

# Nurse Author & Editor

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### Evaluating and Choosing Journals and Editors – A Guide for Authors

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After seeing this title, you may ask: Why would an author choose where to submit work based on an editor? Shouldn't the primary consideration be the journal? One of the problems beginning authors face is finding an appropriate place for their work, and many, as editors know, choose poorly. "Have they ever even read this journal?," many editors must wonder when they receive such things as an entire dissertation sent to a practitioner's journal or a breezy single case study report sent to a journal focusing on quantitative research.

But the reality of writing for publication is that authors must choose based both on the topic presented, the editor of the journal, and the journal's editorial policy. This is something that experienced writers learn with time, and in reality it is no different whether for researchers, authors of fiction, or even composers of chess problems or crossword puzzles for game magazines.

#### **Editors are human!**

Editors are human, of course, and have all the same foibles as other people. There are certainly "bad" editors – those who don't acknowledge manuscripts in a timely fashion, those who "forget" to send papers out to reviewers, and so on. We will discuss some of these qualities in this article, but have no intention of "slamming" editors – we have served in such capacities ourselves, and have experienced many of the situations that contribute to the difficulties editors face.

It is important to appreciate that editors usually have other full-time jobs. Those with academic appointments are often supposed to be granted release time for their editorial duties – an academic policy that often gets lost in the myriad responsibilities of the academic workday.

One manuscript can be a day's work for the editor. They must first read the manuscript to decide whether it should go through the peer-review process, and then find the reviewers who can best evaluate the particular piece. And often editors get burned – seemingly promising reviewers do not review the manuscript properly, or let it sit on their desk until the deadline for sending it back has long passed.

Experienced writers know how to choose where to send their work based on trial and error. In this article we share our personal experiences to help new authors and those hoping to establish a record of publication in their professional and academic careers.

#### **Step One – Read the potential journals**

It is amazing how often journals receive totally inappropriate manuscripts. There needs to be a good fit between the topic and journal. Journals are published for readers, and not just to take up space on library shelves or, these days, in library computers. To become a good writer you must first be a

critical reader of the literature.

It is also imperative to read the author guidelines. Failing to do so is another common mistake. Formatting, referencing style, and the like are all important to the editor, as it is not their job to correct the manuscript for style. Such a manuscript may not even be fully read by the editor – it may be returned for not meeting the author guidelines. This error can mean that the editor will view that author with a jaded eye in the future.

### **Step Two – Communicate with the editor**

Experienced authors with a record of publication know where and where not to send their material. The experience of colleagues is invaluable, although not always 100% helpful. But again, it is a starting point. Sending a query with a few facts or the abstract of the article – rather than just showing the editor the manuscript – may be helpful. This can save the editor the time of reading the entire manuscript if the topic is inappropriate. A query letter or email with title, topic, research methodology, and length is helpful in soliciting interest. This can go to up to more than one editor, while a manuscript must only be submitted to one at a time. However, with journals that are published frequently and therefore deal with very large numbers of contributions, the editor may not be able to give an individualized reply and may simply advise you to go ahead and submit the article – or they may say that is appears unsuitable for their journal, of course!

Mentioning a personal connection may be helpful when submitting a manuscript. That will not get it accepted, but a simple statement such as “Professor Davidhizar indicated to me that my article may be a good fit for your journal” establishes a bond and also shows that one has done one’s homework! Of course, always secure permission from the person before making such statements. This can be especially helpful with journals that cover a discipline or specialty dominated by a community of well-known authors, where new authors are sometimes viewed with suspicion.

### **Step Three – Choose your journals**

Yes, the plural is intended. You should choose a primary journal for the first submission, but new authors especially should choose backups. A “backup” does not necessarily mean an inferior journal. You may find, for example, that the editor is uncommunicative, and that several months may lapse without updates. To someone on a “tenure clock” or hoping for promotion in their job, this can be particularly troublesome.

Some journals are slow not because of editorial ineptitude, but because they receive a very large number of manuscripts. Also, many reviewers do this work for more than one journal and cannot always respond quickly or within the journal's target time. This means that the editor needs to find a replacement reviewer and this may result in further delay and perhaps exceeding the ideal turn-around time.

All this assumes that a new author has been developmental in approach - an assumption that is perhaps incorrect. If you has never published before, it is often best to start small. One method might be to ask various journals that review new books if they need reviewers – most do. Then you can try publishing in professional magazines that are not peer reviewed, which often gives an opportunity to develop your writing skills – these magazines often have professional editors adept at cleaning up style, chopping length, and so on. If your research involves a pilot study, there are many journals that publish “shorties” – articles of perhaps 500 to 1000 words that are perfect for those interested in the topic but not in a full-blown research article. Look at copies of the magazines in your library or inspect the tables on contents on website to find this out.

### **Step Four – Follow your manuscript**

Never simply submit a manuscript and wait. Gentle reminders at appropriate intervals are not a problem to editors who understand the importance of people's work to their selves and careers. If an editor acts as if these gentle reminders are troublesome (e.g., "I sent you this manuscript 2 months ago and have not heard back") or does not reply at all, it may be time to consider your backups, appropriately withdrawing the manuscript first to avoid potential duplicate publication – another professional disaster.

However, withdrawing a manuscript can certainly "burn bridges" at a journal, so this should be considered carefully.

### **Step Five – Keep track of journals and editors**

Someone wanting to become a long-time contributor to the literature needs to know the appropriate outlets, which include helpful and unhelpful editors, slow and quick journals, and so on. Also, both professional editors (those who edit for a living and may or may not have content expertise) and academic editors rarely stay in the same position for long periods of time. It is not unusual to have three- to six-year cycles for academic editors, in which case previous editorial policies may remain in place or be significantly modified. Knowing the publishing cycles is important, and authors may "follow" editors as they move from one publication to another. This is not so much switching allegiance as expediting publication. Some outlets that were previously productive may dry up as editors change.

Also, once you have a record of publication, you can usually withstand the wait better as the tenure and promotion clock is no longer ticking so loudly.

### **Step Six – Don't give up**

Novice writers often become discouraged with a rejection and do nothing more with the article. Experienced writers can tell a "good" from a "bad" one. Thus, a novice learning the writing process needs to check with an experienced writer to know how to interpret editorial responses. Advice such as "What this means is that if you do these five things this journal is highly likely to print your manuscript" can spur a novice on and facilitate success. Obtaining help in understanding editorial responses can be the difference between a revision that will lead to publication and one that is a waste of time.

### **Conclusion**

Evaluating and choosing journals and editors wisely are every bit as important as the ability to write an elegant and articulate article. The fact is that both are essential to success in publishing your work. It is not only the ability to write that gets you published—it takes an editor accepting the article to fulfil your dream of getting it in print.

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