Getting Published in Peer-Reviewed Journals: Advice for Student Authors

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Abstract This chapter discusses the challenges that student writers face in getting their work published in international peer reviewed journals and aspects of the peer review process that they need to understand in order to achieve this. Many of the difficulties student authors face in this process are due to their unfamiliarity with the procedures, practices, and expectations of peer review. In addition, students are often unsure of how to interpret and respond to reviews of their work. The chapter outlines typical features of reviewers' reports and, in particular, aspects of the reports that students often find difficult to deal with. Suggestions are made for ways of working through the peer review process with students so that they can better understand it and, as a consequence, participate more effectively in it.

Keywords English for research publication purposes · Writing for publication · Student writers · The peer review process · Reviewers' reports · Review criteria

Getting published in academic journals is increasingly important for research students in terms of gaining employment when they complete their degree. This is especially the case as the competition for entry-level academic positions increases across the world. Publishing is also, of course, important for students who have the acceptance of their work in a peer-reviewed journal as a graduation requirement for their degree. Academic publications are also, in some situations, necessary for receiving a scholarship as well as for obtaining research grants. As Badenhorst and Xu (2016) have argued, research students are often told that "their academic future is dependent on peer-reviewed publications" (p. 1). This is as true when they are applying for an academic position as when they are seeking tenure or promotion later on in their careers. All of this has implications for the field of writing for research purposes (Paltridge, 2019) and, in particular, the need to support beginning academic authors in getting their work published in peer-reviewed journals.

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In this chapter, I discuss work I have done with my colleague Sue Starfield which aims to provide insights into the process of peer review (Paltridge & Starfield, 2016; Starfield & Paltridge, 2019) and some of the matters we think are important for students wanting to get their work published in academic journals. Our interest, in particular, is: "What is it that student writers need to know in order to get their work published in academic journals?" I also discuss a project I recently completed (Paltridge, 2017) in which I looked at the reports that reviewers write on submissions to academic journals and some of the features of these reports that are difficult for beginning academic writers to interpret and, as a result, respond to.

The literature on writing for research publication purposes (Flowerdew, 2014, 2015) discusses the many challenges beginning academic writers face in the process of getting their work published. Li (2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2016), for example, provides detailed accounts of the challenges that Chinese students face in the writing for publication process while trying to meet the graduation requirement of their degrees of getting published during their studies. Flowerdew (2000) gives an account of a Chinese student's experiences of trying to get his work published when he returned to Hong Kong after having gained a PhD in the US. Lillis and Curry (2010) also examine the experiences of multilingual scholars seeking to publish their work and in their later book (Curry & Lillis, 2013) draw on their research to propose strategies that writers can adopt to enhance their chances of getting published. Many of the difficulties these authors face are, in our view, due to their unfamiliarity with the procedures, practices, and expectations of getting published in English language peer reviewed journals. In our book, *Getting Published in Academic Journals* (Paltridge & Starfield, 2016), Sue Starfield and I have tried to unpack this process for writers who are new to writing for publication in a way which will give them an insider's views of what this entails. Below are the main themes we discuss in our book to give a sense of how we approached the topic:

- What's involved in writing for academic journals
- Deciding which journal to send an article to
- Connecting with readers of research articles
- Understanding the process of peer review
- Reading reviewers' reports and addressing their concerns

It is the last two topics that I address in the most detail in this chapter.

In our chapter on understanding the peer review process, we talk about what peer review involves, and the role of editors and reviewers in this process. We also talk about what is expected of authors in this process saying:

> Our favorite authors are those that follow submission requirements and guidelines to the letter and do not expect that the editor(s) will fix their submissions for them. On occasion, we have had to send back a submission to an author numerous times to get the references correct. We persist until all the changes we have asked for are made, mainly because an untidy reference list sends a bad impression to reviewers. A reviewer can think: "If the author has been this careless with the references, how much care has he or she put into the research on which the article is based? Maybe not a lot …." This is not a message you want to send to reviewers. (Paltridge & Starfield, 2016, p. 71)

In the section on reading reviewers' reports and addressing their concerns, we give this example from a friend of mine:

> I have a friend who has published in many of the top journals in her field who, on receiving major revisions for her very first submission to a peer-reviewed journal, just put the article in her bottom drawer thinking the editor was not interested in her article and that this was effectively a rejection. When she told her supervisor this, he said, "Are you mad? This is good news. The editor wants your article. You just need to do more work on it!" She got the article out of the drawer, revised it, and sent it back to the journal, and it was published [in *Applied Linguistics*] (Paltridge & Starfield, 2016, p. 83).

