

Why has submitting a manuscript to a journal become so difficult? A call to simplify an overly complicated process

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*It is widely acknowledged that submitting a paper to a journal is a fraught activity for authors. But why should this still be the case? **James Hartley** and **Guillaume Cabanac** argue that the process has always been complicated but can, with a few improvements, be less so. By adopting standardised templates and no longer insisting on articles being reformatted, the submission process can quickly be simplified.*



The first scientific journal, the *Journal des Scavans*, was published in Paris in January 1665, hotly pursued by *Philosophical Transactions* in London in March of the same year. We have come a long way since then – from handwriting to typewriting to electronic submissions.

But some things seem to remain the same. Each submission system creates its own difficulties for authors. And each has its [critics](#). Take, for example, the case of submitting papers to publications of the American Psychological Association. Their “instructions for authors” were first published in six and a half pages in the [Psychological Bulletin](#) in 1929. This article was revised in 1944 and 1952 and then book-length revisions were published in 1967, 1974, 1983, 1994, 2001 and 2010. The largest of these editions (2001) contained 29 preliminary pages and 439 pages of instructions. The current 2010 edition initially had to be withdrawn and reprinted because it contained so many errors and confusions.



Today the APA has introduced a computer suite of four programmes under the general heading of [APA Style CENTRAL](#): “a revolutionary new electronic resource for APA style” (including “more than 80 forms for proper reference formatting”). Just this very notion – over 80 forms for “proper reference formatting” – should convince us that things have gone badly wrong in science communication, where the layout of the reference is more important than the reference itself. Drastic [simplification is needed](#).

Nor does it help to solve problems like these by handing them over to the authors to resolve them. But this is what electronic submission systems do. Electronic submissions shift the burden from the publishers to the authors. And in many cases it is apparent that these systems have been designed by computer-based aficionados without any – or sufficient – testing with authors. Recent articles on how to set up electronic journals (for example, [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)) scarcely mention authors or their difficulties. This may not cause too many problems for authors familiar with computers but it is certainly not true for older ones and for [those who are visually or physically impaired](#).

