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Ellen Buckner

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM, bucknere@uab.edu

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Ten Steps to Honors Publication: How Students Can Prepare Their Honors Work for Publication

ELLEN B. BUCKNER

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM

The gold standard for scholarly accomplishment in any professional discipline is publication in a national peer-reviewed journal. Many journals accept small studies such as those done as part of a senior honors project or thesis. Disciplines vary as to what they will consider, but listed herein are ten suggested steps that faculty can recommend to students who want to have their honors work submitted, reviewed, and possibly accepted for publication in such a journal. Just going through the steps will give the honors student valuable experience. Even more importantly, the review process often provides the student with excellent comments by reviewers who have an experienced perspective on the discipline and who view the finished product without being aware of its development. Reviewers' comments may provide validation for the worth of the work and/or feedback on specific elements that are unclear to a knowledgeable reader. These comments are invaluable to the author's objectivity and writing skill.

This discussion is written to provide honors faculty with a "nuts and bolts" overview that they can share with their students to show them how to get their honors work published in a peer-reviewed journal. It is assumed that the honors work is an original piece of scholarship and prepared according to acceptable academic standards for a written paper, with proper referencing, formatting, attribution of sources, etc. If the work includes human participants or non-human (animal) subjects in research, approval by the appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB) or Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee is required and should be included in the description of methods. Most journals will not publish without documentation of approval processes.

The terminology is important; often taken for granted by faculty, it may be new to students. "Manuscript," for instance, refers to a paper in preparation or submitted for consideration while "article" refers to the work after it is published. There are important considerations for assigning authorship and for following the ethics of publishing (authorship, acknowledgements and attribution, accuracy, multiple submissions, timing of press releases, etc.). These are not

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described here but are included in references listed below and are worthwhile topics for further discussion. The topic of copyright transfer may be one that some students need to research in more depth. There are issues nationally about what restrictions apply after signing a copyright transfer. Discussion of these is beyond the scope of these steps and in this author's opinion should not be a barrier to first publication for most students (see 5.d below).

The ten steps for students preparing honors work for publication are listed below. Specific points attempt to address different kinds of publications, but students should consult the advisor for further insight particularly related to their discipline or content area. Several institutions place such steps on a website for student access; others refer students to published articles on writing for publication. Examples of these are listed in the bibliography. A defining element for advisors is to walk the student step by step through the process lest it be too daunting or self-defeating.

Many honors students are encouraged to present their work at meetings and conferences, including the annual conference of NCHC. These presentations strengthen students' skills in discussing their work with others, fielding questions and gaining confidence. However, students need to understand that a publication, unlike a conference presentation, is permanent, thus requiring more and different kinds of work. Finally, this author recommends strongly that the choice of journal include whether it is indexed and in which indexes it is listed. Publication with indexing will be more effective in allowing the student's contribution to become part of the ongoing discipline-specific dialog.

ADVICE FOR STUDENTS: TEN STEPS TO PUBLICATION

1. Prepare a summary or abstract of your work.

While writing in the appropriate format for your discipline, be concise but include enough information to give an editor a sense of the project's scholarly accomplishment. Give the editor a clear idea whether the content and form are appropriate for the journal's consideration.

2. Identify two or three possible journals.
 - a. Look at your bibliography for articles that are similar to your work (research-based, clinical, applied, concept analysis, philosophical, literature review, position paper, etc).
 - b. Choose two or three journals to send a query email. Be careful not to choose journals that are beyond the scope of your work (i.e., do not choose the premier research journal for an undergraduate project).
 - c. Search the internet for websites of journals you have used or read.
 - d. Consider online journals and undergraduate journals.

3. Draft a query email.
 - a. Locate sources that list journals in your field. Most will provide the editor's email address.
 - b. Draft two to three query emails. These are business letters and should have the editor's professional title, credentials, and business address included. Write formally and be sure your grammar is perfect. Your letters reflect the quality of your writing. Editors, hoping to minimize the work of editing, will assume your manuscript is of the same quality.
 - c. Send more than one query email to sample available options. Multiple query emails are acceptable at this stage.
 - d. Ask if the journal will consider student work.
 - e. If the work has been or will be presented at a conference or published in conference proceedings (for example *NCHC* or *NCUR: The National Conference on Undergraduate Research*), include that information in the query email. This is a strong asset and will not disqualify the work from publication in a national peer-reviewed journal.
 - f. Attach or include the abstract or summary.
 - g. Ask about the journal's usual time frame for review and publication.
 - h. You may want to ask if there is a thematic column, section, or upcoming focused issue that would be appropriate for your work. Special feature sections are usually handled by a different editor, and individual articles may be shorter. They are usually indexed as part of the journal and are especially suited to undergraduate work with good ideas but less extensive involvement of time and resources.
 - i. You can also ask the journal's acceptance rate although that information may be available in some discipline-specific publications that compare journals. Look for articles on "how to publish." You are not required to ask for any of this information.
 - j. Ask an advisor or peer to proof the emails before sending.
4. Select journal for submission.
 - a. Review responses. Some journals may discourage submission if the work does not match their preferred focus in topic, tone, rigor, sample size, or point of view. Some are neutral and only say to submit per author guidelines. A response that is positive and communicates genuine interest from the editor is a strong signal to send the work to that journal.
 - b. Based on the responses to the query emails (positive, negative, or neutral), choose **one** journal to which you will submit your manuscript. It

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is unacceptable in publishing to submit to more than one journal simultaneously.

