when authors get a rejection letter. After all, authors put months, often years of work, and their emotions into the paper. Developing a research paper meticulously to meet the target journal's standards can reduce the chance of rejection and subsequent pain. Here are some helpful tips for emerging scholars.

(1) *Motivation:* An excellent paper begins with solid motivation. Why is research motivation important? It explains why the authors have undertaken the research. It explains the demand for this research from readers' point of view. The discussion surrounding the paper's motivation alludes to the new knowledge the paper is likely to generate. What are the policy and practical implications of the new knowledge the paper wishes to create?

(2) *Clarity of the research question(s):* Emerging or inexperienced researchers are often not sure what they are investigating. Identifying what exactly you want to investigate is the very first important step of a sturdy paper. In the context of the relevant global literature, you need to think clearly about whether your research question amounts to "re-inventing the wheel" and how original the research questions are? How relevant are the research questions in a contemporary context? If others have investigated the research questions in another country/region or another setting, what justifies revisiting the same research questions in your setting? Something that has been done elsewhere (in another country) does not justify a revisit unless the current study is a replication study. Replication studies have a different purpose. Important or seminal papers are sometimes replicated in a different time frame or space to generate new insights or to test whether the initial results hold. In some cases, authors may have doubts over the validity of the results.

(3) *Originality of the hypotheses:* Are the hypotheses original or new considering the global literature on your topic? If your hypotheses are not new, why are you

revisiting some "old hypotheses"? What are the reasons? If the hypotheses are not new or original, you are just asking for a rejection letter.

(4) *Research design and estimation:* Is the research design appropriate for testing the hypotheses? Are you using state-of-the-art design and estimation techniques? Do you need control samples in your study? If yes, did you use appropriate control samples? If your research design has limitations, are you considering those limitations in interpreting your results? Is your research design consistent with other studies on similar topics? If the research design is new or novel, how do you convince the reader that it is the most appropriate design? How are your data distributed? Do they meet the conditions or assumptions of the estimation techniques used in the paper? What steps have you taken to ensure that your data and estimation techniques are compatible with each other? Are there outliers in your data? How do you detect or control for outliers? What other problems may your data set have? Self-selection bias? Any endogeneity concerns? Reverse causality? Simultaneity bias? Self-selection bias? Other problems such as correlated omitted variables problem, heteroscedasticity, serial or cross-sectional correlations? Did you adequately control these threats? Are the control variables used in the paper adequate and justified?

(5) *Results:* Are the results interpreted correctly? Do they support your hypotheses? If not, why not? Is there any alternative/competing interpretation of your results? How do you rule out these possibilities? Are the results presented in a very logical and economical manner? Did you pay enough attention to the descriptive statistics by reporting the mean, standard deviation and various quartiles of each variable used in the paper so that readers can infer the characteristics of your data? How are your data distributed across years and industry categories?

(6) *Causation vs association:* Many inexperienced authors tend to claim causation in their study. That is, they claim x causes or caused y. To establish causality, one needs to demonstrate that their study satisfies the following three conditions:

- x happens before y happens;
- when x changes, y changes as well; and
- if x does not change, y does not change.

It is often challenging to meet all these three conditions in social science and business research settings. So, it is safer to say that x and y are associated. Especially in archival studies, we analyze data that have been recorded in the past by independent or third parties. Thus, we cannot undo past events, and hence, we cannot meet the third condition.

(7) *Contribution:* A research paper that is perfectly executed with attention to detail can still be rejected due to insufficient contribution. Just how much contribution is sufficient for acceptance is an unknown quantity. However, somehow there is a shared understanding among the members of the editorial team and expert reviewers about the level of contribution that is required to publish in a certain journal. Experienced authors and expert reviewers can often perceive the extent of contribution that is required in a specific journal. Nevertheless, you need to consider the following questions. What is the contribution of your research paper? How does your paper extend the relevant literature? What new knowledge do

readers learn from your article which they did not know previously? What are the policy or practical implications of your findings?

In sum, this commentary identified some key issues that a research paper needs to consider so that readers can have confidence in the evidence produced by the paper. Each research setting engenders distinctive challenges which cannot always be preempted. Nevertheless, I trust that researchers will find the tips provided here beneficial.

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