

Crafting a research paper

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Paper presented at the Faculty of Accounting and Informatics, Durban University of Technology
Research Seminar, 29-30 October 2009, IT Boardroom, DUT

Introduction

Since the inception of the Faculty of Accounting and Informatics about three years ago, we have made significant inroads in terms of registration, of faculty staff particularly, for research degrees. A university context, however, also demands publication of research particularly in scholarly journals. Research is regarded as being complete only when it is published. You should not allow your work to sit in the university library and bend the shelf over the years. Writing up your research and getting it published in academic and professional journals allows others the opportunity to see your work and enables them to engage with and challenge it. Hence you must insert your work, via publication, into the slipstream of scholarly debate.

Writing for publication is no doubt an intimidating task. Have no illusions. It is not simple and straightforward, especially for the novice research writer. However, you can overcome feelings of vulnerability and lack of confidence by doing your research well and writing it up well so that it can stand up to public scrutiny. Hence the purpose of this presentation is to provide an overview of what is involved in crafting a research paper for publication in journals. While there are other forms of research publication, this presentation will focus on journal publication as this is the medium via which many of us, as academics and researchers, cut our teeth in research writing. Some of the areas this presentation will touch on include: Why the need to publish in journals? What can be published? What characteristics make a paper publishable? Understanding the journals market and Stages in getting a paper published.

Why the need to publish in journals?

Apart from pressure that you receive from your university to publish in journals to increase the institution's funding from the national Department of Education; and from competition for promotion, more importantly, there are positive reasons why one should engage in publishing (Epstein, Kenway and Boden 2005: 54-55):

- It is personally rewarding: it offers you a sense of progress, achievement and pride in your research;
- Publishing provides an opportunity to engage in wider academic debates in your discipline and to make a contribution to the publically available body of knowledge in your field – which is the *raison d'être* for undertaking research in the first place;
- The rigorous peer review process that your work undergoes gives it a certain 'quality mark'. Very rarely do papers emerge from the review process unimproved. Readers are likely to trust and respect work that has been subjected to rigorous scrutiny;
- Publishing helps to build your profile as an academic and researcher in your field. This may be critical to you securing a new and exciting job or a promotion. Your enhanced reputation will also attract good quality students to yourself and your department for research supervision. You are likely to be called upon to serve on the editorial boards of journals in your field, review papers for publication, contribute a chapter to a book, and so on – thus further enhancing your profile; and
- A good publications record allows you to make a contribution to the income of your department and/or institution. It also places you in a credible position to secure external funding for research projects. In essence you become an asset to an institution where you are actively contributing to a research environment.

What can be published?

Premature publication should be avoided as it wastes your energies and efforts and is frustrating for journal editors and reviewers. On the other hand, do not constantly put off submitting a paper

for publication because it is not yet perfect – there is no perfect publishable paper. Rather the process of crafting a research paper involves several stages of drafting and redrafting and aspiring to the best possible quality. What then can be used to craft a paper for publication?:

- You may publish after completion of a research project for higher degree purposes. Here research supervisors have an important role to play in carving up the dissertation into publishable parts and then guiding the student through preparation for publication. Remember everything in a dissertation, though successfully examined, may not be journal publishable. The ‘big book’ was written for a different purpose and for a different audience and cannot be simply translated into publishable articles. Carefully selected aspects often need to be reworked to convert them into stand-alone journal articles;
- Others may publish ‘along the way’ while a study is in progress. In fact doctoral students should be encouraged to subject aspects of their work in progress to such public evaluation: “publishing should be part of their ongoing research process, even before they complete” (Wisker 2005: 353). For example, a paper may focus on describing and analyzing empirical data that becomes available at certain stages during the project. Feedback from the peer review process, particularly supportive and constructive critique, will serve to strengthen the study making the final product that much better. At the same time, as a doctoral student by publishing you have placed your research out there to be in dialogue with others in the field and this is an important element of being part of a research community;
- Many journals from time to time have special issues around certain themes. You may be able to craft from your research, either completed or in progress, a paper that fits into this theme;
- Those individuals working towards a doctorate where you are generally expected to become very knowledgeable on a particular field of literature, may write a review essay which takes a critical look at the range of literature in this area, “synthesizing it and building on it to develop new insights” (Epstein, Kenway and Boden 2005: 56);

