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ABSTRACT

This paper begins by stating that if a writer of scholarly articles wishes to succeed in getting published, he or she must become a good communicator, a good reader of instructions, and knowledgeable about his or her audience. The paper suggests that a beginning writer should submit the first few manuscripts to regional rather than national journals in the relevant discipline, or to the interdisciplinary journals that are accepted by the writer's department. It also explains how an individual should act (with step-by-step advice) when a call for papers is seen in a journal. The paper notes that technical matters as well as style and length are important when submitting manuscripts. It also points out that requests for revisions should be expected, since editors and reviewers are looking at the big picture and want to make their journals better and sharper. (NKA)

Practices to Improve Your Chances for Success when Submitting Research Articles to Academic Journals.

by Ralph Donald

Practices to Improve Your Chances for Success when Submitting Research Articles to Academic Journals

A Paper Delivered to the Annual Convention of the National Communication Association, New Orleans, LA, Nov. 22, 2002

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First of all, the prevailing theme of my remarks is that if you wish to succeed in getting published, you must become a good communicator, a good reader of instructions, and learn to know your audience. If you do these things well, you'll be much more successful.

If you're a beginner, my first suggestion is that you submit your first few manuscripts to regional rather than national journals in your discipline, or to the interdisciplinary journals that are accepted by your department. This is because the accessibility and rejection rate for regional journals are often better than the *Q-J-S* and the other national and international journals. Regional journals have often been a little more open to the scholar without a major league portfolio or the scholar who teaches at the small college. But don't take this to mean that regional journals are pushovers -- not by any means. Bad submissions are bad submissions, and whether you're editing a national, regional, or a state journal, you see plenty. The regional journal editor wants his or her journal to publish quality work too -- it's just that at the national journal level, editors can be extraordinarily picky and tend to favor authors with more impressive resumes.

Since regional and state journals are often targeted for scholars' first journal submissions, editors often receive work that looks, reads, and presents itself as coming from the inexperienced. Not a good way to get published. So, in this presentation, I'll provide a few helpful bits of experience to the uninitiated -- that is, those unlike the rest of us who can paper their office walls with rejection slips. I hope this line of discussion isn't too tedious for those among you who already know most of this -- but perhaps I'll mention a few things you haven't thought of before.

To begin, you come across a call for papers for a journal. The journal's title sounds like it might be right for your current research topic, or for that paper you presented last spring at convention. Don't just print off a copy of that last convention paper and fire it off to the editor. Do these things first:

a. Check out their website, download and print their instructions for submissions. Remember how upset you get when you print out instructions for a project and hand them to your students – and then they don't read or follow them. That's the same way editors feel when they get submissions that don't follow their instructions. Also, check the website for any mention of backlog. Some journals, such as the *Journal of Popular Culture*, have as much as a three-year backlog. If you can't wait that long to get into print, look elsewhere.

b. Next go to your library and look up a few back issues of the journal. At a small college, that might be a problem if they don't subscribe. You might not be successful in getting your library to subscribe to a new journal, but there's always interlibrary loan. Take the time to do this before you mail your manuscript.

c. Look the journal over: If it's a disciplinary journal, do you have academic or professional credentials in this discipline? If not, this can sometimes be a problem. Often the editor of another discipline's journal won't look at your piece if you don't seem to belong. Why? Let's look at an example. Let's say that your article takes a psychological approach to some communication phenomenon, so you send it off to a journal on psychology. The editor may take one look and reject it, figuring that this may be a not-too-good piece by a communications professor who's been rejected a few times in his/her discipline and the author's getting desperate. The rejection letter will probably suggest that you submit it to a communication journal.

d. Look over the journal some more: If it's a communication journal, or an interdisciplinary one like the *Mid-Atlantic Almanack*, what kind of articles does it seem to prefer? Does it favor a certain research paradigm to the exclusion of others? Or does it appear to be open to many methods of investigation? Is the collection of articles open and eclectic? Does it publish a lot of "theme issues" devoted to a particular topic? Some quarterly journals are a mix of eclectic and themed editions.

e. OK: Assume that everything seems to fit. The journal seems to be right for your article. What next? If you couldn't find anything on-line, the next place you go is to the fine print in the masthead, or in some other portion of the journal, and carefully read the boilerplate about submissions. Is it an open journal, or is it restricted to just the membership of the organization? In other words, how much by way of yearly dues are you expected to pay for the privilege of being considered for publication? Some equivocate on the issue, stating delicately that "Contributing authors are asked, but not required, to become members of the Association." Other journals require membership.

It's hard to believe, but during the six years I edited the *Almanack*, nearly half of the submissions I received had some glaring technical thing wrong with it before I sat down to read them. I once received a submission with no note, no cover letter, no

address or phone number: just an old convention paper with the name of an individual and the name of his college. So, let's go over what you should prepare before sending an article to a journal.

