

The frustrations of writing research articles for publication and what to do about them

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Abstract

Prepared especially for readers who are considering taking their initial steps in writing for publication, this piece draws on the author's personal experience, as well as insights from related literature, to explore around a dozen challenges that such individuals may face. In particular, it outlines what inexperienced writers, who will be facing these challenges for the first time, can do either in response or to prevent their development from the outset. Sequenced here approximately in the order in which they are likely to be encountered, the problems described are effectively of four types: issues pertaining to the tracing of sources that the writer may want to use, concerns that arise when the individual is attempting to cite material, how the author may deal with the reactions of journal editors and reviewers to the work and matters that may emerge when the manuscript has actually been published.

1 Introduction

Writing for publication can be a joy. The thrill of putting together an article that advances in some small way our knowledge about the topic in question is undeniable and, once the piece is published, the author has a reassuringly concrete product to show for many weeks of endeavour. When the article is cited or raised in professional discussion subsequently, he or she gains a sense that, not only has the piece been read, it has also been used by others in *their* work or at least influenced their thinking. Nevertheless, any first-time author should be aware that there are also frustrations associated with writing for publication. This article uses the writer's own experience, gained from the production of over sixty published articles, to explore around a dozen such frustrations, in particular, and suggests how authors might look to counter them. Essentially, they relate to four areas: the tracing of material during the preparation of the manuscript, the citing of sources, dealing with the reactions of others to the submission and responding to what may take place when and after the article actually appears. The author has already written a more general guide to producing work for publication (Shenton, 2005). This was published elsewhere several years ago.

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Moore (2000) draws a distinction between “academic journals” and “professional periodicals”. These different types of publication effectively cater for separate readerships – scholars and information practitioners respectively. Eve and Schenk recognise that an uneasy relationship exists between academic journals and practitioners, noting that such people find the former “...dry and impenetrable. They want research results to be translated for them” (Eve and Schenk, 2007, 22). This creates an immediate complication for writers. If they are keen to disseminate their work across the totality of the LIS community, they must look to contribute articles for both types of reader. This article thus considers the challenges of writing for each form of serial.

2 Tracing material for inclusion

Much of the author’s early work on a piece, before any words for the manuscript are written, is likely to involve the collection of pertinent source material, the existence of which is often learnt from papers that offer synopses of related literature. Although rare, instances do emerge in which the later author misrepresents the work of a predecessor. Such misrepresentation may range from straightforward factual inaccuracies to more subtle faults, such as the reporting of findings out of context or giving undue prominence to a theme that may be of no more than incidental importance in the original material. Oblivious to these shortcomings, anyone reading the more recent work may well accept without question the summary provided, especially if the paper appears in a peer-reviewed journal, as this, it may be assumed, provides a quality control mechanism. Nevertheless, wherever possible, the individual should go back to the actual publication to gain a first-hand understanding of the original work and, if there are mistakes, to ensure that these are not perpetuated in the new article. Preece is especially keen on such verification, commenting that the individual’s own interpretation of the original work may “seem rather different” from a synopsis provided by a later writer (Preece, 1996, 226). It must be conceded, however, that efforts to trace the source may prove time consuming, expensive and sometimes fruitless, especially if the item is old or obscure. Delays can be particularly frustrating if the author is assembling a piece for a professional periodical. Gadd (2003) points out, in relation to *Library and Information Research*, that timeliness and currency may be significant factors when decisions are made by an editor on whether an article of this kind should be accepted.

Books of quotations can provide invaluable nuggets of insight on a whole range of issues. One such volume, devoted to quotations from science fiction (Westfahl, 2005), offers some fifty quotations broadly relating to “Knowledge and Information”, many of which provide food for thought for writers in LIS. Books of this type frequently inspire the reader either to use the material itself or to explore the wider context of a particular quotation. Yet, the book may state only some of the citation information necessary to trace the extract easily. Whereas the author, title of the source and date may well be stated, the page number is less likely to appear. Since many journals require the author to specify a page reference when any words are reproduced directly from a source, this omission cannot easily be ignored by the extract’s user. In addition, it is possible that the book quoting the extract may itself have reproduced the words incorrectly and the

writer may feel duty bound to explore its accuracy conscientiously. If the author is fortunate, he or she may be able to learn the appropriate page of the original source by simply entering part of the extract into a search engine and learning the required bibliographical details from a retrieved Web page. Still, on occasion, the author has little alternative but to scan the whole text of the source until the desired portion is located.

At times, the mundane task of tracking down even a recent journal article known to be relevant to the topic on which an author is writing can quickly escalate into a major hunt. An especially dispiriting feeling is that of going to an academic library and learning that the only issue of the journal in question missing from stock is that which contains an article needed for one's researches. Nevertheless, a range of other opportunities may be investigated. The journal may be accessible from the same library electronically; other local libraries may hold the desired issue; colleagues with similar interests may themselves have copies or, in today's era of rapid worldwide electronic communication, it may be possible to e-mail the author of the piece and ask for a copy. All these alternatives may prove faster and cheaper than making an interlibrary loan request for the article. If various attempts fail, the author may consider locating a similar, more readily available article, probably in a different journal, in which the writer has again addressed the issue of interest.