- Your paper may be a methodological reflection which delves into challenges and dilemmas that arose during your research and how you dealt or should have dealt with them;
- Some journals allow for shorter, ‘work in progress’ report type papers involving description of an on-going research project. This might be a good way for the novice research writer to get into print. While such pieces may be non-refereed, they are still useful to build your publications profile especially in the early stages of writing; and
- For the more seasoned research writer there are ‘opinion pieces’ which some journals invite on issues that are of topical interest in the discipline. While shorter than the regular research journal articles, these tend to be have a more polemic or argumentative style characteristic of more experienced academics and researchers.

What characteristics make a paper publishable?

There are certain generic qualities that journal editors and referees look for in manuscripts submitted for publication. A publishable paper will have most, if not all, of the following (Epstein, Kenway and Boden 2005: 57):

- It presents new knowledge in any of the following forms:
 - Substantive research findings;
 - Theoretical developments;
 - New insights into existing debates;
 - New analyses of existing knowledge; or
 - A synthesis of the literature.
- The paper is well grounded in relevant literature and demonstrates familiarity with current scholarly conversations in the field;
- If the paper is empirically based, the research methodology used must be sound;

- The paper addresses issues relevant to the discipline; and
- The paper is well written with carefully crafted and logical arguments.

Understanding the journals market

To be successful in journal publishing you need to first understand the journals market in your discipline. Only then will you be able to effectively target an appropriate journal:

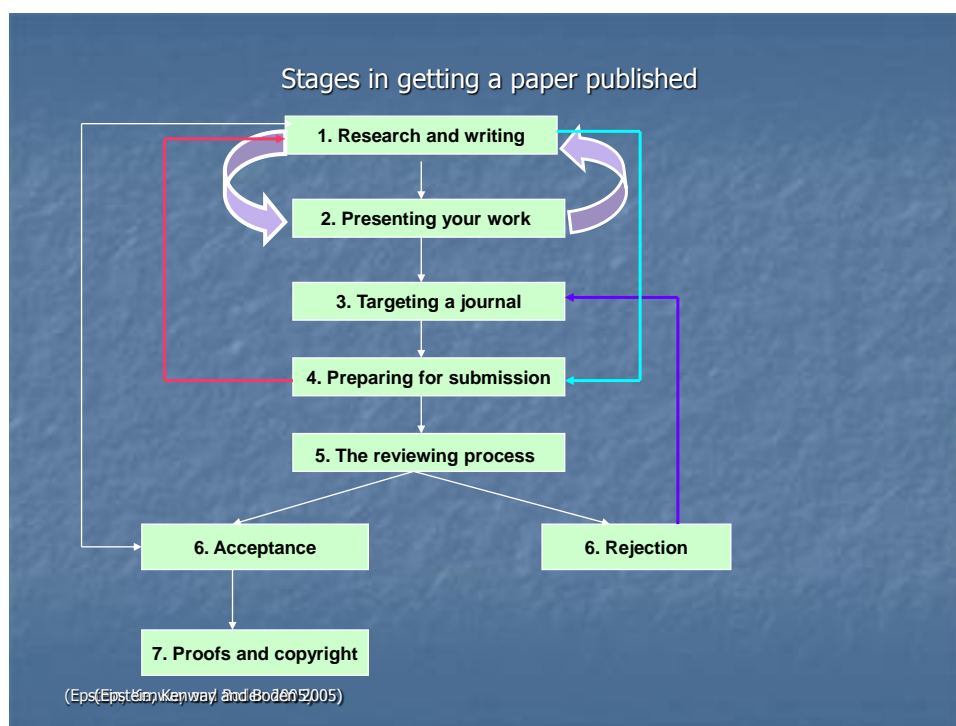
- Become familiar with the journals in your discipline. Go through your research reference lists for journals you have been reading for your research, peruse the shelves of the university library, speak to senior colleagues and research supervisors and search the Web;
- Identify the hierarchy of journals in your discipline. There may be prestigious journals which might not be within reach of a person starting out in journal publishing. On the other hand, there may be a good journal, but not necessarily with a top reputation, which has an encouraging approach to new authors;
- Browse your discipline's journals on the library shelves. All journals have notes for contributors and statements of editorial policy. These can also be found on journal websites together with exemplars of published articles. Read the editorial policy and other notes and also scan some of the articles to ascertain which journals your work may be compatible with.
- Different journals have different areas of interest, presentation styles, methodologies, aims and objectives – become familiar with these aspects for the journals in your field. Some journals have a particular theoretical, political or epistemological leaning. If your research does not fall into the paradigm of a journal, then you will not send your work to that journal; and
- Understand whom the journal is aimed at. For example, if the subject of your research is of national interest then you will not send it to a journal that targets an international audience.