At the top of this "to do" list is this: Remember that it's considered unethical to send out your manuscript to more than one potential publisher at a time. Hedging your bet by sending out multiple submissions of the same manuscript means that many editors and reviewers are going to have to read and evaluate the same article, but only one will get to publish it. That's unfair. We're all too busy to review something that we may not get permission to print. If someone has the reputation of sending out multiple submissions, they'll be rejected from the outset. So choose one journal at a time, and if your article is rejected, then you're free to send it to another. However, before you turn it back around to send out to the next journal, consider any editorial comments and criticisms the editor may have provided. Some editors, myself included, enclose pertinent reviewer comments with both acceptance letters and those hard-to-write rejection notes. So make it better before sending it out again. After all, I tell my students that the best writing is re-writing, and a better-written piece will have a better chance the next time up to bat.

A note about query letters: It's good practice. Find out ahead of time if the editor seems interested in your submission. If not, you've saved a lot of time.

Be sure to spend some time mulling over the title. It shouldn't be too long (please!) or too short, and it must arouse the editor's curiosity. The value of an interesting-sounding title (and for that matter, the first few paragraphs) in a publish/no-publish decision is highly underrated. Many journal editors are entirely too busy and have too many manuscripts to read, and if your title and introductory paragraphs are dull, uninteresting and uncreative, they may not read on. You'll receive a rejection letter.

When you submit your article, provide the editor with a cover letter. Briefly introduce yourself and list the title and a very brief, paragraph-length synopsis of your piece. Make it sound interesting -- you're really selling at this point. If articles are blind-reviewed, list your name only on the title page of the article. This can be a problem for those articles done in APA style. When in doubt, call the editor and ask for advice. Find out on the website or in the boilerplate how many copies are required. These copies go to the reviewers.

Style becomes an issue in many journals. Some strictly adhere to one version or the other, and will send it back to you numerous times for revisions. Since these continual, annoying, style revision requests are about as pleasant as being pecked to death by ducks, why not begin by consulting a style manual? Also check out the journal itself to see how things are presented. Sometimes the editor takes quirky, personal liberties with style. Incidentally, since the *Almanack* and journals like it are interdisciplinary, most allow authors to use the style favored by their discipline. MLA is our default style, as the current editor is an English professor.

Length is also a consideration. Most journals stipulate a maximum length, including bibliography. If they don't, you could assume that 15-20 double-spaced pages

will be OK. But I'd check to be sure. Some journals won't consider longer pieces.

Incidentally, always double-space your copy -- Although most of the submissions I received came from professors, I still receive some that used a tired old printer ribbon, or sent unreadable photocopies, have poor grammar, spelling, and proofreading. And while I'm complaining, one more thing: It's fine to rewrite a convention paper for submission to a journal. Sharing ideas with colleagues at an annual meeting is a great way to test a thesis and gather informal feedback on our work. But please remember to rewrite it! I get a trifle annoyed when I read a proposed article that begins, "It's a pleasure to be here in Altoona for this panel today. . ."

Some journals, including the *Almanack*, also request that if you want your manuscripts returned, you need to provide a stamped, self-addressed manila envelope. I've received all sorts of variations on that theme -- from a legal-sized envelope with no stamp, to an eight- -and-a-half by eleven envelope with insufficient postage, to a dollar bill paper-clipped to the article. At first I wasn't sure if it was for postage or a terribly cheap bribe.

Most journals today require that you provide IBM or Macintosh text files. This means that once a publication decision is made and revisions done, you send it to them on a computer data disc – or perhaps you'll be given the option to e-mail or F-T-P the file to the editor.

Speaking of revisions, expect them. We wouldn't be academics if we weren't a little opinionated about something -- so you can count on requests for revisions. Please don't take these requests personally. Editors and reviewers are looking at the big picture and want to make their journal a little better, a little sharper. If a reviewer's comments and suggestions are dead wrong, get on the phone and discuss these issues with the editor. Explain your difficulty with proposed changes, and usually you can come to some sort of compromise that will satisfy, if not please, everyone. I realize that a giraffe can be defined as a "horse designed by committee," but then those of you who have written theses and dissertations have gone through this before. Nothing changes in this business, except the names of the players. And remember the slogan of academic argument: "The smaller the issue, the greater the controversy."

In closing, I hope you're all successful in identifying the right journal for your hard work, and that my comments help in some way to make the process go smoother. And if you have a piece that falls into the category of popular cultural criticism, I hope you'll consider sending it to the *Mid-Atlantic Almanack* or to one of the other Popular Culture journals. *<http://www.siue.edu/~rdonald/mapaca/maa/maa.htm>*

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