3 Citing of sources

Although Berry asserts quite unequivocally, "The selection of the targeted journal precedes the drafting of the paper" (Berry, 2004, 122), by no means all writers routinely follow this line of thought. Some, in fact, determine the journal to be targeted only when the piece is virtually finished and look merely to "tweak" the material to fit the journal's style and requirements. Journals may, however, use idiosyncratic forms of referencing, which demand that the manuscript includes source information that the author may have hitherto assumed would not be necessary. *Library and Information Research*, for example, stipulates that ISBNs be given when books are cited in references lists – a practice that is by no means common elsewhere. Other journals ask that a page reference is given when any source material is cited, even if no direct quotation is involved. In these circumstances, in order to avoid the need for tedious backtracking at a later stage, it is useful if the author keeps either notes of where exactly such material has originated or photocopies/printouts of the source material that has been employed, with the appropriate areas clearly highlighted. This is indeed wise if the author is considering writing another piece in the future that may draw on the same source material.

In certain instances, the application of the Harvard system for citing references can prove awkward to apply. This is especially the case where authorship is unspecified or material is undated. Both these scenarios are common in relation to Web pages, and it is also true that some books bear no indication of their year of publication. Virtually all academic journals require that the author follows a prescribed convention for citing references and the writer has no alternative but to adhere to it. Nevertheless, some professional periodicals, in which attention to scholarly conventions is less pertinent, allow the writer to use any method he or

she chooses, and in these circumstances the author may be well advised to select the style best equipped to deal with the limitations in the bibliographical data available.

Whatever referencing system is employed, it is likely that the citation should include an indication of a book's place of publication. In some volumes, this is not obvious as the publishing firm may be multinational, with offices in several countries and each of these is stated equally prominently in the work. It is rare for the author to be asked to list all of these in the citation. Generally, it is expected that only one will be specified. The author may consult an entry for the book provided by the British Library Public Catalogue or, if the book has actually been borrowed from a library by the user, check the appropriate catalogue record to determine which single place should be stated. A further option lies in seeking advice from an information specialist in a library holding a copy.

One of the great frustrations of citing material made available via the World Wide Web is that one cannot necessarily be confident that when a paper is written the URL for a cited source will remain the same as that for the material when the manuscript is read weeks later. Some reviewers assiduously check the references in papers they receive and, where a particular address does not lead the reader to the expected source, may believe that the failure is evidence of carelessness on the author's part. Since the literature review is likely to be one of the first components of the paper to be written, it is entirely possible for the references for this section to be set down several weeks or even months before the paper is dispatched. It is clearly impossible for the author to legislate for the fact that pages may disappear from the Web or change their addresses between the work being sent off and the manuscript being read but the chances of such problems arising are reduced if the author checks the URLs just before the paper's submission.

4 Reaction to the submission

As Watts and White (2000) explain, it is rare for papers sent to prestigious journals to be accepted without the need for any amendments to be made. Many authors will admit, perhaps initially only grudgingly, that sometimes referees' suggestions will indeed result in the production of an improved piece. Still, comments which appear to indicate that a reviewer has misunderstood the writer's argument or even the whole nature of the paper can be hard to accept. It may be, for example, that the study being reported was intended to be wholly qualitative, yet a reviewer may ask that, when referring to participants who articulated particular attitudes or ideas, the author adds frequency counts, as these will give a greater transparency to the results. In these circumstances, the writer is placed in an uncomfortable position. If he or she refuses to make the suggested modifications, there is a strong possibility that the journal will not publish the piece. Conversely, if the writer makes the changes fully as requested, he or she may feel that the intended spirit of the work has been diluted and "foreign" elements introduced. In extreme situations, the author may even form the opinion that, if he or she were to adopt all the recommendations, they are so extensive that the final version will actually become a collaborative work between the writer and the reviewer. The dilemma for the author in deciding whether every single suggested alteration should be made does not arise, of course, where it proves

impossible for the individual to introduce such comprehensive changes. It may be that a referee suggests the inclusion of data that have not been collected by the individual and the person is now no longer in a position to return to the field in order to gather what is required. Here the action that can be taken is effectively removed from the author's hands. Questions may be asked in relation to the ethnic composition of a research sample, for example, and the author may be unable at this late stage to provide a more comprehensive breakdown than that which he or she anticipated would be necessary and which has already been included.

Some journals ask that the writer includes a point-by-point explanation of how he or she has responded to the comments, as well as merely revising the paper in accordance with the feedback. The writer may feel tempted to rewrite the piece sufficiently to enable him or her to demonstrate that cognizance has been taken of the reviewers' major criticisms but baulks at making major changes that would result in altering the whole nature of the study. An alternative, of course, lies in simply withdrawing the paper and presenting it to a journal whose referees may be more sympathetic to the paper. This is a questionable option to take, however, if the piece has already been conditionally accepted elsewhere. Indeed, one of Foster's four tips for publishing is that the author must be prepared to rewrite a manuscript after reviewers' feedback. She comments, "While your ego may be temporarily deflated, taking a deep breath and pounding the keyboard is well worth producing a strong, quality article" (Hinchliffe and Dorner, 2006, 5).

