

Towards a publishing strategy

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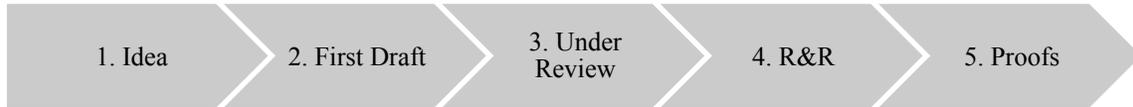
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I am *not* claiming to be an expert here. I don't think I'm doing too badly in terms of publishing research but I feel that I have much to learn in terms of possessing a publication strategy. Consequently I've attended a number of conference sessions and seminars on this topic, and this is an attempt to codify some of those lessons. This is very much a work in progress, and will hopefully evolve throughout my career. You can view this as the guidelines of someone trying to make the step from graduate student to junior faculty.

As an aside, I try to follow the advice that every idea should generate three publications: an academic article; a policy paper/trade journal; and a newspaper column. Note that the former is the driver of the entire process and therefore I'm concentrating on it here.

An important starting point is to have an appropriate metaphor for the publication process. I think of the research structure of production being similar to the various development phases of new drugs. For example:

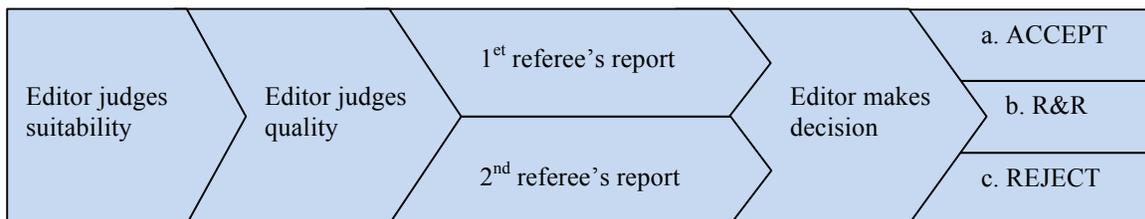


I tend to judge my progress by categorising my research activities into the respective phases, and this helps me decide where I should be prioritising - on writing a first draft of a new idea, or revising an existing draft ready for submission etc. Ideally I have a plump pipeline with a number of projects at each and every stage. Advice I try to follow is:

- Always have at least 2 papers in phase 3 (i.e. out being refereed)
- Diversify – it’s a risky strategy to rely on a single article to stake your future career upon, therefore try to collaborate

Some of the advice I’ve been given on publication strategy is focused on Phase 1 of the process, and rather than advise on “how to increase the chances of being published” it should actually be titled “how to conduct research in areas most likely to find publication”. Whilst these issues are interlinked, I am going to focus exclusively on the desire to reduce the time and effort required to move from phase 2 – 5 *for a given idea*. In other words let’s assume that your research agenda is driven by big and important questions, and not the speed at which you can be published.

Therefore the main purpose of this essay is to focus on the peer-review stage, and speculate as to how we can improve the probability that a particular paper swiftly passes through phase 3. We can expand upon this part of the pipeline as follows:



Evidently a “good” journal has an acceptance rate of 20-25%, but I suspect that it’s very hard to apply probabilities for dropout rates at each step of the process – it would vary strongly depending on the journal, and average results aren’t necessarily typical.

I think this process is pretty uniform, although note that the review process is never blind. The editor always knows who’s submitted the paper, and she decides who referees it. Evidence shows that your reputation matters, which means that for younger scholars strategy is even more important.

Lesson 1: Target multiple journals

Write a list of 4 target journals, and therefore as soon as you get a rejection from one you can send it out to another. At the early stage of your career it’s important to invest in developing knowledge about these journals, at the bare minimum you should be familiar with the work of the editor, and the last few years worth of issues.

Lesson 2: Don’t take rejections personally

Expect to receive a lot of rejections throughout your career, especially at the beginning. Dust yourself down and send it straight out to the next target journal (see lesson 1). If you receive 2 or 3 rejections there’s clearly a problem either with your journal targeting or the actual quality of the paper. Again, this shouldn’t be taken personally, but warrants further thought.

Lesson 3: Get the basics right

Evidently editors and reviewers want to see well-written, well-constructed papers. Sloppy grammar and basic mistakes come across very badly, so try to submit well-polished papers. It’s also important not to fall at the first hurdle, which is where the editor assesses if the paper is suitable for that publication. If you’ve done your research (lesson 1) you should have already ensured that you’ve targeted the right journal, and can demonstrate that through the formatting etc.

