

# Publish or Perish

An Overview of Publishing for  
Peer-Reviewed Journals in Health Policy

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# Why Peer-Reviewed Publications?

- Peer-review publication is the standard of credibility for research. Approved by knowledgeable peers.
- Peer-reviewed journals are indexed in sources like PubMed and join the record of research.
- Builds your reputation and makes you and GW part of national/international community of experts. Get invited to conferences, get grants, etc.
- **Required for faculty advancement, promotion and tenure at GW and other universities. Researchers should all seek to publish.**

# Downsides

- Takes a long time and is a hassle. Pipeline can be a few months to over a year. A problem for time-sensitive policy issues. (Consider grey literature or blogs.)
- Policy officials don't read scholarly studies.
- Projects may not include funding or permission for publication.
- Fear of rejection. Your work will be critiqued and this can sting. (But critiques make you stronger.)
- May have to modify your findings or conclusions because of comments from reviewers.

# Common Objections

- I don't have time.
  - Make time.
- I don't know how.
  - Learn. Read journals. Review manuscripts.
- I don't do that kind of research/work.
  - Expand your horizons. Wide variety of types of journals and papers.
- I don't have funding for publications.
  - Not all papers need to be funded.
  - Can be simpler to publish unfunded work.

# Strategies

- Think about teams and co-authors. Every article should have lead author who is primarily responsible. For ongoing work, can rotate lead authorship.
- Think about articles as a story: What is the problem? What is the plot? Is there a conclusion?
- Methods matter, but clear message is paramount. Can you readily summarize the key findings? What is the policy significance?
- Think from reader's perspective. Not what you (the researcher) did, but what the reader needs to learn.

# Warning About Prior Publicity

- Most journals will not publish material that has been published before.
- This may apply to prior publicity about your paper, especially for prestigious journals with their own press releases. They may reject your paper if it has already received publicity or been released in an earlier version.
- Can be a concern for reports done for funders who want their own publicity and report. Can consider peer-review first, then policy report.

# The Process – First Steps

- Identify a target journal. (Consider back-up choices)
- Review articles from that journal – right niche?
- Look at instructions for authors.
  - Types of articles accepted
  - Length & number of tables, figures
  - Formatting
  - Reference style
  - Understand style and norms of journal.

# Which Journals?

- LOTS of peer-reviewed journals in the health area.
- Many oriented to empirical research, but others to policy analysis, qualitative research, reviews, etc.
- Top tier journals include: *JAMA*, *NEJM*, *Inquiry*, *Milbank*, *Medical Care*, *HSR*, *AJPH*, *JHPPL*, *JHE*, etc.
- *Health Affairs* is a major journal, but is different.
- Has journal published work in your area? Is it read by those who work in your area?
- What tier is feasible for this paper?
- Consult your colleagues.

# Submission of Manuscript

- Pre-submission inquiry to editors?
- Proof article and tables before submitting.
- Submit article.
  - Usually online. May take an hour or more.
  - May be asked: contact info and roles of co-authors, funder, human subjects, conflict of interest, etc.
  - Submit to one journal at a time.
- Then wait:
  - Sometimes quick rejection
  - Speed often related to frequency of publication
  - If reviewed, usually 2-4 months wait

# Initial Review\*

- Senior editors identify topic and delegate to associate editors.
- Editors then quickly scan:
  - May reject as not appropriate for journal's niche, clearly not valid, published elsewhere, etc. Many journals reject 50% or more without external review.
  - Otherwise, they assign to 2-3 peer reviewers (approach several reviewers until 2-3 accept)
  - You may propose reviewers (not too helpful) or ask that certain people NOT be reviewers (more often honored).

\* Law journals typically have a different process. Use student reviewers. See a lawyer.

# The Review Process

- Reviewers usually given 3-4 weeks to review, but are often late.
- May critique anything. Often focus on theory, literature, methods, implications, etc.
- Asked to give comments to authors and to editors
- Usually asked to rate: accept (rare), minor revisions, major revisions, or reject.
- Assigned editor collects reviews and decides whether to request revisions or reject.

# Revisions

- *If editor asks for revisions, this is a good sign.* It means they believe that if the authors put in effort and follow suggestions the article is publishable.
- Get back to journal soon.
- Be **very attentive** to reviewers' and editor's comments.
- Create a document that lists every comment and how you respond to it.
  - Need not accept every comment, but should respond to each.
- May be sent for re-review and cycle may begin again.

# If Rejected...Handling Rejection

- Review why article was rejected.
- Consider if problems can be fixed. Consult with your co-authors.
- Resubmit to another journal, your back-up choice.
- Remember that if it is reviewed, it might be reviewed by same reviewers as before.
- Try to resubmit soon after.

# Common Problems Mentioned

- Not appropriate type of article for journal (quick rejection). Editors often make this decision.
- Literature review, conceptual or theoretical basis.
- No new contribution to knowledge.
- Weak methodology or data.
- Selection or measurement bias. Lack of causality.
- Incorrect policy or programmatic detail.
- Problems of interpretation.
  - No limitations discussed
  - Not enough policy implications

# Once Accepted

- Will be copy-edited.
  - Level of copy editing varies with journal and its style.
- You must review copy edits and queries from editor and respond relatively quickly.
- Revised manuscript will be turned into proofs/galleys (publication ready)
- You must review and approve proofs very quickly (often 24 hour turnaround)

# Publication

- Depending on journal, may be published online first, then be published in hard copy (or these days, just online publication)
- If you know when it will come out, you may want to work with GW public affairs staff for press release.
- **Congratulations!!**
- Keep a pdf copy and note the publication in your CV.
- Keep working on the next articles.

# Possibly Related Talk

- Dr. Naomi Luban
- Chief of Lab Medicine, Children's National Medical Center, Vice Chair for Academic Affairs in Dept. of Pediatrics, GW
- “Now that you've done the research....Writing productively.”
- Friday, Aug 26, noon – 1 PM
- Ross 101