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TWELVE TIPS

Twelve tips for getting your manuscript published

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Abstract

The author shares twelve practical tips on how to navigate the process of getting a manuscript published. These tips, which apply to all fields of academic writing, advise that during the initial preparation phase authors should: (1) plan early to get it out the door; (2) address authorship and writing group expectations up front; (3) maintain control of the writing; (4) ensure complete reporting; (5) use electronic reference management software; (6) polish carefully before they submit; (7) select the right journal; and (8) follow journal instructions precisely. Rejection after the first submission is likely, and when this occurs authors should (9) get it back out the door quickly, but first (10) take seriously all reviewer and editor suggestions. Finally, when the invitation comes to revise and resubmit, authors should (11) respond carefully to every reviewer suggestion, even if they disagree, and (12) get input from others as they revise. The author also shares detailed suggestions on the creation of effective tables and figures, and on how to respond to reviewer critiques.

Introduction

Scholarly writing and research reporting are increasingly common in all areas of medicine, not least in health professions education. The rising number of advanced training programs (Tekian et al. 2014) suggests that soon even more education scholars will enter the field with training in research and an expectation to publish. Much has been written about how to plan and conduct a research study or scholarly project (Bordage & Dawson 2003; Beckman & Cook 2007; Ringsted et al. 2011), the elements of research reporting in general (Bordage 1989; Parsell & Bligh 1999; Coverdale et al. 2013), and required reporting elements for specific study types (von Elm et al. 2007; Moher et al. 2009; Schulz et al. 2010; O'Brien et al. 2014). Less has been written about how to navigate the publishing process itself.

The purpose of the present article is to share twelve practical tips (Table 1) on how to successfully navigate the process of getting a manuscript published in a peer-reviewed journal. While these tips reflect the personal approach of a medical education researcher, I believe they apply broadly to all domains of academic writing. I intend to complement rather than repeat others' suggestions regarding effective writing and the editorial process (Bordage 1989; Gopen & Swan 1990; Huth 1999; Parsell & Bligh 1999; Bordage 2001; McGaghie 2009; Coverdale et al. 2013; Azer et al. 2014).

My immediate target audience is lead authors (first authors and corresponding authors), although others including coauthors, editors, and reviewers will also find this useful. A junior first author would ideally implement these tips in collaboration with an experienced mentor. I will assume that readers are familiar with the process of journal submission and peer review, that essential steps such as goal clarification, study design and execution, and reflective critique (Glassick 2000) have already occurred, and that the immediate challenge is to publish.

Getting the manuscript ready

Tip 1

Plan early to get it out the door

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing novice writers is the imperative to overcome writing inertia. To paraphrase Newton's first law, a manuscript in preparation will remain in preparation indefinitely unless acted upon by a motivated author. It will not get published as long as it sits on your desk! You need to get the manuscript off of your to-do list and onto someone else's (namely, the editor's or reviewer's). To make this happen, you need to write regularly, set ambitious goals, and refine the manuscript in stages.

Some people believe that to write effectively they need blocks of time (several days in a row, with several hours each day). This works in some cases, but all too often those big blocks of time fail to materialize, or get consumed by other tasks. It can also be cognitively overwhelming to write episodically, to the point that some writers come to dread their writing day. Research suggests that those who write daily, even for short periods (e.g., 15 minutes per day) are substantially more productive than those who postpone writing until they have a large chunk of time (Boice 1989). Another drawback to allowing time to lapse between writing sessions is the loss in continuity and efficiency – it

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Table 1. Twelve tips for getting your manuscript published.

GETTING THE MANUSCRIPT READY
1. Plan early to get it out the door
2. Address authorship and writing group expectations up front
3. Maintain control of the writing
4. Ensure complete reporting
5. Use electronic reference management software
6. Polish carefully before you submit
7. Select the right journal
8. Follow journal instructions precisely
WHEN YOU ARE REJECTED
9. Get it back out the door quickly!
10. Take seriously all reviewer and editor suggestions
WHEN YOU ARE INVITED TO REVISE
11. Respond carefully to every suggestion, even if you disagree
12. Get input from others as you revise
9 (revisited). Get it back out the door quickly!

takes time to remember where you left off and what issues needed to be addressed. Occasionally, if you are having trouble articulating a particularly difficult idea, it helps to step away for a period and then return with fresh eyes. But in general it helps to write regularly – ideally daily, even if for only short periods.

It helps to set ambitious yet realistic deadlines for yourself and your coauthors. Deadlines should push you to work hard and quickly; conservative or comfortable deadlines will not accomplish this purpose.