We also quote from the work of Becky Kwan (2010) who discusses the challenges that beginning scholars have in dealing with reviewers' reports. She says:

> Many first-time writers are confused, discouraged or even shocked by the negative reviews they receive and the substantial revisions requested … Some never attempt to revise and resubmit their work that reviewers see as having potential for publication (Kwan, 2010, p. 213).

In our opinion, anything other than a rejection is good news. A request to revise a paper means the editor thinks the paper is potentially publishable, provided the author takes on board the feedback they have been given by the reviewers. So, if a student is being asked to revise, they should do this. Being asked to revise is a very common outcome in the peer review process. In their book, *Writing for Scholarly Publication*, Casanave and Vandrick (2003) emphasize that "revise and resubmit is not a rejection" (p. 261). Many students, however, misinterpret the letter from the editor asking them to revise their article as a rejection. It is not: it is an invitation to revise their article and resubmit it to the journal. A study of the publication histories of articles submitted to an international academic journal has suggested that a key factor leading to publication is "authorial persistence" (Belcher, 2007, p. 1); that is, the author's willingness to revise and resubmit their article through several rounds of revisions so this is what we encourage new academic authors to do.

Why, however, are reviewers' reports often so hard to interpret? Often, for reasons of politeness, reviewers are reluctant to tell authors exactly what they want them to do with their submissions. This can make it difficult for new researchers to understand exactly what the reviewers are wanting them to do with their paper. In my book *The Discourse of Peer Review* (Paltridge, 2017), I examined matters such as these in reviewers' reports on papers that had been submitted to the journal *English for Specific Purposes*. One of the matters I examined was how the reviewers asked for changes to be made to the submissions that they reviewed. I found that requests for changes were largely made as directions, suggestions, clarification requests and recommendations. While a good number of these changes were requested directly, a large number of them were not. That is, the reviewers used both direct and indirect speech acts (Austin, 1962; Sbisà, 2009; Searle, 1969) to do this. Examples of this are:

> Directions
> *Proofread the manuscript carefully* (direct speech act)
> *At the moment the conclusion is too general* (indirect speech act)

Suggestions
My main suggestion is that the author develop clear, fully explained connections between discourse cue conventions and disciplinary frames (direct speech act)
A more summarizing comparison between the differences might be helpful (indirect speech act)

Clarification requests
Clarify why it is important to identify ESP learners' strategies (direct speech act)
What do the findings mean? (indirect speech act)

Recommendations
I recommend that the author familiarise him/herself with Aitchison and Lee (2006), which contains numerous references worth exploring, as well as Caffarella and Barnett (2000) (direct speech act)

And, of course, a sentence which contains the word "recommend" as in the above example, while, on the surface a direct speech, is in fact an indirect speech act as the reviewer is telling the author to read and cite the work being referred to, not just suggesting that they do this.

Other examples of politeness strategies that occurred in the reviews were the use of:

Good news/bad news frames (Belcher, 2007)

Although the theoretical frame is well expressed and appropriate [good news], the literature review is inadequate, appearing to miss many of the studies that, unfortunately, have already produced the very same kinds of findings that this study turned up [bad news].

Praise/criticism pairs (Hyland, 2000)

I think your paper reads a lot more clearly now that you have made changes as suggested [praise]. There are still a few little things that I think would improve the readability of your paper [criticism].

Hedging (Hyland, 2000)

It may be [hedging] there in the data but the write up does not do a good job of making it salient.

Taking personal responsibility for a comment (Hyland, 2000)

To my mind [taking personal responsibility] it is always positive when research challenges stereotypes and certainly stereotypes of East Asian students need to be challenged.

Or cases where the reviewer used a politeness strategy (Brown & Levinson, 1987) such as:

Intensifying interest

This is an outstanding [intensifying interest] piece of work, almost a model for the kinds of papers we want.

Expressing approval

This paper represents a useful addition to the literature [expressing approval] on applications of SFL to the teaching of research writing.

