

Basic Advice from Editors to Scientist Writers

“You’ve had my article for 3 months! What do you mean you still don’t have an answer?”

“How could you reject my article? Now I’ll never get tenure!”

Sound familiar? Despite what some authors may think, science editors do understand the many trials and travails of publication. In that spirit, here are three articles filled with advice to take authors through the publication process—from writing to waiting to dealing with possible rejection. The next time an author calls your office in disbelief or exasperation, feel free to suggest one or more of these articles.

Young M. Writing for the peer-reviewed biomedical literature: Part I. The why and the wherefore. Clin Chiropr 2003;6:144-50.

This article is aimed at chiropractors, but its writing advice is applicable to health professionals and scientists of any stripe. The article focuses mostly on why it is important for chiropractors to publish articles related to clinical experience. More relevant to authors is a list of six “Thou shalt not[s]” of writing, applicable to any field. The list comprises not: trying to write the article without the proper research, trying to write the article all at once, allowing distractions, underestimating the time commitment, waiting for inspiration, and ignoring detail. In addition, the article walks through the submission process; this summary may be especially helpful to new writers.

Passell L. Getting out the word: an insider’s view of Physical Review Letters. Phys Today 1988;41:32-7.

Sooner or later, every author wonders, “What does that journal do with my article for weeks or months after I submit it?” This is the question that Laurence Passell

addresses. Passell wrote in the late 1980s about a physics journal, but his words of patience and wisdom still ring true and also apply to journals across the sciences. He offers a breakdown of what happens to an article after it arrives at a journal and why it seems to take so long for authors to receive a response. The simple answer is, It takes time to get the papers refereed, as editors know. In addition to demystifying peer-review schedules, Passell offers advice on speeding the process and increasing an author’s chances of acceptance. For example, Passell suggests that scientists notify journals they review for if they plan to be away from the office for an extended period, include lists of possible reviewers with their manuscripts, and make sure that submitted papers are appropriate for the journal.

Durso T. Editors’ advice to rejected authors: just try, try again. Scientist 1997;11:13.

Rejection happens to everyone. The important thing is not to get discouraged and, as Durso touts, to “Try, try again”. He reminds readers that some work reported in papers initially rejected by journals later received Nobel prizes. On the basis of interviews with the editors of several prominent journals, Durso explains what authors can do to deal with rejection and to improve their acceptance rates. Just as freelance writers must study their target publications, so must scientists. Not every paper is suited to every journal. By submitting to the journal whose subject matter best fits the article, authors can increase their success. The editors also suggest that authors seek informal peer review by their colleagues before submitting to a journal and take reviewers’ advice to heart when reworking articles.

JAMIE DE GREGORY prepared this column while a Science Editor intern.