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Academic Publishing 101: The SAJS monthly Journal Writing and Peer Review Forum

Significance:

The *South African Journal of Science* monthly Journal Writing and Peer Review Forum is an open platform targeted at early career researchers who may be new to the publication and peer review process. This Commentary reflects on 10 frequently asked questions (FAQs) in the Forum and considers the collective response of the editorial team in helping to address each question in detail. The FAQs highlight some common concerns and uncertainties among new researchers, notably the issue of predatory publishing, turnaround time, and questions surrounding peer review.

Background

To the uninitiated, the journey to publishing an academic journal article may seem intimidating. The publication process is often learnt through trial and error, and by following the advice of supervisors and mentors. Yet Castle and Keane¹ argue that “many academics and postgraduate students today, even in research-intensive universities...do not have access to the opportunities and experiences which could lead them to be productive and successful writers”. High rejection rates may also discourage early career researchers from submitting their work for publication. As an intervention to help demystify the publication process, the editorial team at the *South African Journal of Science* (SAJS) has been running a monthly online Journal Writing and Peer Review Forum. The Forum provides an open platform for early career researchers to raise questions, share insights, and reflect on the publication and peer review process. There are currently 270 forum members, dominated by South African participants, but including researchers from at least six other African countries (Botswana, Ghana, Malawi, Mauritius, Nigeria and Tanzania) and from the United Kingdom. These meetings have highlighted several frequently asked questions (FAQs), which are summarised and addressed in this Commentary.

Before launching into these, it is worth bearing in mind certain aspects of the traditional publication process, which may come as a surprise to some. Firstly, the academic rigour of journal articles is upheld through the peer review process, which is intended to assess the quality and appropriateness of new submissions, and offer constructive criticism on how to further improve the work. Reviewing a manuscript is a time-consuming process, undertaken by specialists in the field, as a service to the academic community. This explains why the turnaround time for academic publication can often be painfully slow, because the process relies on finding reviewers who are willing to make time to review. A bizarre feature of the academic publishing process is that academics offer their research submissions freely, review freely, but often have to pay, via university library subscriptions, to access their own articles and those of the wider academic community. It is somewhat baffling that this system could persist for so long in academia. Encouragingly, there has been recent progress on this front, through the practice of making article preprints freely available online, the push for open access science, and other reforms. The SAJS is in a highly rare and fortunate position to offer fully open access publication with no article processing charges (APCs) or publication fees to authors. This is made possible through the sponsorship of the publisher, the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf). I am providing this background to help early career researchers understand why the publishing process may at times seem frustratingly slow and cumbersome. Similarly, while peer reviews may occasionally seem harsh or overly critical, this response can be tempered with the appreciation that expert reviewers are taking the time to read and comment on your work, with the ultimate goal of improving its quality.

Frequently asked questions

With this background in mind, below are 10 of the most common queries and concerns raised by the pool of participants in the monthly forum.

1. How do I choose a target journal?

This question is one of the most asked questions in the Forum. If you have recently completed a research project or finished your postgraduate studies, and have discussed with your supervisor the possibility of publication, you need to then select a target journal, or create a shortlist of potential target journals.

A journal will likely desk reject manuscript submissions that do not align with the journal aims and scope, so it is worth spending some time selecting an appropriate journal for your work. When selecting a journal, it is easy to get caught up in the prestige of metrics such as journal impact factors or quantile rankings. According to SAJS Editor-in-Chief Prof. Leslie Swartz, start by asking yourself, “Who do I want to be in a conversation with?” Determining your target audience is key to identifying an appropriate target journal. This means that you must ask yourself whether your work is more appropriate for a multidisciplinary or a specialist audience. Also determine if your work stirs international interest or has more of a local focus. These criteria will help narrow the pool of potential journals. For further reading, Knight and Steinbach² provide a comprehensive overview of journal selection criteria.