Once you have decided which journal you are targeting for your work then you can shape your paper in terms of the requirements of this journal: “organize the overall essay, title, tone, presentation and focus to suit the journal” (Wisker 2005: 354).

Stages in getting a paper published

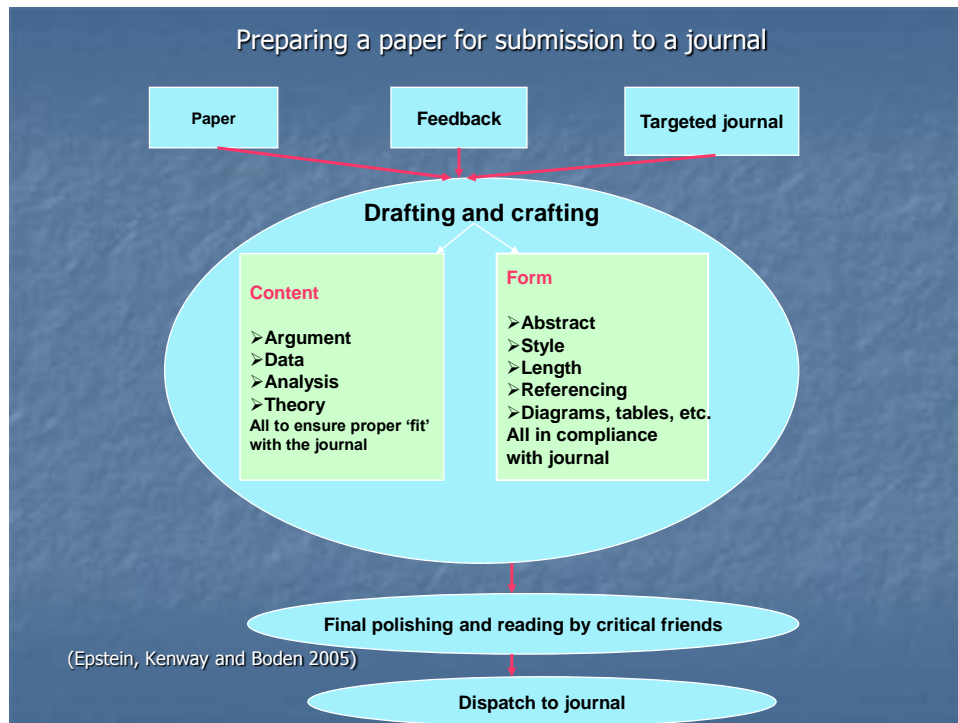
There are several stages that a paper goes through before it gets published. These stages are captured in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1



Bearing in mind some of what has been discussed already, you will draw from your research and develop a paper. This is your research and writing stage. Once the paper has been developed, it needs to be taken to conferences, seminars, workshops, etc. (presentation stage) – forums which provide opportunities for feedback. Use this feedback positively to refine and polish your paper before sending it to a journal. Now you need to target a journal (discussed above). The process of preparing your paper for submission to a journal is captured in *Figure 2*.

Figure 2



This process involves a blending of three important elements, namely, your existing paper, feedback that you have received from ‘taking your paper on the road’ and the requirements of the targeted journal (Epstein, Kenway and Boden 2005: 63). The process of synthesizing these three elements is referred to as drafting and crafting. Content and form are critical to drafting and crafting (Epstein, Kenway and Boden 2005: 63).

