

## WRITING TIPS SERIES

# Effective writing and publishing scientific papers, part X: choice of journal

### 1. What you should know

In a scientific paper, you try to tell a story, but to whom? Your audience will largely depend on the journal you publish your work in. PubMed alone cites more than 20 million papers. This shows that with some perseverance, you will probably get your paper published at some point, but choosing the right journal for your work is not easy.

Depending on a journal's status, space restrictions, and flow of submitted papers, acceptance rates vary from under 10% for the most prestigious journals to more than 80% for some journals. The impact factor of a journal reflects the average number of citations of articles published in the journal in the past 2 years and is a much debated but still widely used measure of a journal's relative importance in the field, published in the annual *Journal Citation Reports*. These also allow you to browse journals by subject category, which is useful to get an overview of journals within a specific field.

The number of electronic journals without printed formats is ever increasing. Such journals are not constricted by space limitations and will often be able to publish more papers a year as well as being able to publish papers very soon after acceptance.

Many scientific journals are nowadays (partly) open access. This is the practice of providing unrestricted access to and unrestricted reuse of peer-reviewed scholarly research via the Internet, so papers are also accessible to people who do not subscribe to the journal (eg, researchers not attached to an academic department or living in low-income countries), and materials may be used and copied, subject to proper attribution of authorship. Open access does not necessarily mean that the author must pay a publication fee on acceptance, although many journals (traditional and electronic) do charge such fees (€500–2,000), which are replacing the publishers' traditional business model of reader subscription fees. There have been reported cases of mock journals and fake publishers sending out e-mail invitations to submit papers, while only being interested in pocketing publication fees. Proper scientific journals will not normally send such e-mails. Be aware that electronic publishing does not automatically imply open-access publishing or vice versa.

### 2. What you should do

Think about a target journal before starting to write. The nature of the target journal will affect the skeleton of your

paper in general and the introduction and discussion sections in particular (see the item on "How to start"). Discuss within your team the focus and preferred audience for this specific paper. Look at the relevant literature for your project to see where similar work has been published. Decide if you want to reach fellow researchers, health professionals, or both and draw up a list of general journals or more disease-specific or content-specific specialist journals. Be realistic about the likeliness of your paper being accepted by a top journal. Ask your (senior) peers for an honest opinion and also ask them about their experiences with journals' peer-review and publication processes in terms of punctuality and reasons for rejection or acceptance. Look at the journals' Web sites and author's instruction to see if a journal actually publishes the type of paper you intend to write.

Balance the desire to publish in high-impact factor journals with your preferred time to publication. Submitting a paper to a journal with a high rejection rate may give you useful reviewer reports but may also delay your publication process by several months as multiple submissions may be necessary. Once you hit the submit button, the paper will be off your desk for quite a while. If you want to publish in a specific journal, be sure to read the journal. Look carefully at the table of contents and the papers, and read editorials to learn about the scope of the journal and the editors' preferences.

Discuss relevant target journals, prioritize them and rank a final list of 3–5 journals. This will enable you to focus on your first journal of choice and adhere to their author's instructions, while also giving you a predefined strategy should the paper be rejected by the first journal.

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#### Checklist for choice of journal

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- Think about a target journal before you start writing.
  - Consider the following journal characteristics
    - (1) Basic vs. clinical research
    - (2) Generalist vs. specialist journal
    - (3) Traditional (printed) vs. electronic journal
    - (4) Subscription access vs. open access.
  - Balance the desire to publish in top-quality journals with the need for rapid publication.
  - Consider, but do not be fooled by, impact factors.
  - Draw up a prioritized list of 3–5 journals.
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