

## EDITOR'S NOTE

## Journal Shopping and Pruning the Literature

Researchers who publish their work naturally want to place it in the most prestigious showcase possible. This provides both intrinsic and extrinsic validation of their effort. Excessive optimism, however, can result in submissions to journals unlikely to accept the work. Justifications can include a sense of “nothing ventured, nothing gained” or a belief that the feedback will be high quality even if the work is not accepted. Regarding the latter hope, it is important to understand that no journal, even the most prestigious, has access to unlimited subject matter expertise. Some journal editors will decline to review manuscripts outside their usual range, some will try to find appropriate reviewers from outside their circle, but others may decide to send it forward for review by relatively unqualified reviewers. Although credible journal editors want the best reviews for all manuscripts, it is possible that they will be unaware of factors that should affect the choice of reviewers for some work. Less credible editors will accept almost anything for a publication fee. Authors need to remember that the choice of target journals should not be just about prestige or ease of acceptance, but also about how to get the most appropriate, thorough, and thoughtful reviews of the work and how to best reach the right audience.

Every author, secretly or publicly, wants the affirmation of having a manuscript accepted without change on the first review. This outcome is only meaningful, though, if the reviews are high quality. If the decision is made by ill-matched reviewers or by “pay-to-play” predatory journals, critical opportunities to refine the work are lost.

The designation of “prestigious” in science publishing is complicated. Many would say that the impact factor is a measure of prestige, but the reality is not that simple. Although high impact factors are sometimes well deserved, it is also possible to gain inappropriately high scores through efforts that do not reflect scientific quality of content. Similarly, some journals with relatively low impact factor scores may be the most effective in reaching specialist audiences, arguably a more important consideration.

Authors need to think carefully about the best showcase for their work, and also about where their work is

most likely to be nurtured to its highest level. Journals with large submission numbers often rely on quick accept or reject decisions and invest less time in promising but not fully mature drafts. It will often be the journals with the closest native fit to the manuscript content that will provide the most helpful feedback. They are likely to have the best access to subject matter experts and extra motivation to help develop promising work.

Practically, it is reasonable to follow a 2-journal submission plan. The first step is to submit to the most prestigious journal with an appropriate focus for the work. If the manuscript is rejected without fatal flaws, refinement and submission to a backup journal may be appropriate.

There are several hazards to avoid in the submission process. Most importantly, if truly fatal (unresolvable) flaws are found, all efforts at submission should stop. It is a waste of time for everyone to have a fatally flawed manuscript reviewed again, and worse, to have fatally flawed work appear in the literature. Acceptance of a manuscript does not determine its worth; it is the long view of history that provides the fairest assessment. Authors need to think about the long-term view in deciding if any attempt to publish is appropriate. It is important that both authors and reviewers understand that effort does not equate to publishability. Fatally flawed material should be put on the shelf as a reminder of the need to do better, not in the literature.

Reviews that uncover major, but not fatal, flaws can also be tricky. In some cases they will prompt rejection of a manuscript. Submission to a backup journal may be appropriate, but it should always follow appropriate revision, specifically an honest effort to salvage the quality content and not to obscure deficiencies. It may be that elements initially thought to be important have to be excluded, and probably that the limitations section will be expanded. None of this is problematic if the remaining product is valid and meaningful. Even imperfect efforts can help to improve our knowledge base.

The most troubling scenarios arise when authors actively obscure shortcomings and redirect attention without addressing core deficiencies, or submit to journals based on an expectation of relaxed acceptance practices. Submitting bandaged (but not fixed) manuscripts to

journals in hopes of getting past peer review is short-sighted, and resubmitting a weak manuscript to journal after journal until it squeaks through is not a success. Not only will this practice waste tremendous amounts of reviewer time, it may add inappropriate content to our historical record. Although journal shopping can be discovered if subject matter experts are assigned to the same manuscript by different journals, this is too rare an event to be relied upon. The onus is on authors to submit material responsibly.

When inappropriate content does get past peer review it is important that it is flagged by the community. This is best done with letters to the editor, which are then linked to the original article in standard electronic literature searches. Letters linked to articles should be carefully reviewed before deciding whether to cite the original work. That which is shown to be unacceptably flawed should not be referenced, but instead allowed to fade into oblivion as quickly as possible. Referencing valid critical letters instead of the original article is one way of acknowledging that the original publication was considered without giving it better citation statistics.

Ultimately, peer review works when all parties do their best for the good of the literature. Even rejected

manuscripts can sometimes be improved sufficiently to contribute positively. We need to be mindful, though, of what we introduce to the literature. Our collective goal should be to publish meaningful, credible work and to exclude that which is not. If deficient pieces do make it into the literature they should be flagged to restrict their ability to confuse future scholarship.

*Wilderness & Environmental Medicine* enters its 29th year of publication in 2018 as a well-established niche journal. In 2017 we received 205 original submissions. Of these, 71 were rejected, 63 were accepted, 41 are currently under our review, 19 are currently being revised by authors, and 11 were withdrawn. Revisions were requested for 126 (61%) of the submissions. Of the returned manuscripts, 76 (60%) were returned for a second revision, 35 (46%) for a third revision, 12 (34%) for a fourth revision, 4 (33%) for a fifth revision, and 1 for a sixth revision. Overall, this constitutes an extremely vigorous effort to bring our readership the best information available. It is important to recognize that the majority of this effort was provided on a volunteer basis by those who choose to enrich our community.

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