As Strunk and White noted, "Revising is part of writing. Few writers are so expert that they can produce what they are after on the first try." (Strunk & White 2000, p. 72). Using outlines and multiple progressively refined drafts will optimize organization and minimize the amount of wasted effort (e.g., polishing text that is subsequently revised or deleted). It is far easier to visualize and manipulate the flow of logic using short bullet-points than full sentences and paragraphs. Thus, I agree with McGaghie (2009) in advocating the liberal use of outlines – especially when drafting text that allows flexible organization (e.g., a research manuscript's Introduction and Discussion, or a non-research scholarly article). Once the outline is complete, converting bullet-points into sentences and paragraphs is straightforward. For this first "rough idea draft" I try to clearly articulate my thoughts but I do not attempt to fine-tune each sentence. In subsequent drafts I iteratively refine my thinking, shorten the text, clarify meaning, and adjust individual words. Different parts of the manuscript may progress at different rates (e.g., I usually do not write the Discussion until the other sections are nearly complete). At each stage (outline, rough idea draft, first final draft, and each fine-tuning draft) I enlist the aid of my coauthors with explicit instructions and objectives for that stage (e.g., "Focus on broad-stroke ideas today; do not worry about fine-tuning, and ignore the Discussion"). Using outlines can help in later stages as well, such as when shortening the manuscript or making major revisions in response to reviewer comments. Converting a fully-written Introduction and Discussion back into outline form allows one to easily find and eliminate redundancy, rearrange and merge paragraphs, and focus on the central message.

Tip 2

Address authorship and writing group expectations up front

Publishing a manuscript is usually a team effort. Decisions about authorship – including the order of authorship and the expectations and responsibilities of each coauthor – should be made as early as possible. A full discussion of the issues surrounding qualifications for authorship (Wislar et al. 2011; Bordage et al. 2015) is beyond the scope of this article, but current guidelines indicate that authors must make *substantial* contributions to the conception, design, or data analysis and interpretation, and *critically* revise the manuscript for *important* intellectual content (International Committee of Medical Journal Editors 2013). Lesser contributions, including administrative, political, and funding support and simple data analysis, should be recognized with an acknowledgement.

It helps to set clear expectations for each author before writing begins. This would ideally include a rough timeline and deadline (see Tip #1), the expected turnaround time for each draft, and any specific contributions (e.g., manuscript sections). First, second, and senior author positions should be finalized after these initial discussions.

Tip 3

Maintain control of the writing

One person – usually the first author – must be ultimately responsible for the final manuscript and all changes made during editing. Thus, when I am the lead author, I maintain a single copy of a master document and edit this document to incorporate suggestions from coauthors.

Collaboratively editing documents online (e.g., using Google Docs or Dropbox) is increasingly popular, and is useful for many activities in education, research, and administration. Yet, I have found collaborative editing to be counterproductive when writing for publication because inconsistencies, redundancies, and omissions inevitably creep in when multiple authors jointly contribute untracked edits to a single, shared document.

Using tracked changes avoids this, but simply accepting changes suggested by coauthors is not advisable. First, coauthor-suggested edits frequently contain small errors in spelling, punctuation, or grammar (often encouraged and obscured by the tracked changes format). Second, most suggestions require judgment and editing to prioritize the use of limited space, reconcile conflicts, avoid redundancy, trim words, integrate with other ideas, and avoid inaccuracies.

To avoid these challenges, I distribute a manuscript copy to all coauthors via email or a file sharing tool such as Dropbox, and collect suggestions as tracked changes and embedded comments (or, occasionally, as written comments on paper). I then integrate these responses and make needed edits to the *separate* master document.

Tip 4

Ensure complete reporting

It is often difficult for investigators, even as a team, to identify all of the information needed or expected by readers. For this reason, reporting guidelines have been developed for most common study designs including randomized trials (Schulz et al. 2010) (including an extension for non-pharmacologic studies, Boutron et al. 2008), non-randomized trials (von Elm et al. 2007), assessment studies (Bossuyt et al. 2003), qualitative research (O'Brien et al. 2014), and systematic reviews (Moher et al. 2009). Additional reporting standards can be found at www.equator-network.org. Reporting guidelines will not salvage a poorly planned or poorly executed study, but they can certainly improve the odds of success for a well-done study (especially for authors with less experience).