Lesson 4: What you put in is what you get out

Soon after graduating I realised that the majority of my references were books, and this indicates that the content of my paper was not suitable for journal publication. I'm not suggesting that articles should merely be filling in footnotes of previous work, but clearly some amount of being embedded to the literature is required. Consequently your references section is a good indicator of where your target publications should be.

Lesson 5: Be sympathetic towards the editor

It is easier to view editors as gatekeepers of knowledge and thus refuse to become a sycophant. However they invest an immense amount of time and professional judgment in the publication process and therefore I try to act with civility and integrity. There's obviously strategic reasons why this is beneficial, since editors do possess discretionary power and will not wish to enter the review process with you if you're a lunch tax. Editors that I have heard in discussion openly admit to factoring the ease of working with an author into the decision process (at the margin). View the process as a repeated game, and try to make the editor's job as easier as possible. In particular if you receive a revise and resubmit take care to:

- In a separate word document list *every* comment made by a reviewer, and respond. This doesn't mean that you follow blindly every suggestion, it does mean that you (i) confirm that you received the advice; (ii) explained whether you accept it or not (and if not, why not).

Ultimately since you have the intellectual copyright over your work you are always free to try other journals. If an editor is annoying you, simply go somewhere else.

Lesson 6: Be patient

We all know that the review process can take a long time, so it's important to be patient. Once editor mentioned a situation where he sent a paper out for review, but when he chased it up after 3 months the referee said that they'd lost the paper and needed a new copy. A new copy was sent and 3 months later the same thing happened. This can be as frustrating for the editor as it is for the author. There is a long structure of production in the generation of economic ideas. It takes time to switch between scholarly work and trade journals. Also be careful about paying

too much attention to journals that provide information on the turnaround times. These are self-reported and averages, and therefore merely *indicative* of what will happen to you.

Lesson 7: Understand the difference between a, b and c

I recently forwarded a rejection letter to a more senior colleague who replied to say that it wasn't a rejection at all, it was a revise and resubmit! Apparently this is common amongst younger scholars, so be careful to read the editors report carefully. They don't intend to be ambiguous, so if there's any doubt either ask a colleague, or simply send an email seeking clarification.

Lesson 8: Become a referee yourself

The best way to understand referees is to become one yourself, and a good way to get in the good books of an editor is to offer to referee – and then do a good job. The job of a referee is to be (i) thorough; (ii) honest; and (iii) fair. This means that you should provide a written report that can be sent directly to the author (making it easier for the editor, and holding you to a basic standard of civility); be timely with your report (at the very least stick to your estimate about turnaround time); and also be wary of double jeopardy. If you are sent the same paper to referee twice it is common practice to return it to the editor and mention that you've already rejected it and therefore it should be sent to someone else

Lesson 9: Don't get frustrated if ideas get stuck at Phases I or II

Treat these as an entrepreneur treats sunk costs. It shouldn't influence future decisions, but we're often better off for having incurred them. Not every idea needs to germinate into a published article in order to be useful. It's a discovery process as we realise that some articles are best split into two separate ones, or a few separate ideas should be consolidated into a single paper.¹

¹ If you're anything like me than the former is more likely than the latter. The playwright Tom Stoppard once commented on how he only had an idea for a play when about three of four separate ideas were formed. In this case Phase I is likely to lead to multiple first drafts, or more likely, Phase II involves sub-stages were these ideas are delineated into a number of separate papers. This is more likely for theoretical projects, as empirical ones are easier to glimpse the entire process from the inception.

As previously mentioned, this advice isn't a list of how I do things, but a manifesto of how I would *like* to do things so that I can improve as a scholar. There's a lot of advice that I've deliberately ignored, such as anticipate potential reviewers and cite them heavily. I think that goes beyond merely increasing the probability of being published, to moulding your research around publication channels. Ultimately it's easy – and becoming ever easier – to get published, but there's no point in becoming published for its own sake. If you only care about seeing your name in print then focus on op-eds (where you'll actually have an audience).

Taking the above, there are 2 “metrics” that might provide a useful overview regarding research productivity:

- **Pipeline** – simply sum the number of papers currently in each phase of the pipeline, and report in the following format: [Phase 1, Phase 2, Phase 3, Phase 4, Phase 5]
e.g. my current 'pipeline' is [4,1,3,2,1]
- **Posthumous** – imagine you stop writing research papers today. If someone only knows you through your research productivity, how long will it take before they notice that you have stopped?
e.g. it will be 16 months before my publications dry up

Finally, the goal shouldn't be “to get published” – it is to get published in respectable journals that enhance your legitimacy as a scholar. If you can think of other ways to climb that mountain, do let me know...