

Selecting the right journal for your submission

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ABSTRACT

Increasing pressure on researchers and academic clinicians to publish high volumes of work in highly visible publication outlets means that authors must have a finely tuned, efficient process for submission. One of the key decisions every author must make is where to submit their paper. This article addresses several important components to making that decision, including (I) topic match; (II) acceptance/rejection rate of the journal; (III) speed of review/publication; (IV) distribution of and access to the journal; and (V) impact factor.

KEY WORDS

Submission; selecting journal; process

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Introduction

“Publish or perish.” This is an adage we hear quite frequently, and is one that rings true for many academic and clinical researchers. Career foundations are laid, promotions are garnered, and tenure is achieved in part by having a long list of publications in prestigious journals in one’s curriculum vitae.

Most authors put their heart and souls into their journal submissions, painstakingly preparing a manuscript that accurately communicates their thought-process, including a thoughtful introduction describing the problem, detailed methods of testing their subject(s), thorough results reporting, and conclusions that justify their hard work.

But what happens next? Once the paper is written, an equally painstaking process should be undertaken to decide where to submit the paper. There are innumerable things that an author can consider when deciding where to submit their paper. In this article, I will focus on the following 5 aspects to consider when deciding where to submit: (I) Topic and article match - does the journal’s published content match up to the topic and article type of your paper? (II) Acceptance/rejection rate of the journal - how likely is your paper to be accepted? (III) Speed of review/publication - how quickly will your paper be reviewed, and if accepted, published? (IV) Distribution of and access to

the journal - is the journal widely discoverable and accessible by interested readers? (V) Impact factor - how important is this for you and your coauthors?

Identifying a list of potential journals

The first question authors may consider is how to identify a short list of journals to consider. It’s important to have more than one journal in mind, because if a manuscript is not accepted by the first journal it is sent to, the authors should be able to quickly rework the paper for a second (or third) journal. Just remember, do not submit your paper to more than one journal at a time. Journals have policies against this, and failure to comply with that request can result in being banned from submission in the future.

A couple of ways to identify journals of interest include doing a PubMed search for Index Medicus listed journals, or accessing a list of journals in the Institute of Scientific Information’s Journal Citation Reports, the list that provides Impact Factor data and rankings for journals. The Journal Citation Reports are segregated by topic area, so that can be an easy way to find a list of relevant journals to choose from.

Topic match

So as you are considering the list of journals to submit to, one of the first things to look at is the type of content published by the journal. Does the subject matter match your own? Although this may seem obvious, journal titles can be vague and may not always accurately reflect the range and types of content that the journal publishes. And over time the percentages of content published in particular areas can change. For example, is the journal’s focus clinical or basic research, or both? How much

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content is the journal currently publishing in the area that your paper focuses on? For example, if you are writing an article about pneumonia, how often does the journal publish pneumonia or content related to lung infections? Is there a specific section that might be applicable for your submission and enhance the appeal of your article? Or another example is, if you are writing a review article, it's worth researching the journal to find out how many reviews it publishes each issue or per year, so you can better gauge the likelihood that your paper will be relevant and published in a reasonably timely manner.

Acceptance/rejection rate of the journal

As you consider submitting to any journal, it's very important to know the numbers of how many papers a journal receives in a year, and how many of those papers are accepted or rejected. Most top-tier journals accept less than 10% of the articles submitted. So, unfortunately, the odds are already against being accepted in one of those. However, many smaller or less established journals may accept a large percentage of the papers submitted to them because they are trying to make a name for themselves. Of course every medical researcher would love to be published in *NEJM*, or *Lancet*, or *JAMA*, or *BMJ*, but those are extremely difficult journals to be accepted into, and so being realistic about the possibility of your paper being accepted is crucial.

Similarly, the number of papers a journal publishes per year is also a factor to consider - is the journal a small, quarterly journal that only publishes 10 or 12 articles per issue, or is it a large monthly journal that publishes 50 or more articles per issue? It's important to find out from the journal what these numbers are, so that you can make an informed decision about the journal you are submitting your research to.