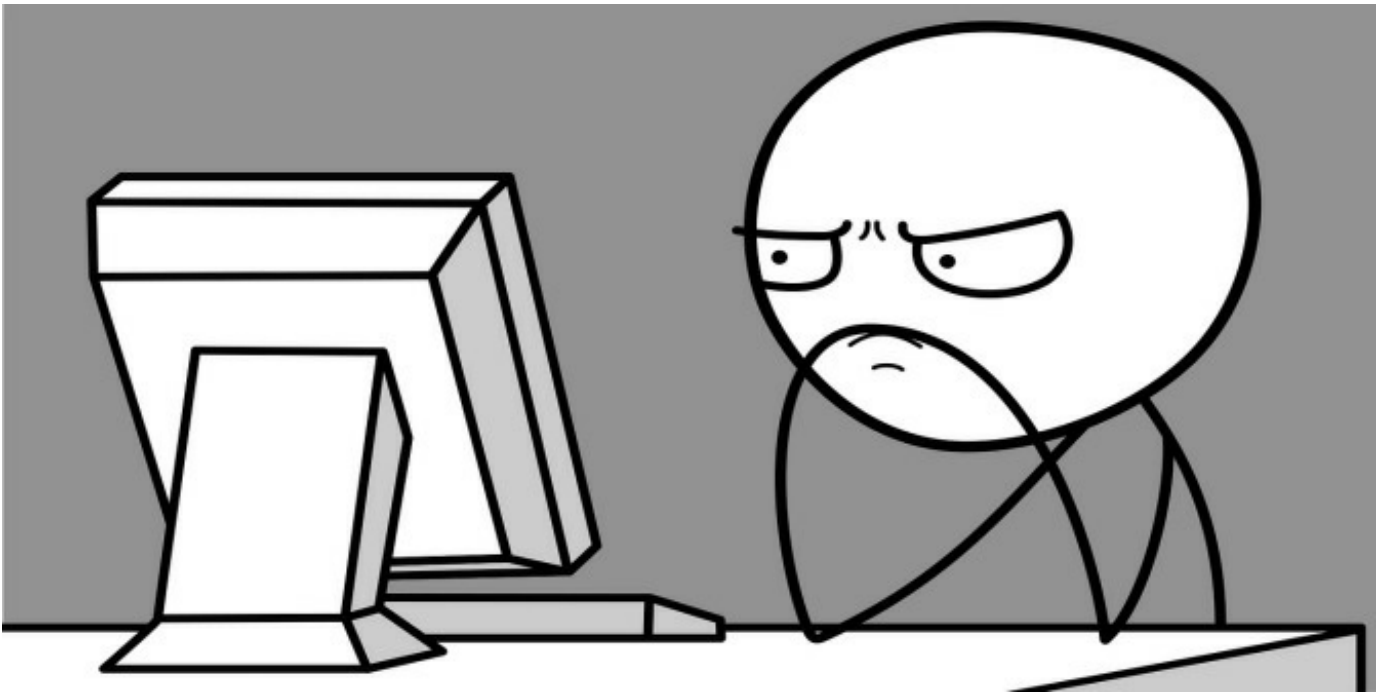


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So what we need is one simple system, rather than the myriad solutions proffered by different publishers and where one has to relearn a new system every time you want to submit (or resubmit) an article to a different journal.

Six ways to achieve this are:

1. Authors should be able to submit manuscripts in any (appropriate) format. The [Authorea](#) and [Overleaf](#) platforms provide in-built templates for most journals.
2. Editors and reviewers should consider any manuscript submitted in any (appropriate) format first before deciding whether or not to accept or reject it.
3. Rejected articles can be revised and resubmitted to another journal without them first having to be reformatted. Reformatting is time consuming and [wastes public funds](#).
4. The text, tables, figures, footnotes and references of accepted articles can be formatted automatically according to the journal's house style by applying automatic, pre-defined templates.
5. Ideally, there should be three or four standard formats for journals that everyone can use, with trivial house-style requirements abolished.
6. Finally, there should be an in-house factotum to deal with any enquiries.

For those authors ready to submit their paper, we have prepared a checklist of 20 possible requirements for submitting to a journal papers electronically. Once the paper is ready, and the order of co-authors is agreed upon, prepare separately and have at hand in case you are suddenly asked for it:

1. Your password on the journal's editorial manager, if you are already signed up.
2. The postal address of all co-authors.
3. The email address of all co-authors.
4. The national and international phone numbers of all co-authors.
5. The ORCID iD of all co-authors (if appropriate).

6. The name of the “corresponding” author who will be sent the proofs.
7. A separate title page, with authors’ addresses and emails and the abstract (formatted according to the journal’s style guide).
8. Another version of the above *without* the authors’ names, addresses and emails.
9. A list of keywords (or an abstract with these below).
10. The names, addresses, and emails of possible referees — just in case you are asked, but this is increasingly unlikely.
11. A file of the text and references formatted according to the journal’s style guide (it is helpful here to download a similar paper from the journal to act as a guide when doing this).
12. A separate file of tables (in case they are not embedded in the text).
13. A separate file of table captions (in case they are treated separately).
14. A separate file of figures (in case they are not embedded in the text).
15. A separate file of figure captions (in case they are treated separately).
16. A graphical abstract (in case you are asked for one).
17. A tweetable abstract (in case you are asked for one).
18. An archive with the data used in your article.
19. A covering letter to the editor.
20. Finally, prior to submitting you should ensure you are fully aware of and satisfied with the publishing agreement you may be asked to enter into if your article is accepted, including the rights you will retain as author.

*This blog post is based on the authors’ article, “[The delights, discomforts, and downright furies of the manuscript submission process](#)”, published *Learned Publishing* (DOI: 10.1002/leap.1092).*

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, 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.

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