

How to increase your likelihood of publishing in peer reviewed journals

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*Writing about your research is one thing but knowing how to write an article for publication in a peer reviewed journal is quite another. From his perspective as a journal editor, **Hugh McLaughlin** offers some helpful tips and insights, ranging from demonstrating your familiarity with your chosen journal and what it has published to the importance of paying attention to the 'heavy lifting'.*



Writing can be both a joy and a trial, often at the same time. Most of us know where and when is our best time to write but perversely this is often one of the most difficult times for us to find time to write. Writing is not merely a technical activity but an emotional one as it sets out our position on an issue, our standpoint on a debate and our claim to being an author or academic. This is especially so in peer reviewed journals where your work is likely to be assessed by two unknown peers, [which can result in a painful reviews](#). Once published, your views cannot be retracted, they are there for all time for others to view and judge. However, if you wish to be considered as a serious academic, want to secure tenure, promotion or be submitted to the next Research Excellence Framework, being published is non-negotiable.

It is not enough just to write, you must have something to write about. The good news is that journals will accept a wide range of submissions including articles based on research, theoretical or conceptual pieces, a case study or even a reflective piece based on your practical or academic experience. You might want to consider some key questions: does your article contribute new knowledge? Does it offer a unique way to address a social problem or policy dilemma? Will it have implications for practice? Considering these questions and being able to answer in the affirmative is likely to increase your chances of publication.



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Once you start writing it's important to remember that each paragraph and page is only a draft. You can change it later, nothing is fixed until the article is submitted. Don't procrastinate over that perfect first sentence; don't even get stuck writing in paragraphs if that inhibits you. You can always come back and correct them later. It is useful at this stage to have identified the journal you wish to submit to. Be clear about the journal's focus, article word limit and referencing style. It is also wise to check whether it has published an article in your area in recent issues; if it has, be sure to reference it. Editors like to see that potential authors are aware of the journal and its content. Reviewers will comment on these things along with grammar, spelling, structure, and matters of publication ethics. Most journals ask reviewers to provide comments on a fixed set of questions, often including the manuscript's relevance to the field, whether it is conceptually sound and rigorous, makes a significant contribution to knowledge and is accessible to an international audience. It can be very helpful to ask some colleagues to act as critical friends to read the paper and provide comments for you to consider.

If submitting an empirical article it is important to follow accepted standards and whilst there are a number of guidelines for quantitative articles (e.g. [PRISMA](#) and [CONSORT-SPI](#)) there are fewer guidelines for qualitative manuscripts. This can lead to difficulties in assessing the rigour and validity of the research. Some suggestions that might help you with qualitative articles include:

1. Know your methodological literature and its epistemological traditions
2. Ensure integrity of design, according to the assumptions and rules relating to your epistemological perspective
3. Be consistent – once you have identified your philosophical position, stay there
4. Align the various pieces into a coherent and well-synthesised whole
5. Rigour is generated from the integrity of the overall design.

Having considered these, one of the most important things you can do is pay attention to the 'heavy lifting'. The three key heavy lifting areas for authors to address are: *focus, infusion and musing*. Focus refers to the crafting of a literature review to support and justify the choices for the study. Infusion refers to the infusion of theory into the manuscript, providing readers with new ways of provoking discussion, challenge and applications to practice. It was noted in our [recent publication](#) that "articles that are theoretically strong receive the most citations". Lastly, musing refers to making interesting and useful connections not only to theory and/or practice but also to social policy and lived experiences. Manuscripts that convey passion and compassion, are free from hyperbole, speak with authority and have engaged with the heavy lifting are most likely to be successful.

Once submitted your article will be judged against standard categories ranging from immediate accept, accept with minor revisions, accept with major revisions, revise and resubmit (also known as reject and resubmit) and reject. What we all want is to see our manuscript be immediately accepted but this very rare on first submission and is likely to take two or three revisions. Accept with either minor revisions or major revisions is a good result. A decision of revise and resubmit is common and means that the article is within the focus of the journal but requires major work to bring it up to a publishable standard. This is not a rejection and gives you the opportunity to revise your paper.

Having received the reviewers' comments it is important to read and consider these carefully. Remember, these are provided in the spirit of addressing weaknesses and improving your article. Respond to each reviewer separately showing how you have addressed the points they have raised. This does not mean you have to agree with all comments but you must treat them seriously and offer a reasoned argument in response to those you may disagree with.

Perhaps the most difficult decision to face comes when your prized article is rejected. It is probably worth remembering that this happens to everyone at some stage of his or her career. If rejected outright it cannot be resubmitted to that journal. Rejection might happen because you submitted to the wrong journal, offered little original

to the body of knowledge or for myriad other reasons. Consider the reviewers' comments and also ask a trusted colleague to review the article for you. You may want to consider putting the manuscript aside for a period so that in time you may gain a fresh perspective on it, consider how it can be improved and where you can resubmit it.

So, why not start writing? There is no magic wand; it takes time, effort and perspiration but it is a wonderful feeling when you get that email with 'accepted' in the decision column!

*This blog post is based on the author's co-written article, [Publish, Don't Perish!: Strategies for Getting Published in Peer Reviewed Journals](#), published in *Social Work Education* (DOI: 10.1080/02615479.2016.1188459).*

Note: The title of this post was updated shortly after publication.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the author

Hugh McLaughlin is Professor of Social Work at Manchester Metropolitan University and Editor-in-Chief of *Social Work Education: the International Journal*. Prior to entering academia he was a social worker and manager for 22 years. Hugh's key research interests include service user involvement in social work education and research, critical professional practice and safeguarding. When not working Hugh enjoys running and scuba diving – preferably in warm waters!

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