



## Editorial

## The do's and don't's of submitting scientific papers

We have presented versions of the material below at various meetings as part of discussions for our junior colleagues who are relatively new to the scientific publication process. While some of it seems to be stating the obvious, based on submissions we sometimes receive even from senior authors, we thought it might be helpful to publish these tips in the form of “Do’s” and “Don’t’s”

## Do...

*...examine the scope of the journal and description of its contents before submitting.*

You might be amazed at the number of “inappropriate” manuscripts editors receive and have to rapidly “desk reject” (without review, or after a quick examination by an editorial board member) simply because they don’t address the interests of the journal’s audience. Some good questions to ask yourself in this regard are: Do papers like yours appear in the journal? Have you cited papers that have appeared in the journal or similar journals? If still in doubt, send only the title, authors and abstract to the journal office for a quick opinion on appropriateness, or even the whole paper. In the case of *CBP* specifically, we are often asked “Part A, B, C, or D?”. The same advice above applies.

*...format the paper appropriately.*

There is the tendency amongst authors to say “I’ll format the paper and reference style later, after it has been accepted”. This is especially true if a paper has previously been rejected by another journal whose format is “similar”. If you pay attention to the details of the appropriate format for the journal you are submitting to now, you will have one fewer thing to be criticized about by both the editorial staff and referees. In a paper that might be “controversial”, poor format could just be the straw that breaks the camel’s back and tips a referee to tick the “reject” box.

*...look at costs.*

Does the journal of choice levy page charges or submission fees, or fees for color illustrations or photos, or reprint charges? Clear the expenses up front with your advisor. You want to avoid the “good news your paper is accepted, bad news you owe us \$700” scenario. If you are short of funds, many journals have an “as affordable” policy that might subsidize some of your costs if you plead poverty. It can’t hurt to ask. *CBP* has no page charges or submission fees, and our publisher sometimes allows us to grant free color if there are

mitigating factors and if the use of color is “scientifically justified/necessary”.

*...prepare a detailed cover letter.*

You need to state that the manuscript is not being considered elsewhere, that the data (or parts of the data set) have not been published elsewhere, that you have the permission of *all* co-authors, and other formal information. In addition, you should include a sentence or two describing the novel finding, why you are so totally excited about your work (the “newsworthiness factor”), and why you think it would be appropriate for the journal. Make sure you have appropriately addressed the cover letter! You would be amazed at how many letters we receive addressed to the editor of another journal (obviously the most recent place where the paper was rejected). Not a very promising start.

*...suggest potential referees (up to 5 or 6) and an Editor and member of the Editorial Board whom you think would best be suited to handle your paper.*

Of course it is the editor’s prerogative to identify and assign referees, but the reality is that journal staff members are overworked. If you can do a little background work to help them, it will be appreciated. Also, although journal editors and editorial board members tend to be broadly trained and interested, they do not know all fields equally well. By suggesting *appropriate* referees, you maximize the chances that your manuscript will get knowledgeable reviewers and not something out of context. Of course, avoid the obvious conflicts of interests (researchers from the same institution, folks who are very close collaborators of yours, folks who are simply “your buddies”). A good question to ask: “Have I cited papers by the people I am suggesting as referees?” This gives you confidence that you have chosen appropriate people, and of course, human nature being what it is, the referee will be chuffed that you have cited him or her (assuming of course that you have appropriately and fairly represented their published findings!).

Similar considerations apply to the choice of an appropriate member of the editorial board. Often, when a manuscript is received, the editor will directly assign it to an editorial board member for a quick read (to see if it’s appropriate) and to ask for referee suggestions.

You don’t want to make a habit of this, but: you can in fact suggest people whom you do not want to review your paper, due to a personal conflict, because they are an extreme competitor (not quite so much of a problem in our comparative world), or simply because you feel from prior experience that they are so opposed to your ideas as to not be able to give a fair evaluation.

There is no guarantee that the Editors will heed any or all of your suggestions, but there are times when we look at these lists and say: “great list, couldn't have done better myself, let's use them all”.

