Avoid Submitting Your Manuscript to the Wrong Journal

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All those who perform academic research will eventually want to publish their work. Primarily, the aim is to communicate the research findings in the best possible journal after benefitting from the peer review process[2]. In doing so, the authors not only advance knowledge but also gain recognition for their effort and contribution—which is increasingly crucial for career advancement and funding for more projects. Another benefit to successful publication, at least for the PI's and lab heads, is that it helps attract the best and brightest students and staff[1].

Choosing a wrong journal to publish your paper in increases the likelihood of its rejection[3], either immediately or after peer review is completed. This is a very common mistake in academic publishing. Conversely, if you think carefully about your paper, especially in the context of already published work in your field, you can greatly enhance the likelihood that your paper is provisionally accepted at the first journal you submit to. This means faster time to publication that avoids wasting precious time and money and avoiding another potentially lengthy, stressful, and exhaustive round of peer review.

Making a Journal Shortlist

After having duly planned and prepared your manuscript for publication[4], the final step is to choose the right journal. No single formula exists due to the various factors involved in this daunting decision. The best way forward is to carefully consider these in order to generate a shortlist of suitable journals. The first step is to ask your co-authors and your supervisor for their advice on some suitable journals[3]. This is an effective springboard to get you moving towards compiling the shortlist. Then, think about a journal's readership and ask yourself if the readers will understand your work, and cite it in their own work? Every journal provides an overview of their aims and scope, target audience, and their preferences for the article types accepted, the scale of the study, or even for specific topics. Perusing the current issue and archived material of each journal will quickly yield a sense of what they regularly publish[2]. Then ask yourself if your work fits in? Is it a reasonable match? Have they published papers similar to yours?

> A crucial factor concerning scope is whether or not the journal is more general or more specialized.

The former (e.g. Nature, Science, PNAS, Cell, etc.) tend to have a wider audience, and a higher impact factor, and ask for research that is not only high in quality but also represents a breakthrough or is transformative for knowledge. Their rejection rates are much higher, and the word length restrictions are tighter than those found in other journals that are more regionally or thematically focused. That said, systematic reviews tend to be widely welcomed by many jounals[5]. However, irrespective of general- and niche-interests, each journal on your shortlist should have a reputable recognition i.e. they ought to be accessible, valued, read, and respected by your peer group and mentors. Society journals have long had such a presence in academic research; they are regularly seen by a built-in readership[1]. Similarly, newer “predatory” journals should be always avoided[6].

The impact and prestige of a journal are hard to objectively define[2]. Moreover, it can change over time or with changing trends in research. Nonetheless, it is a major driver of journal selection by both aspiring and established researchers, especially since the introduction of the journal impact factor (IF). This has been the default metric for publishing success—it reflects the average rate of citations garnered in the last 2 yrs[1] —and is increasingly controversial and critiqued for various reasons[1,2]. Always remember that a journal’s high-IF is no guarantee that your paper will be heavily cited once published. No matter how tempting it is to publish in these top-tier journals, please reserve this only for your best work, since repeated rejections will destroy your academic motivation.

An overlooked criterion in this process is honestly appraising the quality and potential impact of your manuscript submission[2]. This requires a self-critical eye and a certain degree of modesty. This is also inherently difficult to do in practice, especially for first-time authors who may think that their paper is just great. The idea here is to not “oversell” your work, which will guarantee repeated rejections but also not to “undersell” it either. In short, strive to know what your work is really worth scientifically.

Some Other Considerations

With a decent shortlist in hand, refine it further[3]. A journal’s publication efficiency[1] is worth investigating. Inquire with your peers and check the backlog of manuscripts in press. Importantly, try to estimate the time from submission to first decision/acceptance[2] . Also, make sure you are comfortable with the peer review policy of the journal[3] and check its restrictions, especially the limits on article content (number of words, figures, and tables). Finally, if your budget is tight, scrutinize the submission and publication charges, which can become very expensive if seeking an open access publication. So, spend enough time when choosing your right journal, but don’t overdo it.

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Cite this article

Enago Academy, Avoid Submitting Your Manuscript to the Wrong Journal. Enago Academy. 2017/02/27. https://www.enago.com/academy/avoid-submitting-your-manuscript-to-the-wrong-journal/