Existing guidelines provide detailed suggestions for the Abstract, Methods, and Results, but less direction for the Title, Introduction, and Discussion. I will, therefore, offer brief suggestions for the latter three. First, the title is the shortest possible abstract (Cook et al. 2007; Bordage et al. 2015). It is almost always the first thing a potential reader reads, and it may be the last if it does not catch his or her attention. Rather than being written as a last-minute afterthought, the title should be the product of thoughtful effort by all authors. I typically create a list of key words reflecting the manuscript's central message, use permutations of these to generate over a dozen tentative titles, and then solicit impressions from coauthors and other colleagues before selecting the best title.

The Introduction sets the stage for all that follows (Beckman & Cook 2007). It starts with a very broad problem and then focuses this problem through the lens of a *conceptual framework* or theory (Bordage 2009) and a summary of prior work (*literature review*) into a focused *problem statement*. The problem statement clearly identifies one important aspect of the broad problem that remains incompletely understood, and highlights how a better understanding of this issue would advance the field as a whole. The problem statement is immediately followed by a statement of study intent – a research question, hypothesis, goal, or purpose – that explains how the subsequently described study will fill that knowledge gap and thereby accomplish the needed advance. For example, "Although these studies suggest that adding more questions does not necessarily enhance learning, the interpretations are confounded by the simultaneous variation in the types of questions, which in turn suggests the need for further research [*problem statement*]. . . .We therefore sought to answer the question: Does varying the number of self-assessment questions affect knowledge outcomes in [Web-based learning] for medical residents? [*research question*]." (Cook et al. 2014) These four elements – conceptual framework, literature review, problem statement, and statement of study intent – combine to not only articulate a question, but also to convince the reader that the answer remains unknown and that finding the answer is important (McGaghie et al. 2001).

The Discussion section of most research reports is far longer than needed, and thereby consumes valuable space that could be used in other sections. "Brevity is the soul of wit," and writing a focused yet informative Discussion is an oft-neglected part of manuscript preparation (Docherty & Smith 1999; Clarke et al. 2002). I have found three practices that help me stay focused and succinct. First, I imagine that no one except the editors and reviewers will read the entire Discussion. Most readers read the first paragraph and many read the last, but I suspect that everything in between has a limited audience. As such, I focus my efforts on crafting a concise summary of the study findings (first paragraph), highlighting well-supported implications (last paragraphs), and addressing issues that would concern editors and reviewers. Second, the Discussion section should focus on the study's objective findings and immediate, justified implications. Limited speculation on the interpretation and application of findings is appropriate, but this is not the place to editorialize on issues only tangentially related to the study, even if germane to the study topic. Third, to operationalize the first two suggestions I organize the Discussion into four sections, with subheadings for the latter three:

(1) *Summary* (no heading): One or two paragraphs that succinctly and objectively summarize the key findings without further elaboration (i.e., no citations to other sources, no interpretation).
(2) *Limitations*: More than just a *list* of limitations; an examination of how the study scope and design might *influence* the interpretation and application of findings.
(3) *Integration with prior work*: One to three paragraphs linking my findings with both theory and empiric research.
(4) *Implications for practice and research*: Three to five paragraphs highlighting what readers can do differently now that they know these results. These implications should derive directly from the findings of the present study as interpreted in light of the limitations and integration, and could anticipate effects on theory, practice, or future research. The "Implications" replace the need for a separate Conclusion section; the implications *are* the conclusion and should leave readers with a clear sense of how this study will influence their practice.

Tip 5

Use electronic reference management software

Writing a manuscript without the support of electronic reference management software is like building a bookcase using a hand drill instead of a power drill – sure, you can do it, but it is a lot easier with a power tool! With reference management software you create a list (library) of articles and books you wish to cite and then place a placeholder (field code) representing each reference in desired location(s) in your manuscript. The software formats these placeholders into the reference style required by the selected journal. Advantages include the abilities to re-use references in a new manuscript without re-typing or copy-and-pasting, insert a new reference near the top of the manuscript without manually renumbering the subsequent references, share reference libraries with colleagues, make personal notes about a reference, and adjust the format

style (e.g., to meet another journal's requirements) with the click of a button. Wikipedia currently lists over 30 software packages including purchased products such as EndNote and Reference Manager, and numerous free options such as Mendeley and Zotero (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comparison_of_reference_management_software).