Reviewers also avoided disagreement as in:

I am not sure if I have understood [avoiding disagreement] what the author wants to say

or asserted common ground with the author:

As I am sure the author will agree… [asserting common ground]

I also examined the stance (Hyland, 2005a, 2005b) that reviewers took in their reports; that is, the ways in which they evaluated the submissions. What I found was a high use of attitude markers and self-mentions in the reviews as in:

Attitude markers

I *enjoyed* this paper for a number of reasons

Self-mentions

I regret not being able to simply recommend publication

There were, however, compared to published academic writing for example (see Hyland & Jiang, 2016; McGrath & Kuteeva, 2012), many fewer instances of hedging in the reviews, such as:

A good case study *may* be here.

This, coupled with the high use of self-mentions, showed a high level of certainty in the views expressed by the reviewers and, thus, less encouragement for authors to disagree with or negotiate the points of view expressed in the reports.

How, then, can we help student writers understand the process of peer review? We teach a course on writing for publication purposes at the University of Sydney which aims to address this. The students in our course are all enrolled in a research degree at and near the final stage of their studies and, hence, wanting to publish their work. In the course we discuss, in addition to what a good research article should look like and the matters it should address, the topics shown in Table 1 are covered in the course.

Our session on the peer review process includes a discussion of what the process involves (see Paltridge & Starfield, 2016, Chapter 4) as well as a discussion of different kinds of peer review such as double blind, single blind and open peer review. We also focus on the pros and cons of each of these types of review including the reasons for blind review and arguments that have been made both for and against it (see Paltridge, 2017, Chapter 6). When we discuss typical criteria used by academic journals to evaluate submissions we give examples from journals we have edited as

Table 1 Matters addressed in the writing for publication course

The peer review process and how it works
Typical criteria used by academic journals to evaluate submissions
Interpreting reviewers' reports
The pragmatics of reviewers' reports
Evaluative comments in reviewers' reports
Responding to reviewers' reports

well as broader matters that journal editors have said have influenced their judgment. These include whether:

- the topic is within the scope of the journal;
- the author's literature review takes account of the most recent work on the topic;
- the study is well planned and carried out from a methodological point of view;
- statistical analyses, if they have been used, have been appropriately applied;
- the reporting of the research is clear, well written and well structured;
- the research that is reported on is of interest to readers of the journal (Coleman, 2014).

We also discuss how journals editors very often carry out an initial culling of submissions and reasons that are typically given for what are termed "desk rejections" (Craig, 2010; Nexon, 2014a, 2014b) which, for some journals, can be 80% (Hyland, 2017) and for other journals even higher (Paltridge & Starfield, 2016). The questions in Table 2 are the questions we used to do this at *TESOL Quarterly* when I was co-editing it with my colleague Ahmar Mahboob.

Not all the points in Table 2, of course, would lead to a desk rejection if the answer is no but some (for example, the first four questions) would. In the case of questions six to ten, the author may be asked to revise their submission before it is sent out for review. With question 11 (*Is it under the word length for submissions to the journal?*), this depends on how much the article is under the word length. If the article is a little under the word length this is not normally an issue. However, if the submission is substantially under the word length, this could suggest the author has not treated the topic at the level of depth expected by the journal and their article could, for this reason, be desk rejected.

We also provide students with examples of the criteria that are sent to reviewers, something authors often don't see. In the case of *TESOL Quarterly* these are:

- Does the manuscript contain new and significant information to justify publication?

Table 2 A checklist for the initial in-house review of submissions (adapted from Mahboob et al., 2016, p. 43)

1.	Is *TESOL Quarterly* the correct journal for the submission?
2.	Is the article of interest to the international readership of the journal?
3.	Does the article report on research?
4.	Is the research reported on original?
5.	Is textual similarity a problem with the submission?
6.	Are the sources referred to in the literature review up to date?
7.	Does the author compare the results of the study to previous research on the topic so we see how the study moves the field forward?
8.	Has the article been prepared for blind review?
9.	Can the author be identified from the acknowledgements?
10.	Is the article over the word length for submissions to the journal?
11.	Is the article under the word length for submissions to the journal?