In terms of **content**:

- The argument in your paper should be logically constructed;
- The relationship between the argument and the data or evidence gathered should be clear;
- The analysis of data collected should be sound;
- If the paper has drawn on theoretical resources, then these must be relevant and be used to good effect; and
- All of the above must be done in terms of ensuring proper ‘fit’ with the targeted journal.

With regard to **form**:

- Make sure that the abstract reflects the contents of the paper;
- Ensure that the prescribed house style of the journal has been adhered to, for example, guidelines regarding capitalization, spelling conventions, punctuation, etc. have been followed;
- The length of the paper must conform to the requirements of the journal;
- The designated referencing style of the journal must be used; and
- Diagrams, graphs, tables, etc. should be clearly labeled, of good quality and should be referred to in the text.

At this stage it is useful to get one or two critical colleagues, mentors or research supervisors to read your work. They may pick up things which you may have missed. Do your final tweaking and polishing and then send off the paper to the targeted journal with a satisfied feeling that you have complied with all the requirements of the journal and that your work is of a sufficiently high standard to warrant it being sent out for review.

Good journals use a ‘double-blind’ system of refereeing. The editor will, if your paper warrants reviewing, remove your name and dispatch it to at least two selected reviewers together with the journal’s evaluation sheet. This evaluation sheet, an example of which is shown in *Figure 3*, asks for evaluation on various aspects of your paper and to indicate if it is publishable.

Figure 3: An example of a journal article evaluation form

Please circle a score for the paper you have evaluated on each of the criteria below.
You may find it helpful to refer to these criteria also in commenting on the paper.

	Poor	Below average	Average, competent	Good, above average	Excellent, outstanding
Originality or novelty of approach:	1	2	3	4	5
Scholarship/accuracy:	1	2	3	4	5
Quality of writing:	1	2	3	4	5
Research methods used:	1	2	3	4	5
Theoretical interest:	1	2	3	4	5
Interest and importance for a professional readership:	1	2	3	4	5
Relevance for the journal's mission:	1	2	3	4	5
Interest for a wider audience:	1	2	3	4	5

What is your overall judgement of the paper?

- Accept
 Accept subject to minor revisions
 Revise and resubmit
 Reject but suggest major revisions and journal reconsider
 Reject

(Dunleavy 2003)

Reviewers are generally experienced academics and researchers in the field whose expertise qualifies them to critically evaluate the suitability of your paper for publication. Reviewers are not paid for their efforts – it is a scholarly contribution which they make to the discipline, with some doing it very well and others not. The review process can take between six weeks and three months, depending on how efficiently the journal is run – so be patient. Do not be pushy. Enquire with the editor politely if you have not heard for a while.

Once the editor receives the reviewers' comments, the editor will decide what happens to your paper: should it be accepted, rejected, accepted with minor revisions or be revised and resubmitted. Once this decision has been made the editor will write to you informing you of the decision and enclosing necessary aspects of the reviewers' comments. Whatever the outcome, sometimes very bruising even to the most seasoned research writers, deal with the editor's and reviewers' comments to move your paper along so that it eventually gets published even if not by the same journal. Very rarely is a paper accepted without revisions, even for the most senior academics. Develop a thick skin to harsh comments (some reviewers can be very vindictive and destructive), learn how to turn critical comments into helpful feedback and revise your paper

accordingly in order to finally get it published perhaps in a different form and even in a different journal. The time-lag between submitting a manuscript to a journal for possible publication and it eventually appearing in print can sometimes take up to eighteen months. Though a long drawn out process peer review remains a “central quality-assurance process in the academic world” (Dunleavy 2003: 228) and the review process can be drawn on very positively to build you as a research writer and to grow your publications record.

Conclusion

Your research is virtually lost if you do not put it out in the public domain for others to scrutinize it, engage with it and challenge it if necessary. By publishing you are making a contribution to knowledge creation and advancement of your discipline, a *raison d'être* for very the existence of a university which you are now a part of. Research and publication is exciting and rewarding but it requires commitment to your research area, rigour in quality and discipline in attitude to research.

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