Beyond urging you to "just do it" I suggest the following power-user tips:

- Learn some skills beyond the rudimentary insert and format functions. Useful tasks include tweaking the formatting styles (in my experience, journal-specific templates don't match perfectly with actual journal requirements), adding text such as page numbers to the in-text citation, finding and eliminating duplicate entries, and exporting libraries to share with a colleague or import into another program such as Excel.
- Use PubMed and journal websites to add articles to your library rather than entering these by hand.
- Use self-entered "Notes" to organize, sort, and search for references within your library.
- Copy and share references or entire libraries with others. CiteULike is a free Internet service dedicated to promoting such sharing.
- Consider turning off the instant formatting feature offered by several programs (e.g., EndNote's "Cite While You Write"). While useful if you are the sole author, it gets messy if collaborators delete or move text or if you track changes.
- Correct any errors in the reference list at their source (usually the library entry or journal-specific template) rather than making edits directly to the reference list in your manuscript. If the same reference appears twice in the reference list there are probably two library entries for that reference. Missing information or other problems with the reference list format could indicate an error in that reference's library entry or in the journal-specific formatting template.

As a final step before submission, you will need to convert the document with dynamic placeholders to a placeholder-free, text-only document ("convert to plain text" in EndNote). Save a separate copy of the final, unformatted placeholder version to use as a starting point when making revisions.

Tip 6

Polish carefully before you submit

Editors will help you tailor your message to their audience, but you should not expect them to correct poor grammar or typographical errors. Errors or inconsistencies in writing or formatting impair understanding, suggest (rightly or wrongly) sloppiness in the scientific rigor, and will require extra effort from the editorial team – none of which will improve your chances of manuscript acceptance! The notion of polishing need not conflict with the tip to get the manuscript out the door. Polishing does not necessarily add a lot of time, but it does require deliberate planning and effort. The following tips will prevent common errors:

- Use a consistent font style for each level of subheading (e.g., bold and all capitals for main section headings [level 1], bold and first letter capitalized for level 2 subheadings, etc.). Word processing "styles" can help maintain this consistency. Some journals have specific subheading format requirements.
- Use abbreviations and acronyms sparingly. Many abbreviations commonly used in a narrow specialty, and all abbreviations invented by the research team, will be unfamiliar to most readers. Define such abbreviations, or better yet eliminate them altogether.
- Review the title of each table and figure to ensure that it accurately and completely describes the information contained therein, and carefully proofread table/figure footnotes and legends. Ensure that footnotes define all abbreviations, clarify any apparent inconsistencies (e.g., percentages that do not sum to 100%, or response rates that vary across table cells), and explain key analyses. Table 2 contains additional tips for constructing tables and figures.
- Confirm that data and other details in the abstract match those in the main text. Similarly verify the match between tables and figures and the main text and abstract.
- Verify the format and accuracy of each reference, including adherence to the journal's formatting style.
- Remove all comments and resolve all tracked changes.

I always read the entire final draft, including abstract and tables, *out loud* because I have found this helps me identify awkward sentences and grammatical errors. It is also helpful to ask a non-coauthor colleague to read the manuscript to identify awkward sentences, logical inconsistencies, missing information, and simple errors. For those writing in a non-native language, a skilled native speaker should always proofread the manuscript (note that just because someone speaks English does not mean he or she is a good writer or good proofreader). McGaghie (2009) enumerated several additional suggestions for those writing in a non-native language.

Tip 7

Select the right journal

You will naturally want your work published in the best possible journal, but the best journal is not necessarily the one with the highest impact factor or the greatest prestige (Azer et al. 2014). In selecting a journal, I first consider the journal's readership: Is this journal followed by the people who will read, understand, apply, and cite my work? If not, then regardless of the journal's prestige my work may not get the visibility it deserves. Journals usually publish "Instructions for authors" that describe their target audience, scope, and preferences for specific topics and study types. Perusing back issues of a potential journal can further clarify the type and topic of articles published. Experienced colleagues can also offer field-specific tips.

Second, I consider the quality and potential impact of my own work. Let us face it – some articles are stronger than

Table 2. Tips for effective tables and figures.