5. Prepare manuscript according to author or journal guidelines.
 - a. Follow the journal guidelines to the letter—including formatting style, references, page length, submitting procedures, etc.
 - b. Proofread your manuscript, and ask another person to do so as well (see comment above about editors preferring well-written manuscripts).
 - c. Submit in required format. Many journals today accept manuscripts by email. Some may want paper copies (the number of required copies is listed in the guidelines) and a disk or CD.
 - d. Sign the copyright transfer. Most journals require a statement of copyright transfer. There may be a form or simply a statement in the cover letter. Regardless of the format, this is a necessary step and one that protects you as author.
 - e. If paper copies are mailed, be sure to keep a copy. Track the mailing through the postal or delivery service so that you have a record of its receipt. Alternatively, you may include a self-addressed, stamped postcard for the recipient to acknowledge receipt. Receipt of unsolicited manuscripts may or may not be acknowledged routinely by the journal.
6. Send and wait.
 - a. Do not submit to a different journal during the review process. It takes from several weeks to over six months for a review to be completed. If you decide the process is taking too long or you want to submit elsewhere, you may, of course, withdraw your manuscript from consideration. Then you are free to go elsewhere. If three to six months have passed, you may contact the editor to inquire as to its status and the time expected for completion of the review.
 - b. Realize that it can be a good sign or a bad sign if the review is very quick. Some journals have a screening process and will tell you quickly if your manuscript will not be considered. In other cases your work may be so important it is given a “fast-track” review and speedy publication.
7. Receive review and respond.
 - a. Realize that a manuscript is rarely accepted “as is.” Most acceptances require a major or minor revision.
 - b. Complete the revision immediately. This shows commitment and interest on your part and keeps the work moving forward. Any indication that a revision is encouraged is a highly positive sign and should be followed up.

- c. With a minor revision, make as many of the changes as you can, going through the comments line by line. Show your willingness to use the editor's feedback to improve the manuscript. Usually a manuscript with only minor revisions will ultimately be accepted if revised according to editor or reviewer comments.
 - d. With a major revision, first look at the nature of the reviewers' comments. If the criticism focuses on the design, set-up, or implementation of the project, then you cannot change your manuscript. However, should the editor want those elements described in more detail, you can rewrite your manuscript accordingly. You can certainly add to the literature or background, cut page length, tighten the wording of the written text, clean up the presentation of results, etc.
 - e. Accept an editor's recommendation, should you receive one, that you cut the length and publish as a column. A publication in a peer-reviewed journal in your discipline is an impressive accomplishment for an undergraduate. A column or special section is a publication, usually cited in the indexes of other articles in the same journal, and may be listed on your resumé.
 - f. Don't hesitate to submit to a different journal if the comments are highly critical or cannot be fixed. Look for a journal that matches the work more closely.
 - g. As an alternative to submitting a full-length manuscript, send a letter to the editor. The letter may include data or conclusions from your honors work with implications relating to a previous article or an issue covered in the journal.
 - h. As an alternative, rewrite the paper from a different perspective or gear it toward a slightly different audience, and submit to the journal with that point of view.
8. Keep the process in perspective.
- a. If you receive a rejection letter, do not be discouraged. Most published authors have drawers full of rejection letters. When you submit your work you take a risk, but without risk there is no reward. If the rejection includes reviewer comments, those are highly beneficial to learning how to improve your work.
 - b. Try again, but learn from the process. **Do not** send your manuscript back to the same journal if it is not a good match. **Do not** manipulate or change the manuscript to falsify any procedures or make the findings stronger than they truly are. **Do not** go further in your description of conclusions or discussion of implications than the original project can support. It is better shorten the manuscript and indicate that the work raises some good questions for further study.

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- c. **Do** take comments seriously. The reviewer gave you his/her time and expert recommendations. **Do** learn from the comments indicating where you can improve for the future—expanding your literature review, adding a control group, increasing sample size, using a different instrument, citing a recent study in the area, strengthening a concept, etc. **Do** keep the goal of publishing in a peer-reviewed journal.
9. Receive acceptance letter and anticipate time of publication.
 - a. Reply to the editor immediately and meet all deadlines. Revisions are usually given a date for return. Galley proofs usually must be returned within a few days (two-seven, maximum). All deadlines must be strictly met for the manuscript to continue moving forward in the process.
 - b. Request an estimated time to publication. Some journals publish within about six months; others may take two years or more. You can request a letter from the editor stating the current status of your submission in order to document acceptance for a graduate school application packet or professional portfolio.
10. When the actual publication occurs, notify and thank those who assisted. They share in your success. Celebrate!

Listed below are additional readings on this topic. Most are in health-related fields (this author's area), but many disciplines publish similar resources periodically. Look for such guidelines in the journals you are considering, and be sure that your manuscript matches the journal's expressed emphasis and current policies. Consult your advisor for further tips on publishing.

ADDITIONAL READINGS

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- Ruth-Sahd, L., & King, C. (2006). A diamond in the rough, to a polished gemstone ring: writing for publication in a nursing journal. *Dimensions of Critical Care Nursing*, 25(3), 113–120.
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- Saver, C. (2006b). Guest series: writing for publication. Finding and refining an article topic. *AORN Journal*, 83(4), 829–832.
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- Saver, C. (2006e). Guest series: writing for publication. Choosing a journal and submitting your manuscript . . . fifth in a series. *AORN Journal*, 84(1), 27–30.
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- Saver, C. (2006g). Guest series: writing for publication. Demystifying the publishing process. *AORN Journal*, 84(3), 373–376.
- Saver, C. (2006h). Guest series: writing for publication. Legal and ethical aspects of publishing. *AORN Journal*, 84(4), 571–575.
- Steneck, N. H. (2004). ORI Introduction to Responsible Conduct of Research. Available from the U.S. Government Printing Office <http://bookstore.gpo.gov> or as a PDF on www.ori.dhhs.gov.

The author may be contacted at
bucknere@uab.edu.