Speed of peer review, decisions, and publication

Timeliness of the journal's processes are important to assess, because they will impact the author's submission and publication process. Before submitting to a journal, find out what is (I) the average time from submission to first decision; (II) the average time for 2nd round of review (very few manuscripts are accepted without at least some level of revision by the authors); and importantly, (III) time from acceptance to publication. The longer these processes take, the longer it will take for the authors to realize and enjoy the fruits of their labor.

Item 2 above, time for the 2nd round of review, is often dictated by the authors. If you have a paper that requires revision and resubmission, the faster you and your coauthors make the revisions and resubmit, the faster you will know if your paper will be accepted or not. In that situation, you are the master of your own fate to some degree.

Item 3 above is also important because some journals may post recently accepted papers online before they appear in a future issue. Find out if this is a service the journal provides, as it allows an accepted paper to be "found" in the literature much faster than in the past, when a paper was only considered "published" when it appeared in a print issue. If there is no such online first option, find out how long the backlog of accepted papers is - some journals may have a backlog of up to one year, which means a long time before the authors receive recognition for what they have accomplished.

Distribution of and access to the journal

Of course, any submission to a journal is done with the hope and expectation of acceptance and publication. One of the next logical questions is, how many potential people will see my research if I am published in Journal X?

There are a number of ways that journal content can be distributed and made discoverable. Journals are typically distributed in print and/or online to individual and institutional subscribers. If published by a professional society, it may also be provided to members of that society. In addition, a journal may be indexed in various literature databases, such as PubMed and others, and ideally indexed in major search engines, such as Google. All of these things ensure that the author's research will be widely distributed and discoverable. Authors may wish to compare potential journals' print circulation and online visitor statistics before submitting.

There are other things to consider if an author wants to maximize their opportunities to have their research or paper discovered by others. For example, does the journal engage in active public relations campaigns to make medical journalists or news outlets aware of their regular publications? Do they actively participate in social media efforts such as building awareness about publications through Twitter, Facebook, or other platforms?

Finally, it's important to consider how freely accessible (or not) is the content of the journal. When content is published online, are abstracts freely available immediately? How long after publication are readers given free access to the full content? Most traditional journals make content free to view after 6 to 12 months. However, open access movements are gaining popularity with authors, funding agencies, and librarians. Authors may wish to target open access journals - if they have grant funding to support such endeavors as most open access journals charge authors or their funders for open access. Which brings us to another important point: some journals charge publication page charges or other charges (such as for peer review or for publication of color figures). Be sure to find out in advance if the journal you want to publish in has such fees, and be sure you have the budget to pay for them.

And when considering accessibility of the content, authors should also be aware of their own rights to the content once the manuscript has been accepted and published. Most journals require that authors assign ownership and copyright of the material to the journal, although the level of ownership varies from journal to journal. Some of the larger and more visible journals, as well as those published by commercial publishing houses, often retain all rights, whereas others may provide certain rights to authors for using the work in professional environments. Authors should do the due diligence to find out the policies of the journals prior to submitting their work.

Impact factor

One of the most highly touted and widely used criterion for choosing a journal is the journal's Impact Factor. Unfortunately, it is also one of the most misunderstood metrics and one of the most widely debated. Only the authors can determine how important the journal's Impact Factor is when making their list of potential journals to submit to. Depending on how the author's institution views the Impact Factor, the author's career path,

promotion, and other aspects of their professional reputation may be heavily tied to the Impact Factor of the journals they are published in. However, Impact Factors will rise and fall from year to year, so it's important to have some historical perspective on the trend of the journals you are considering. Is the Impact Factor going up or going down over the past several years?

Parting thoughts

There are numerous factors to consider when selecting a short list of journals where you wish to submit research or original papers. Because publishing is competitive, be sure to review the criteria discussed in this article. Have more than one journal identified in case your paper is rejected by your first or second choice. If your paper is rejected, don't take the rejection personally. Simply consider it as an opportunity to improve the paper and submit to another journal. Good luck with your submissions!

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