Tips for effective tables

- Consider whether the table is really necessary
  - The ''information density'' (information per square inch) should be greater than just putting this information in the main text; data that would require fewer than 2 columns and rows should be presented in the text rather than a table
  - The information should complement rather than duplicate information available elsewhere in the manuscript
- Create a brief but explanatory title
- Carefully select the data (not all data are equally important) and thoughtfully organize the data to communicate a clear message
- Ensure that the table can be easily interpreted without reference to the main text
- Ensure that the table accurately reflects both the data and the intended message
  - Organize and order information to facilitate accurate and intuitive interpretation; emphasize relationships (differences, patterns, interactions) that most clearly communicate the central message
  - Provide sufficient information to allow interpretation in context (e.g., historical data, comparison group, reference range); clearly indicate factors (e.g., design changes or historical events) that might influence data
- Keep the table simple, clean, and free of extraneous detail
- Distinguish counts (tallies of items or events) and measurements (readings or scores on a continuous or semi-continuous scale)
  - Counts can be reported in absolute numbers (e.g., the number of events) or proportions (e.g., the number of a given response from a larger number of observations); proportional counts are typically summarized with numerator, denominator, and percentage (ideally all three); absolute counts benefit from a reference range or explanation of context to enable meaningful interpretation (e.g., is 247 website visits per month a lot or a little?)
  - Measurements are typically summarized with an estimate of central tendency (e.g., mean, median), an estimate of variance (e.g., standard deviation, interquartile range), and the number of observations; again a reference range or context is helpful
  - A separate column is usually used for count vs measurement data, although mixed-data columns can be created if changes in cell contents are clearly indicated (e.g., with row labels or footnotes)
  - The total number of observations can be reported in the column heading (if consistent for that column)
- Verify the accuracy of all data
- Create the table using your word processor Table tool rather than using tabs and hard returns; each piece of data should be contained in its own cell (this facilitates the publication process)
- Create a column heading for every column; use row labels as needed for additional clarity
- Identify probability level values (*p* values) in the table cells or using footnotes
- Resolve or explain all ambiguities and perceived incongruities (e.g., changes in the number of responses leading to ''shifting denominators'')
- Explain all abbreviations; special use of italics, parentheses, and dashes; special symbols; and empty cells
  - Example: a cell entry ''46/50 (92%)'' should have a column heading or footnote explaining that this means ''No./N (%)"
  - Keep abbreviations consistent with the main text; define all abbreviations using footnotes (so that the table can stand alone)
- Consistently apply formatting
  - Within a table: consistently use emphasis (bold, italics), line spacing, abbreviations, and column and row labels
  - Across tables: apply similar formatting for all tables in the manuscript
- Follow all journal-specific instructions on table creation
  - Use footnote symbols conforming to journal instructions (e.g., *, †, ‡, § or [a], [b], [c], [d])
  - Look at recent back issues of the journal for examples
- If the table or its data are from another source, cite the original source
- Refer to the table in the text
- Place the table in the manuscript according to journal instructions (i.e., appended at the end, embedded in the main text, or submitted in a separate document)

For additional information on table preparation, see the Purdue Online Writing Lab (owl.english.purdue.edu) and Wainer (1984), Morgan (1985), and Schriger et al. (2006).

Tips for effective figures

- Consider whether the figure is really necessary
  - The ''information density'' (information per square inch) should be greater than just putting this information in the main text or in a table. Note that the effective visual display of information can efficiently communicate key relationships, but often at the sacrifice of potentially useful information (e.g., specific numeric results); such trade-offs should be carefully considered and minimized as much as possible
  - The information should complement rather than duplicate information available elsewhere in the manuscript
- Create a brief but explanatory legend or caption
- Carefully select the data (not all data are equally important) and thoughtfully organize the data to communicate a clear message
- Follow established guidelines and norms for specific figure types (e.g. participant flow diagram for experimental studies (Schulz et al., 2010), or study flow diagram for systematic reviews (Moher et al., 2009))
- Ensure that the figure can be easily interpreted without reference to the main text
- Ensure that the visual metaphor of the figure accurately reflects both the data and the intended message; avoid perceptual distortions
  - The visual representation of numbers should be directly proportional to the numerical quantity
  - Ensure that that all scales (e.g., *x* and *y* axes) are consistently used and correctly proportioned; disproportionate scaling (e.g., scales that vary irregularly along the axis, scales that do not start at 0, and nonlinear scales) can be misleading, and should be used with restraint and always made explicit (verbally or visually) in the legend or in the figure itself
  - Organize and order information to facilitate accurate and intuitive interpretation; emphasize relationships (differences, patterns, interactions) that most clearly communicate the central message
  - Provide sufficient information to allow interpretation in context (e.g., historical data, comparison group, reference range); clearly indicate factors (e.g., design changes or historical events) that might influence data
- Keep the figure simple, clean, and free of extraneous detail; avoid using special effects (e.g. 3-D effects, shading, and layered text)
  - The ''data-to-ink ratio'' (Tufte, 2001) provides one approximation of the clarity of presentation (high ink [which leads to a lower ratio] suggests unnecessary clutter that can obscure the message)
- Verify that all data are accurate and are plotted accurately
- Use lettering that is dark enough and large enough to read, and compatible in size with the rest of the figure
- Explain all line, symbol, and color styles; text emphasis (bold, italics); and abbreviations in the legend or caption
  - Keep abbreviations consistent with the main text; define all abbreviations (so that the figure can stand alone)
- Consider using grayscale (or black-and-white) rather than color

