

Navigating the Journal Spectrum in Academic Publishing

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Every scientist must publish his or her research at some point, and these publications are still integral to the scientific process.¹ More often than not, aspiring as well as established scientists want their work to be read by their peers and other scientists, preferably in a peer-reviewed journal.² Inevitably, a decision must be made about where to submit your manuscript. However, scientific journals are not all alike. There are two broad classes of journals that exist on the spectrum of journal literature: the more general vs. the more specialized.³

The most general journals such as [Nature](#), [Science](#), [PNAS](#), and the likes are interdisciplinary and highly competitive, are quickly reviewed and widely read by researchers across disciplines, and they tend to have much higher impact factors than more specialized journals. Nevertheless, a broad scientific branch may have its own “general” journals, such as PLOS Biology or Cell (for Biology). Since specialized journals are considered by many as less “prestigious,”³ they tend to receive fewer submissions and so editors there are less picky about what they publish, but they may take longer to find reviewers and complete the peer review and reach print, as they target a smaller community of researchers interested in a particular subject or area of research (e.g., *Journal of Tropical Ecology*, for biology). However, deciding on a

general vs. specialized journal is no trivial matter. So what should you keep in mind, as an author, when making this decision?

Know Your Target Audience

Some key questions to ask yourself are the following: (i) Is there an ideal audience this paper should reach?³ (ii) If so, which journals cater to such readers and thus make a best match?^{3,4} (iii) In considering such journals, does my paper fit within their scopes and aims, as well as the author guidelines and the required submission process?^{1,4} (iv) Do I care more about broad readership and visibility than reaching my peers working on a similar topic in my field? (v) Do I want to publish in an Open Access (OA) journal, to perhaps reach more people, though it might cost me extra money?^{1,4} (vi) How important is the time to publication for me? (vii) Will a geographic-centered journal or one more internationally circulated benefit or hinder my paper?^{2,4} (viii) How important is a journal's impact factor for me?

For example, in the case of (i) to (iii) given above, it often helps to peruse the content in those journals, and also to see if you recognize any authors as well as names on the editorial board.¹ What are the “go-to” journals you regularly read and cite in your own research? In the case of (vi), a more general journal may return your paper quicker, but they may be more likely to refuse sending it out for review altogether, and even if so, to reject it, which means more time spent revising again for a new [journal submission](#). This trade-off is a difficult one, especially for PhD students and post-docs.

The last case of (viii) above deserves a special mention in the current high-pressure academic environment, and it often appears online in discussions on the merits of general vs. specialized journals.⁵ Many are tempted to “aim high” for a high-impact factor journal in their field, but this has its problems. First, it overloads the peer review system and leads to “early desk filtering” by editors to deal with all the submissions. Second, it can be “gamed” by greedy authors who are looking for a fast-turnaround and input from peer-reviewers. Third, for the author, acceptance is no guarantee that it will be read by people in your community or cited by them. Arguably, if your work upends existing theory, makes a discovery empirically or theoretically, is generalizable, or tests theory in a novel way or on an unprecedented scale, then a more general, high-impact journal is justified. Otherwise, your work is likely to be more read and influential, and enjoy more recognition, respect, and citations by your target audience if it is published in a specialized journal.

Points to Consider

When picking a general vs. specialized journal several other factors come into play. A major one is the current career stage of the lead author. If the author is established and tenured, then high-impact journals may not be so urgent a goal, however, these journals may matter more for the post-doc looking for a start-up grant and professorship. The Internet and search engines now make it possible to easily find specialized materials across the journal spectrum. So, even if it is published in an obscure journal, the article

can be found with right keywords. Finally, the rise of social media (Facebook, Twitter, RSS feeds, etc.) to disseminate and create “buzz” around published articles may offset some of the perceived limitations associated with specialized journals, since your paper may get quick exposure and it can now be shared with the community of researchers, and perhaps even garner some mainstream media coverage.

Importance of a Good Cover Letter

One aspect that is often overlooked when submitting a paper to either a general or specialized journal is the cover letter. Every paper you submit should include a cover letter: apart from its basic content, and it should be succinct and explain very clearly to the editor why your research is suitable for their journal’s scope and aims and its readership.⁶ This is a golden opportunity to persuade the editor that your paper is valuable to them, and specifically, that you have thought carefully about why a more general vs. a more specialized journal should be its home. Mostly, this makes a favorable impression. Unfortunately, the cover letter remains an undervalued tool by many academic scientists.

Ideally, authors should pause and give thought to considering their target audience and journal for their paper, *before they write it*.^{1,3} When your results and findings are checked, re-checked, and completed, you are then in the best position to think about the story you want to tell others with your paper.

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