Another dilemma in the redrafting stage is highlighted by Dunleavy, who notes that, in some situations, "the two referees want contradictory things" (Dunleavy, 2003, 243). The author of this paper has personally experienced such a scenario on several occasions. The discrepancy can be a source of great confusion to a new writer, in particular, who may struggle for hours to reconcile the inconsistency. Where this proves impossible to achieve, he or she should have no hesitation in requesting clarification from the editor, who may either suggest a "middle way" or come out in favour of one referee or the other. If, conversely, two or more reviewers make a similar criticism independently, the writer must be prepared to concede that there is good reason to be concerned about the issue raised and remedial action should form a priority in his or her response to the feedback.

If a writer becomes a frequent contributor to a particular professional periodical, he or she may develop a strong working relationship with the editor, whom he or she realises is highly receptive to the author's submissions. Should the editor eventually move on, a frequent problem is that the new incumbent, who may have very different ideas from the predecessor on the course that the periodical should take and who may have had no previous dealings with the author, seems much less sympathetic. In these circumstances, it is wise for writers to enter into dialogue with the new editor and develop a clear understanding of the kinds of papers that are being sought after gaining an initial feel for what may be required by looking at the editions that have already gone out under the person's stewardship. Hinchliffe suggests that the browsing of past issues is, in fact, good general advice to "get some sense of what is commonly used" (Hinchliffe and Dorner, 2006, 3). If the author recognises that he or she will be unable to deliver the type of work that is now expected, it may be necessary in the future to target

other journals that cover a similar area but whose particular areas of interest are more consistent with those favoured by the writer.

5 Publication of the paper and its reception

Few issues in publishing cause as much resentment as situations in which the researcher spends several hours constructing an intricate diagram, only for it to be reproduced inaccurately in the published paper. One precaution that the author can take against such an eventuality is to submit to journals that circulate proofs in advance of the paper appearing. These afford an opportunity for the writer to correct errors emerging in the creation of the printed pages. He or she is not, of course, permitted to rewrite the article at this advanced stage. Usually, although by no means always, the author's corrections to the proofs result in the necessary amendments being made to the work before it appears in print. The circulation of proofs, is, however, mainly associated with academic journals. The practice is uncommon in relation to professional periodicals. Here, the author should consult more experienced writing colleagues in order to learn about the accuracy with which journals reproduce involved diagrams and charts before making a decision on which periodical should be approached.

Even after accepting a particular paper for publication, some editors change it quite significantly before it actually appears. Often this is justified on the grounds that the editor is seeking to maintain a consistent house style across different articles with regard to length, structure, language, etc. The amendments may vary from simply expressing, in slightly different language, the ideas stated in the manuscript to the use of a completely different title or even the deletion of whole paragraphs. Clearly, the author has little control over the action taken in relation to his or her piece by the editor at this stage but it is important that he or she develops, by reading previous copies of the periodical and, in particular, any notes for contributors in advance of submitting work, a sense of what kinds of alterations are likely to be made and their probable extent. A reputable periodical, overseen by an editor with integrity, will acknowledge in the guidance given to contributors that pieces may be subject to editorial amendment. Some writers are, of course, very protective of their work and may resent even minor changes to the language they have employed, whilst with experience many learn to accept alterations unless they are of a major nature.

When discussing near the beginning of this piece problems associated with the accurate representation of source material, much was made of the fact that, occasionally, papers do not give an altogether accurate impression of previous work. The author may gain further experience of this problem from a different perspective. A writer may read, in a new paper, a summary of one of his or her past pieces, only to discover that the description scarcely matches his or her own perception of the paper that was actually published. Sometimes this is due to other authors, in their attempts to summarise the existing literature concisely, oversimplifying the findings to such an extent that they are being misleading but instances have also arisen where "quotations" bearing no relationship to what was written have appeared! Similarly, frameworks allegedly based on this author's ideas have been constructed without it being apparent how they have been derived from the original work. In general, the writer must be prepared to accept such

liberties although, where he or she feels that this has resulted in either grave misrepresentation of key ideas/findings or unjustified damage to the author's personal reputation, the writer may consider carefully whether it is necessary to take a stand against the perpetrator, either informally, perhaps via a gentle e-mail, or publicly, maybe through a letter to the journal in which the offending work has appeared.

6 Conclusions

Despite the pleasure that can be gained from writing for publication, the activity brings with it a variety of pitfalls. The first-time writer may well be entirely unprepared for these and be at a loss to know how best to react. The purpose of this piece has been to alert people in this position to such dangers, with a view to helping them either to develop workable counter-measures or to pre-empt the emergence of the undesirable issues. Undoubtedly, authors will be able to respond effectively to some problems, such as barriers to the tracing of source material for inclusion in their work, and may develop methods of dealing with not entirely favourable reactions of journal staff to a submission, whilst others, like the inaccurate use of his or her published work, are more problematic. Nevertheless, these negatives should not deter the individual from writing for publication, which is not only personally and professionally satisfying but also vital for developing the theoretical knowledge base and informing practice.

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