(*continued*)

- Color should only be used if the print version of the figure will appear in color
- Even if the print figure is published in color, remember that it will usually be black-and-white if printed by a reader
- Varying the symbol (triangle, circle, square; solid or open) or line style (solid, dashed, dotted; light or heavy) may be more clear than varying colors

• Consistently apply formatting
- Within a figure: consistently use line, symbol, and color styles; text emphasis (bold, italics); and abbreviations
- Across figures: prepare parallel (i.e., adjacent) or equally important figures according to the same scale; apply similar formatting for all figures in the manuscript

• Follow all journal-specific instructions on figure creation, including figure resolution and file format (e.g., JPEG, TIFF, PNG)
• Refer to the figure in the text
• Place the figure in the manuscript according to journal instructions (i.e., appended at the end, embedded in the main text, or submitted as a separate file)

For additional information on figure preparation and the visual display of data, see the Purdue Online Writing Lab (owl.english.purdue.edu) and Tufte (2001), Wainer (1984), and Schriger and Cooper (2001).

others, and will merit publication in a higher-impact journal. You do not want to sell short your work, but repeatedly aiming too high will only result in repeated rejections. Each submission–rejection cycle delays your paper's appearance in print, reflects wasted effort on your part (and the journal's), requires you to re-immerse yourself in the details of a project from which you have moved on, and generates increasing frustration and discouragement for you and your coauthors. An honest appraisal of your work's merit, which may require input from a non-coauthor colleague, will reduce both time and frustration. I will occasionally aim one step higher than my realistic estimation for my first submission – hoping to catch a lucky break. But if that fails, I immediately shift to a journal that I believe will be a reasonable match.

Third, I consider the impact and prestige of the potential journals. This is notoriously difficult to define. Quantitative metrics (Rizkallah & Sin 2010; Carpenter et al. 2014) such as the journal impact factor, immediacy index, eigenfactor, and article influence score all attempt to estimate impact, but all have notable deficiencies and norms are field-specific (i.e., the same impact factor value might be considered low in one field and high in another). Once again, experienced colleagues can help navigate journal prestige.

Other considerations include the time from submission to acceptance and from acceptance to publication, publication fees, recognition of the journal by local peers, and restrictions on words or figures. Some journals have several-month backlogs, while others will publish articles "online ahead of print" within weeks of acceptance. Local opinions about journal prestige should not be ignored, but remember that people may change their opinion when presented with new information (e.g., data supporting the prestige of a journal within a field), and moreover if your work is discovered and cited by others this will typically carry more weight than the journal in which it was published.

Tip 8

Follow journal instructions precisely

As a journal editor and reviewer, I am frequently dismayed at authors' disregard for journal instructions concerning topics of interest, article type, manuscript length and required elements, abstract structure and length, reference citation format, and more. Failing to follow instructions creates an unfavorable first impression with the editorial team, and in some cases may trigger automatic rejection. Thus, the last thing I do before submitting is re-read the author instructions and verify that I have fully complied. The only exception is that sometimes I will exceed the maximum number of references (although I have occasionally had to shorten that list during revisions). Most journals limit the number of words, tables, and figures. In general, do not exceed stated limits without express permission from the editorial staff (and document this in your cover letter).

Most journals still require a cover letter. However, this can be very brief and focused. A concise but complete cover letter might consist of three short paragraphs – one each for authorship, article summary, and potential reviewers. The only required element in most letters is a brief statement about authorship, conflicts of interest, and prior publication. The two to four sentence summary paragraph should not recapitulate the abstract (which the Editor is going to read soon enough), but rather should focus on the importance of this topic, the anticipated impact of these findings on the field, and why this manuscript is a good match for the chosen journal. It is usually helpful to suggest some potential reviewers, even if not required. Research suggests little difference in the quality of review from author-suggested versus editor-suggested reviewers (Schroter et al. 2006), and most editors welcome suggestions because it saves them time and because you will probably be more familiar with subject experts than they.

When you are rejected (because you will be)

By following the first eight tips, you successfully got your manuscript out the door. Unfortunately, since most journals accept fewer than 20% of the manuscripts they receive, your manuscript will most likely be rejected. You will naturally feel discouraged when you get that rejection letter. However, rejection is simply part of the publishing game. Most of the papers I have published were rejected by the first journal, and several had two or three rejections before finally finding a home. Yet, I have seen colleagues hesitate to submit their manuscript to another journal because they feel discouraged after the first rejection. You should *never* give up after the first rejection! You have already invested substantial effort in getting the manuscript to this stage; that effort is wasted if you stop now.

