

What Do Authors Think? A Survey from the Journal of Tsinghua University

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Attracting good papers is essential to journals.¹⁻³ To attract authors' best papers, we must know what authors think, why they submit their manuscripts to specific journals, what they want from journals, and what they want editors to do or not to do.

Author surveys are widely used in the West. A survey of authors by Frank⁴ indicated that in choosing a journal for initial manuscript submission, the most important factors were journal prestige, whether the journal had published on the topic, and readership composition; more pragmatic factors, such as likelihood of acceptance, gained importance for later submissions. Schroter and colleagues⁵ surveyed authors' perceptions of electronic publishing; authors found it acceptable to publish short versions of research articles in the printed version of a general medical journal and longer versions on its Web site, and they favored posting accepted articles on the Web site ahead of the printed version.

Author surveys have seldom been done in China. This report summarizes an author survey by the *Journal of Tsinghua University* (Natural Science Version), a comprehensive academic periodical sponsored by Tsinghua University, a leading university in China. The journal is indexed by a number of international entities and has gained many national awards.

The journal draws more than 90% of its authors from Tsinghua University. Over the years, many professors, including famous professors, have published their papers in the journal. However, in

recent years, increasing proportions of the papers have been by graduate students. For example, in 2005, the first authors of about 28% of papers were master's-degree candidates, and those of 45% of papers were doctoral-degree candidates; the corresponding figures for 2006 were 26% and 48%. The change in composition of authorship reflects two main factors: 1) To increase their international influence, many Chinese universities now encourage their faculty members and students to publish papers in international journals covered by the Web of Science database. Recently, about one-fifth of papers from Tsinghua University (2321 in 2004, 2875 in 2005) have appeared in journals covered by the Web of Science. Thus, authors are sending their best papers abroad. 2) Many universities in China require graduate students to publish several papers before graduation and require faculty members to publish at least five papers to qualify for promotion. Thus, university journals, such as the *Journal of Tsinghua University*, still receive many submissions.

To find out what authors think and to attract authors to submit their best papers, the editorial office of the *Journal of Tsinghua University* (Natural Science Version) surveyed authors of papers published in or submitted to the journal. The survey and its findings are described and discussed below.

Methods

Authors of papers that had recently appeared in or been submitted to the journal were surveyed in writing from 18 May to 18 June 2005. Because our editorial office is at the university, authors of papers usually come to our office to submit manuscripts, pay the related fees, revise or proofread their papers, or get their remuneration.

(In China, journals commonly require authors to pay a peer review fee and a publishing fee but then pay the authors when their paper is published.) We put our questionnaires in our office and on the journal Web site and invited authors to complete them. Therefore, most of the authors surveyed were authors of papers published or rejected in 2005. At the top of the questionnaire and on our Web site, a short paragraph indicated that only authors of submissions to our journal could participate in the survey and that the respondents were required to complete all the multiple-choice questions on the form. Authors could send the completed form to the editorial office or submit it by e-mail. Three forms were deleted from the analysis because they were incomplete.

The questionnaire, which had been pilot-tested, contained 11 multiple-choice questions and an open-ended request for advice or suggestions. Among items asked about were reasons for the submission and opinions of the journal. Demographic information also was obtained. Data were entered into a computer and analyzed with SPSS 13.0 statistical software (SPSS Inc, Chicago).

Results and Discussion

A total of 130 validly completed forms were received. Because the survey was open to all, a response rate could not be calculated. The mean age of respondents was 30.05 years (range, 22 to 65 years; standard deviation, 6.78 years). Of the respondents, 68.2% were 30 years old or younger. In all, 84.5% were male and 15.5% female; 21.7% were master's-degree candidates, 48.5% doctoral candidates, 8.5% postdoctoral fellows, and 20.8% faculty members. First authors constituted 88.4% of the respondents, second authors 8.5%, and other authors 3.1%.

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work at the editorial board of the *Journal of Tsinghua University*.

Of objectives identified for submitting manuscripts, the most common (63.1%) was to show research findings to others, and the second most common (35.4%) was to fulfill a requirement for graduation or promotion.

Nearly all respondents (98.5%) said they carefully read the Information for Authors before submission. They expressed satisfaction with the guidelines, but many (90%) indicated that they expected a template for preparing papers, suggesting that they are accustomed to submitting manuscripts through the World Wide Web.

Of the respondents, 72.3% indicated that they often read papers in the journal. In all, 76.9% said that they read papers from the journal electronically via the World Wide Web, and 42.3% said that they read the paper version of the journal.

Most authors agreed that the editors at the journal worked earnestly, passionately, and carefully. They also provided detailed advice on how to simplify the submission process and how to promote the academic influence of the journal. Suggestions

included canceling the registration form for submission, signing the publication contract after the manuscript was accepted instead of at submission, contacting more indexing organizations to cover the journal, and enlarging the exchange of journals of Tsinghua University Library with other university libraries. Of the respondents, 49.2% said they wanted the journal to publish accepted papers more quickly.

The findings suggest that to attract submissions, the editorial office should simplify the submission process, shorten the publication period, and exhibit the published papers online.

Among limitations of the current survey were the inclusion only of authors from a single university and the relatively small number of participants. More extensive surveys with more thoroughly developed designs may yield findings of further use in attracting authors and, more broadly, helping authors, readers, referees, and editors to work together harmoniously and productively.

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