Another approach to creating a shortlist is to consult the reference list of your own manuscript and compile a list of the journal names that keep appearing. For further inspiration, distil your study into keywords and use these as the subject of a Google Scholar search to see which journals are the top recent hits for your topic. From there you can look up the journal homepage, read the aims and scope of the journal, and assess its suitability. The aims and scope may include subtle clues as to the style of article that the journal seeks to publish. To obtain a more detailed



impression of the journal style read the current issue and older articles to get a feel for the style and tone. Once you have a shortlist of potential target journals, there are a few things you can check upfront:

- Is the target journal Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) accredited? South African institutions receive a subsidy from the government for publications in DHET-accredited journals. Note, however, that the best way to advance your academic career is to contribute to the conversation within the academic literature, regardless of DHET accreditation status.
- Will publication in the target journal incur article processing charges (APCs) or colour page charges, and are these affordable to you? Note that many universities will pay or contribute towards page fees. This can be checked through your Research Office.
- Is the journal open access, hybrid, or paywalled? Open access journals help to promote broader readership, but unfortunately many will incur APCs.
- What are the article types that the journal will consider, for example, original research articles, review articles, or short communications? Also check associated word limits and figure and table limits for the article type you are intending to submit. Article types and length limits differ between journals and may not align with your idea.
- Another consideration is journal turnaround time. This can be determined by looking through recent issues to compare the date when each article was first submitted with the date of online publication.
- If metrics are a priority for you, you can look up the journal impact factor, which usually is available on the journal's website.

The above criteria will help you to compile a strong shortlist of suitable candidate journals. At this point, it may be worthwhile to revisit the journal homepages and look at recent issues to determine the appropriate journals on the shortlist. If you are still unsure, you also have the option to send the editor an email including the title and abstract of your manuscript to enquire whether it would be a good fit for the journal.

2. How do I go about submitting my manuscript?

Visit the journal homepage and find the instructions or guidelines to authors. Read these guidelines carefully and prepare your manuscript according to the individual journal formatting and referencing requirements. The guidelines will also provide details on the basic submission process. Ensure that your co-authors are satisfied with the final manuscript and target journal before you submit. Be aware that in some fields you may be expected to nominate potential reviewers to evaluate your work. These should be subject specialists who can provide an unbiased assessment, and should not include recent collaborators. Here you may also list any opposed reviewers.

3. Can I send my manuscript to multiple journals to speed up the process?

In most fields, it is considered unethical to send your manuscript to multiple journals at the same time because it wastes the time of the peer reviewers and editorial staff. During the submission process, it is standard practice to sign a compulsory declaration or publishing agreement which states that the work is not under consideration for publication elsewhere.

4. My manuscript has been in review for ages. What is an acceptable turnaround time and what are my options?

Some journal submission systems will include a status to indicate whether the manuscript has gone out for peer review, so check for this where possible. While patiently waiting for a decision, it is useful to imagine the work going on behind the scenes. Editors face ongoing challenges in finding suitable reviewers and in getting the reviewers to respond to review invitations, and then in receiving the reviews within a reasonable

timeframe. Usually the editor will need at least two independent peer review reports to make a decision, and securing these may require more peer review invitations. Further, consider that not all peer review reports will be considered acceptable by the editor. For example, reports which are offensive, or inherently biased will be excluded, forcing the editor to solicit further reports from a new reviewer. With these delays in mind, it is reasonable to send a polite follow-up email to the editor after 3 months. In some cases, the process may stretch on very much longer (for example, a year), and if after following up with the editor you are unsatisfied with the delays, you have the right to formally withdraw your manuscript from the journal at any stage in the process. Notably, keep in mind that long turnaround times are not uncommon and keep your expectations realistic. In some journals, a publication lead time of up to 2 years may be expected. Another important point to note is that the time spent in review is entirely unrelated to the quality of the manuscript or likelihood of acceptance for publication. In other words, do not think that a long review time will increase your chances of acceptance for publication.