Tip 9

Get it back out the door quickly!

The rejected manuscript does you no good sitting on your desk. You need to get it back onto someone else's as quickly as possible. Make whatever changes you are going to make (see Tip #10), identify the next journal, and submit. To expedite this process (and to make the rejection less painful), at the time of initial submission I often list the two or three journals to which I will next submit the manuscript if (when!) rejection occurs.

As a corollary: It is rarely helpful to argue with editors, especially if they feel the topic is not a good fit for their journal. Never resubmit a manuscript to the same journal without getting express permission from the editor.

Tip 10

Take seriously all reviewer and editor suggestions

In most cases of rejection, you will receive feedback from the editor, several reviewers, or both. Even though you are not *required* to address all of these suggestions (and I've heard some experts suggest ignoring the feedback on rejected manuscripts), I believe it is foolish to ignore this free advice. Moreover, if the same reviewer is asked to review the manuscript again by the next journal, he or she may feel offended if suggestions are entirely ignored.

After a short cooling-down period (rejection is always hard!) I carefully consider all reviewer suggestions, prioritize each as (a) essential (e.g., errors, omissions, or ambiguities), (b) high-yield, (c) easy and useful, or (d) other (e.g., low-yield or erroneous), and revise the manuscript to incorporate those in the first three categories. Tip #11 contains additional suggestions for responding to reviewer feedback.

When you are invited to revise (because you will be, eventually)

Manuscripts are (almost) never accepted without revisions, so when you get an email stating, "We cannot accept it in its present form, but we would be willing to consider it again if you revise it to address the reviewer comments," that is very good news. However, you still have a lot of work ahead as you make the required revisions.

Tip 11

Respond carefully to every suggestion, even if you disagree

The reviewers are always right (Eva 2009). Even if you disagree with their opinion or believe they are flagrantly wrong, there is always something that you can clarify, justify, or explain in response to their critique, and these changes will nearly always improve the manuscript.

Reviewer comments typically vary (Fiske & Fogg 1990), but just because they address different issues does not necessarily mean that they disagree. Outright disagreements between reviewers are infrequent. More often, reviewers simply focus on different issues that individually are all important and collectively will substantially improve the quality of the work.

In contrast to rejection, following which you can selectively respond to high-priority suggestions, in responding to an invitation to revise it is essential to respond to every comment and suggestion. I classify reviewer comments into five types, namely (a) recognition of poor writing; (b) identification of an error; (c) suggestion to elaborate on a theme; (d) opinion without suggestions, and (e) compliment. Each of these requires a different response. These classifications, and my response approach, are listed in Table 3.

Some journals request that changes be tracked or otherwise highlighted. If not, be sure to again remove all tracked changes and comments prior to resubmission.

Be humble and respectful in the response letter. Remember that the reviewers gave freely of their time to read your manuscript and provide comments, and that they are (nearly always) trying to be constructive rather than disparaging. Even if you feel the reviewer is off base, it is usually possible to avoid a direct confrontation by finding and emphasizing areas of agreement, making a relatively inconsequential change in the manuscript text, requesting input from the Editor, or playing one reviewer off another ("Reviewer 2 suggested we shorten the Introduction, but Reviewer 1 indicated it was just the right length; we have elected to make no change for now, but would be willing to do so if the Editor believes it would be helpful."). To create a more favorable tone, it helps us to set aside the letter for a day or two, ask a collaborator to read it from the perspective of the editor or reviewer, or imagine that the reviewer is a good friend and will see this letter (which might actually be true).

Additional tips for an effective response letter include the following:

- Respond to every comment individually (except purely complimentary comments).
- Use white space (indented text), tables, and italics or bold font to distinguish reviewer comments from your response.
- Quote modified passages in full, and/or refer to the page number in the final manuscript where the text can be found.

Tip 12

Get input from others as you revise

Do not try to complete the revision on your own. Share reviewer comments with your coauthors and ask for their help in addressing concerns – especially the comments you find particularly challenging. If needed, contact a non-author colleague for help.

If you have concerns that cannot be resolved though discussion with your coauthors or other colleagues, you may wish to contact an editor for guidance on how to proceed. Remember that the editor is your friend – he or she invited you to revise and resubmit your work, and wants your response to be successful. However, be sure to follow proper channels

Table 3. Types of reviewer comments, and appropriate response.

