

# Getting published by really trying

## Reasons for doing a research-based degree

- Intrinsic interest in the subject material.
- To gain knowledge that is important for society.
- To gain a credential and improve career prospects.

Publishing articles can be a way of furthering each of these goals, though the type of publication sought may be different in each case.

## The foundation for writing articles

- Knowledge of the subject and original ideas. This is seldom a problem.
- Developing a writing habit. This is vital. You should aim to write as frequently as possible. Writing every day is best, but 4 or 5 days per week is satisfactory. It's generally better to write 15 minutes each day than 3 hours once per week. If you're not working on an article or chapter, then write a long letter to a friend about your research. Keep practising.

Writing is like physical fitness: regular exercise is best. For most people, writing is hard work that becomes easier the more it is done.

Writing is a means of thinking. Don't wait until you have your ideas perfect. Start writing after you've prepared an outline. Often the ideas develop as you go along.

- Constant scrutiny. Seek to improve your writing. Go over previous writing, correcting and modifying it. Read good writers to pick up ideas for good style and presentation. Get sympathetic critics to give you advice. This process produces change slowly but is highly worthwhile in the long run.

If you haven't published anything or only a little, seek every opportunity to publish, no matter how short, insignificant or obscure: letters to the editor, book reviews, comments in professional newsletters, articles in student newspapers, leaflets, working papers, conference proceedings, etc. This will help you develop experience and confidence before tackling the major refereed journals in the field.

## Strategies for publishing thesis work

- (1) Write the thesis first and then write articles based on parts of it. This

has the major advantage of finishing the thesis quickly but the major disadvantage of possible burnout on the topic and failure to complete the planned articles.

- (2) Write articles as the research proceeds and base the thesis on rewritten versions of the articles. This may slow the completion of the thesis but leads to a better publication record on completion. It has the added advantages of gaining feedback from referees and readers on the articles and of showing your examiners that the thesis work has already been worthy of publication.

## Choosing a journal

- Knowing your topic, investigate possible journals by browsing in various libraries (the larger the better) and consulting people in the field.
- Choose a journal for first submission and also make a list of two or three other journals for submission if rejected by the first one. Often it's best to start with the most prestigious journal for which your paper has a reasonable chance of being accepted.
- Closely study your chosen journal, including the formal requirements, the typical length of articles, the style, the number and type of references and the theoretical orientation. Model your paper to fit the standard pattern as closely as possible compatible with your own style and commitments. Keep in mind that authors of published articles in the journal are often chosen as referees for later submissions in the same area.

## Sending off your paper

- After you've polished your draft well, give it to several friends, colleagues or other people in the field and ask for honest comments. If you know of key figures in the area, send them copies and ask for comments, even if you don't know them personally and even if they are overseas. Gradually you will find a few people who are able and willing to give you useful comments. Cultivate them! Also, offer to return the favour.
- On the basis of comments received within a month or two, revise your paper—but only if you agree with the comments. Put an acknowledgment in the paper to all those gave substantive comments.

- Proofread your paper once more and send it off to the journal. Don't get cold feet. Do it!

- Don't wait for the journal to respond. Get to work on your next paper.

## When the editor responds

- If your paper has been accepted immediately or with minor modifications required, have a celebration!

- If, as is more likely, "major revisions" are requested, get to work. Don't be put off by critical comments. This is par for the course. Look carefully at each comment by the referees. If you think it is valid, then make appropriate changes. (Sometimes this involves considerable extra work, such as reading additional material.) If you think the referee has misunderstood what you are trying to say, then figure out how to explain your point better. If you think the referee is plain wrong, don't make changes. As well as making changes to your paper, write a letter to the editor describing how you've responded to each of the comments by the referees, and justify the cases in which you haven't made changes because you think the referee is wrong. Consult with friends and colleagues about the revisions, and don't be afraid to show them the referees' comments. Then send off the revised version. Don't hesitate!

- If, as happens frequently, your paper is rejected outright or after revisions, then immediately prepare it for submission to the next journal on your list, and send it off. Take into account any sensible comments from the referees and editor.

The evaluations of referees often conflict with each other. Indeed, evaluations are almost statistically independent, which means that getting favourable reviews is largely a matter of luck. Treat publishing as a game, not as an evaluation of your personal worth. Persevering in the face of rejection is a valuable attribute in developing a good publication record. Learn from rejections but don't be deterred.

*Brian Martin*

*Brian Martin is a senior lecturer in the Department of Science and Technology Studies and author of over 100 published papers and books in several fields in the sciences and social sciences.*