- Is the problem significant and concisely stated?
- Are methodological and/or theoretical matters comprehensively described?
- Are the interpretations and conclusions justified by the results?
- Is adequate reference made to other work in the field?
- Does the manuscript appeal to the general interests of the readership of the journal?
- Does the manuscript strengthen the relationship between theory and practice?

These criteria show that it is important that the research that is reported on is original and that the claims that are made are justified by the data, that proper methodological procedures have been followed, sampling decisions have been explained, and the data have been correctly analyzed. They also highlight the importance of locating the article in the latest research on the topic and writing it in a way that connects with the broader readership of the journal.

In the section of the course on interpreting reviewers' reports I bring copies of reviews of submissions I have made to academic journals to the class. These nearly always surprise students as they mostly haven't seen these kinds of texts before and are surprised by the amount of negative comment in them, even though (most of the submissions) were finally published. In our discussion we focus, in particular, on the pragmatics of reviewer's reports; that is, what is meant by what is said in the reports as opposed to what is literally said. That is, whether reviewers have been explicit in telling the author what changes need to be made to the submission, or whether they have used indirect speech acts which are intended to be read as directions (see above, also Paltridge, 2015, 2017 for further discussion of this).

Students also look at the reviews to identify examples of positive and negative evaluations of the author's work. In doing this, they find that while there is (or may be) some positive evaluation of the paper, it is nearly always outweighed by negative evaluation. They then consider the extent to which the negative evaluations need, in their view, to be addressed for the paper to be accepted for publication. And, of course, the answer is very nearly always (or there needs to be an explanation as to why they haven't).

Some key points we make when discussing responding to reviewers' reports with our students are that they shouldn't send an angry email to the editor if they are not happy with a review. They should, rather, thank the reviewers for their feedback then address the reviewers' comments systematically, and politely, taking each comment at a time. They should explain how they have made the required changes, or explain why they haven't made particular changes with a reasoned justification for not having made them.

A further point we make is that student writers shouldn't be discouraged by what seems to be the very high standing of the journal in which they want to publish or what is involved in getting published in it. The good news is that while a journal may have a low overall acceptance rate, if an author is asked to make revisions to their article there is a much stronger likelihood that it will be accepted for publication. Further, as Atsushi Iida (2016), argues, beginning authors shouldn't be discouraged if their paper is rejected by a journal. Even if an article is rejected, he argues, there is still a lot that can be learnt from the process of being reviewed and from the reviewers' comments on the submission.

Gaillet and Guglielmo (2014) in their book *Scholarly publishing in a changing academic landscape*, quote Jim Elledge from Kennesaw State University who gives the following advice to beginning writers who have had a paper rejected:

> For the uninitiated, the first rejection is terrible, but the second (sometimes the third) can immobilize you. You'll be tempted to slip the manuscript into a drawer and forget about it. Don't. (Gaillet & Guglielmo, 2014, p. 53)

Instead, he argues, students should have a list of journals where they think their manuscript is potentially publishable. If it's rejected by the first journal on their list, they should take on board the reviewers' comments and revise the article with their next journal in mind. Go on like this, he says, until it's accepted. Icy Lee (2014), a Professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, describes a situation exactly like this when one of her papers was rejected by a journal. She says:

> I did not jump to the conclusion that my work was not publishable. Taking into consideration the reviewers' comments, I revised my manuscript, resubmitted it to another journal, and it was accepted. My experience shows that we have to … make full use of the reviewers' comments to improve our writing and find a suitable home for our work (p. 258).

Getting published in academic journals, then, is a challenge for all authors, whether they are experienced academic writers or whether they are new to the peer review process. In the words of Ryuko Kubota, a successful academic author:

> Publishing in professional journals is in no way an easy task, but determination and open-mindedness can enable one to become a member of the publishing community (Kubota, 2003, p. 69).

As Miyuki Sasaki, another published author, explains:

> Many people give up revising and resubmitting their papers when they are rejected for the first time. I would have too if I had not known that many researchers actually begin writing good papers from that point (Sasaki, 2003, p. 219).

The very clear message from this for student writers is not to give up, whether they have been asked to revise or whether their article has been rejected. If they take on board the advice that has been outlined in this chapter they will have a much greater chance of getting published and, in turn, becoming part of their scholarly community (Curry, 2016).

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