Type of reviewer comment	Example*	Discussion and explanation	Response
Recognition of poor writing or omission	''The sentence on page 4, line 3, is difficult to understand.'' ''I could not tell how many repetitions each student performed.''	The reviewer is right – always. Even if you think it was clearly written, the reviewer had a hard time understanding. You might question his or her intelligence for not being able to understand your writing, but the reviewer is probably smarter (and investing more effort) than most other readers.	Clarify this area of ambiguity in the manuscript.
Identification of an error or limitation	''There appears to be an inconsistency between the data reported in the main text and in Table 2.'' ''The investigators used the *t*-test, but the Wilcoxon rank sum test would have been more appropriate.'' ''There are several other studies addressing this question, including work by [author]. These should be cited in the Introduction.'' ''The claim that the results apply to practicing physicians is not justified because it extrapolates beyond the data.''	The reviewer might be correct or incorrect about the issue. If he or she is incorrect, the mistake often arises because of an omission or ambiguity in your writing.	First double check your work, then seriously consider: Is the reviewer correct? • If you believe the reviewer is wrong, did his or her error arise because of ambiguous writing? If so, fix it. It helps to be humble, and take as much responsibility as possible. • If the reviewer is correct, fix or address the error. Tactfully explain your rationale for change or no change in the response letter. ''We neglected to report that we verified the assumptions for the use of parametric tests such as the t-test. We have clarified this point in the Methods, and continue to use the same statistical test.''
Suggestion to elaborate on (or trim) a theme	''It would be good for the authors to elaborate on the finding that ____.'' ''In discussing this point, the authors may wish to draw in the work by [author].'' [note this suggestion is less forceful than the ''error'' quoted above] "The authors spend too much time talking about ____, which is only tangentially related to this topic. This should be deleted.''	It is essential to distinguish errors, which must be fixed, from suggested elaborations (or deletions), which are optional. Errors affect the rigor or correctness of the methods, reporting, or interpretations, whereas elaborations affect only the scope and completeness of the inferences and implications. If you don't make a given elaboration the paper will still be just as rigorous and correct, although it might be incomplete. There is never enough room to say everything one would like to say. This applies to both ideas originating from the authors and those arising from the reviewers. Just because something is interesting or true or relevant does not mean it has to be said in this manuscript. You as the author must make tough choices about what is essential. Criticisms about the appropriateness of the conceptual framework or research question should be addressed as possible errors (see above).	For suggested elaborations, seriously consider: Is the message strengthened if you follow this advice? Or, conversely, does the suggestion confuse the issue, dilute the message, or open you to criticism? Based on this, decide whether to incorporate or defer the suggestion. • If you opt to incorporate a suggested elaboration, it is often appropriate to keep it short. • If you choose not to make a change, defend your decision by stating something like, ''This is an excellent suggestion, and we agree with the reviewer. However, due to space constraints we are not able to address this point fully." For suggested deletions, it is usually appropriate to trim text, although perhaps not as aggressively as the reviewer advises. Editor suggestions to trim overall length (e.g., to achieve a specific word limit) should always be followed, but you can exercise discretion in what text to trim.
Opinion without suggestions	''It is interesting to note that this issue arises in the work on cognitive load theory as well.''	If a reviewer discusses a topic without suggesting any changes (i.e., expressing	First carefully consider: Is a specific suggestion hidden in this opinion?

	''I disagree with the interpretation of finding ____.'' [a suggestion to change is implied] ''I found it particularly fascinating that these authors identified ____.''	platitudes, opinions, and prior knowledge), then strictly speaking no response is required. However, sometimes such narratives contain a partially-obscured suggestion that should be addressed. Even if no suggestion is requested or implied, the topic may be worth discussing (but see issues regarding suggested elaborations, above).	• If yes, then respond accordingly. • If no, then treat this as a suggested elaboration (above) or compliment (below).
Compliment	''This is an important question and a very timely study.'' ''The randomized design adds rigor.''	Compliments do not require a specific response, and can be ignored or addressed at your discretion.	Acknowledge this graciously and without elaboration in the response letter. If there are a lot of compliments, I usually just start off by saying ''We received a number of favorable comments and do not comment on these,'' and then ignore them.

*All example quotes are fictitious.

(e.g., working through the journal's editorial desk rather than contacting the editor directly) and be respectful of his or her time.

Tip 9 (revisited). Get it back out the door quickly

(Note the theme here!) You are so close. This is the final step – victory is within reach. Take this last leg of the race at a sprint, and get published!

Notes on contributor

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