Don't...

*...always assume that everything will go smoothly once you hit the “submit” button.*

CBP receives well over a thousand manuscripts a year to be reviewed, and our sister journals get large numbers as well. Despite our best efforts, there are rare cases when stuff just falls through the cracks, electronic or otherwise. If after a few days you don't get an acknowledgement that your paper was received (usually providing a manuscript reference number), email the journal office. After that, if you don't hear about the status of your paper in six weeks to two months, contact the journal to nudge the editors. Most journals have electronic communication with referees, so your paper should have found suitable referees within a couple of weeks. (Sometimes it just takes longer to track people down though, due to field seasons, grant deadlines, some even take holidays; sometimes the opinion of a tie-breaking referee is required.) Referees usually have a 2–4 week deadline for completing their report.

*...interpret the editor's decision letter too literally.*

Unless of course the letter says something like: “all referee reports said ‘accept as is’, and we have sent your article to be typeset for page proofs” (don't hold your breath, this has probably happened to us once in our careers), or “your paper is most definitely rejected”. Usually there are qualifiers in the decision letter like: “We can only accept your paper after major revisions” or “Your paper is not acceptable in its current form. Should you choose to revise your paper...”. These are generally statements that are leaving the door open for you to revise, rebut and resubmit.

*...take the referee comments too personally.*

Most seasoned referees avoid personal language, but sometimes it slips through (human nature again). Be assured that most editors don't take such personal language too seriously. Remember, *we know* who reviewed your paper, and we can often say “oh, that's referee x, he/she always has an axe to grind about issue y”.

*...needlessly delay in revising and resubmitting your paper.*

Unless of course the referees have asked you to gather more data, or undertake a months' long reanalysis of your data, get on it right away and strike while the iron is hot. Most journals, including CBP, have a two-month rule. If you don't resubmit within two months, it is considered a new submission and it *will* go out for re-review, unless you communicate with the editors about an extended deadline. By turning the manuscript around quickly, you can often avoid re-review (usually this decision rests with the referee though, as they often have a box they can tick or not that says “this paper really needs to be re-reviewed” or “I'd like to see a revision please”). Also, while the paper is still fresh in the referee's mind, you might get a better reception to your revisions.

Do...

*...make a compelling case for why your revised paper should be accepted.*

Assume that the referee will examine your response, and compose the note as if you are specifically responding to them. Be courteous (if there was a personal attack, or an otherwise inappropriate comment, take this up separately in your cover letter to the editor), thank them for their input, and respond to every single point with a “we did this, see page x, line y” or a “we respectfully disagree for the following reason(s)”. Spell it all out carefully and logically (remember that overworked journal staff) so that the editors don't have to fish about for whether you adequately addressed the issues.

*...bask in the glory*

when you get the acceptance letter, and change the paper on your c.v. from “submitted” to “in press”.

*...check on the progress of your accepted paper.*

Follow up to make sure you get page proofs in a timely manner (for CBP this takes less than ten days from acceptance) and *carefully* check everything, including every number value and decimal point in your tables, figure axis labels, legends, GenBank entries, etc.

*...a victory dance*

when your paper shows up online, and then another when the print version comes out (hey, it's what we live for, right?).

*...post a PDF of your article on your or your university's home page.*

*...send reprints to your family.*

*...consider writing a review article.*

Many junior scientists think they shouldn't be writing review articles until they are old and grizzled. Fact is, after having written a dissertation, or that first grant proposal, you have reviewed and understand an enormous body of literature. You probably have a fresher perspective than the veterans as well. But, before you do this, contact a journal editor with your idea, maybe even send a summary or abstract, and ask permission (or to ask to be invited). This is *not* being too forward. Journals love to have great review articles with fresh ideas and perspectives (and if not, they will let you know in a tactful manner). These are often the type of articles that will be highly cited and improve the journal's impact. You might also find yourself being asked to review for that journal, maybe eventually be invited to the editorial board, etc. Be proactive!

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