5. How does the peer review process work?

After submitting, the editor will assess your submission briefly to check that it is appropriate for the journal. If the manuscript is not appropriate, it will be desk rejected, usually within a few weeks. If it is appropriate, peer reviewers will be invited to assess the work. These peer reviewers are subject specialists with no conflicts of interest with the authors (such as past supervisors, collaborators, or researchers from the same institution). There are different peer review models, but the most prevalent are single- and double-anonymous review. In the case of single-anonymous review, the identity of the peer reviewers is concealed. In the case of double-anonymous review, the identities of both the peer reviewers and the authors are concealed. After receiving at least two independent peer reviews, the editor is usually in a position to make a decision regarding the outcome. In the case of contradictory review reports, the editor may choose to secure an additional review before deciding on the outcome. Possible outcomes include acceptance as is, acceptance with minor revision, major revision with another round of review, and rejection. In the case of major revision, the revised manuscript will go out for another round of review, ideally to the original reviewers where available, for reassessment. Importantly, the peer review process should not be viewed as a gatekeeping exercise, but rather as a constructive process designed to improve the quality of individual submissions.

6. My reviews have come back with major revisions.

Where do I start?

Remember that a key purpose of peer review is to improve the quality of manuscript submissions through constructive criticism. If the revisions seem overwhelming, compile a summary document or spreadsheet that lists each comment or criticism. You may find that both reviewers have requested related changes which can be combined. You will also quickly note which changes will be quick to fix, which will be challenging, and perhaps some comments that you can easily rebut or respond to. Note that polite rebuttal is certainly acceptable in the case of inappropriate comments or suggestions. Use this spreadsheet to guide your approach and document your progress in dealing with the revisions. When you are ready to resubmit your revised manuscript, this document can be used in your covering letter as a response to reviewers' comments. Use track changes when revising your manuscript, so that it is easier for the editors and reviewers to see exactly what changes were made.

7. What happens once my manuscript is accepted?

Following acceptance, your manuscript will typically enter a copyediting phase and you will be sent proofs for final checking and correcting of minor errors and omissions, often with a rapid turnaround. Usually, the article will then be published for early access online with a unique Digital Object Identifier (DOI) number which allows for the article to be viewed and cited. The article is fully published once it appears within a specific issue of the journal and is assigned to a volume and issue. This often happens many months after online publication.

8. What is the role of supplementary information?

Supplementary information is similar to an appendix in that you may include information which is relevant for reference purposes but not central to the main article. Text, figures and graphs included in supplementary information do not count towards the main manuscript word count or restrictions on the number of figures and tables.

9. I received an email invitation to publish my work in a journal. How do I know if this is a 'predatory journal'?

As flattering as these invitations can be, it is best to remain vigilant unless you have verified that the journal is legitimate, as the vast majority of these requests are predatory or of dubious origin. Beall³ used the term 'predatory' to refer to open access journals that publish substandard articles without sound editorial and peer review practices, for the purpose of financial gain via the author-pays publishing model (APCs). Tragically, there is evidence that most publications in predatory journals are sourced from Asian and African authors⁴ and that predatory publishing practices remain prevalent in South African universities⁵. Aromataris and Stern⁶ review the issue of accurately distinguishing predatory from legitimate journals, and point authors towards several online checklists such as Think.Check.Submit. (<https://thinkchecksubmit.org/>) and trusted guidelines such as those of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)⁷. Research online details about the publisher or publishing group; this may be the easiest way to establish whether the publisher is associated with predatory publishing practices. If you need guidance, you can also refer to your librarian or research office for assistance in verifying the legitimacy of the publisher.

10. What developmental support does SAJS provide to early career researchers?

SAJS hosts an annual Writing Workshop and an annual Peer Review Workshop, recordings of which are available on the SAJS YouTube channel. In addition, the monthly Journal Writing and Peer Review Forum, the subject of this Commentary, provides a smaller and more interactive opportunity to discuss and engage with the editorial team regarding any challenges you may be facing, or queries you may have. The workshops and forum meetings are conducted online and are open to all participants, regardless of the targeted journals for their work. SAJS also encourages peer review mentorship in which early career researchers can collaborate on the peer review process to gain experience. Finally, SAJS has an Associate Editor Mentorship Programme in which researchers can apply to participate and learn firsthand about the editorial process.

Conclusion

Participation in the monthly Journal Writing and Peer Review Forum meetings has demonstrated that there is a real and pressing need for developmental support among early career researchers wanting to publish their research. This Commentary is a quick reference for those researchers who are unsure about the publication process, or who are contemplating submitting their first manuscript.

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Competing interests

Jemma Finch is an Associate Editor of the *South African Journal of Science*. There are no competing interests to declare.

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