

Preparing a Manuscript for Publication

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The phrase “publish or perish” might not be spoken among faculty colleagues, but it reverberates in the minds of young untenured professionals (Sadler, 2011). The need to publish in a professional journal also exists for other faculty members seeking to share their research. The purpose of this essay is to provide assistance in getting manuscripts accepted for publication in peer-reviewed journals.

Keywords: *abstract; formatting; proofreading*

What do reviewers want to see? The first three items relate to an initial review that a reviewer might conduct upon receiving a manuscript. The remaining six are presented by sections as they appear in the sixth edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA). I am sharing my experiences as an associate editor for this journal and as a reviewer for journals in the family field. I want to help authors know “what reviewers are looking for.”

PROPER USAGE OF APA

While some academic journals require manuscripts to be formatted in the Modern Language Association (MLA) style (MLA, 2009), the *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, as well as most other social science journals, requires submissions to be formatted using the 6th edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (American Psychological Association, 2010). Since its inception in 1929, the APA’s purpose “has been to advance scholarship by setting sound and rigorous standards for scientific communication” (APA, 2010, p. xiii). Even though APA guidelines have been taught at the undergraduate level and APA guidelines are required in most research papers written in the social sciences, I am surprised by the number of submissions whose authors neglect to follow APA formatting.

Grammar and spelling mistakes should be corrected prior to submission. While word-processing programs find many misspelled words, the word-processing programs do not replace proofreading. For example, words spelled correctly may be used incorrectly in the context of the sentence (e.g. to/two/too). Grammar and spelling mistakes send a message to reviewers that the author is

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Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal, Vol. 43, No. 1, September 2014 98–101
DOI: 10.1111/fcsr.12085

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not serious about his or her work. Since it is impossible to completely eliminate subjectivity in the review process, eliminating grammar and spelling errors will give reviewers a better impression about the manuscript.

CURRENT REFERENCES

When the majority of the sources in the reference list of manuscripts are relatively old (e.g., from the 1990s or 1980s), there is a greater likelihood that the manuscript will be rejected. When I and other reviewers see this, we tend to assume that the manuscript has been rejected by other editors and/or the author has searched for old papers because he or she is in need of a publication. Most references should be <5-year old (Bednar, 2013) unless the references are necessary for historical accuracy.

CONTRACTIONS

Finding “etc.” or contractions such as “don’t” or “didn’t” in the text detracts from the manuscript. “Etc.” should not be used in a manuscript. Contractions should only be used when quoting the statement from a participant in qualitative research or providing a direct quote from another reference.

ABSTRACTS

The abstract is a short description of the manuscript’s contents. Since the abstract often determines if a person will read the entire article, it should be concise, and it should include only the purpose, sample, data analysis, and a few of the most important results. The Editor of the *Family & Consumer Sciences Research Journal* suggests that manuscripts should be only 100 words in length (DeVaney, 2014). Following the abstract, authors should list three to five key words.

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of the paper should be addressed relatively early in this section. If the reviewer cannot find the purpose until he or she reaches the fifth page, the reviewer is likely to conclude that the study lacks focus. The research questions or hypotheses need to be stated clearly and how the research questions and hypotheses were derived from the theoretical framework needs to be explained. An in-depth discussion of all previous research is probably not necessary, but it is important to provide sufficient detail, so the reader can grasp how the present study builds on previous research.

METHODOLOGY

In reviewing a paper, the Methodology section is the most critical for me. I believe that a weak research design results in a weak paper. Literature reviews

and discussion sections can be improved after a manuscript has been reviewed, but a manuscript with a poor research design cannot be improved. The primary issues in the Methodology section are (i) did the author provide enough information for reviewers to determine if the study was conducted with sufficient rigor and (ii) can the study be replicated by another researcher using a different population. Frequently manuscripts lack enough detail in describing the participants, how they were recruited, what methods were used to collect the data; and how the study was conducted. Also, I want to know if the author has explained the details of the statistical analysis and the justification for selecting that method of statistical analysis.

RESULTS

The purpose of this section is to describe the results of the statistical analysis. Frequently, the link between the statistical analyses and the research questions or hypotheses is not clearly demonstrated. Another concern is insufficient discussion of the statistical analysis. Some authors get ahead of themselves by beginning the Discussion section in the Results section. In the Results section, the reader should be told what was found, for example, hypothesis one was supported at .05 degree of probability. The purpose of the Discussion section is to explain what the results mean.

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

The Discussion section needs to discuss the *implication* of the results. These need to be specific and realistic. Some authors assume *generalizability* of their results when it is not appropriate to do so. For example, if a study was conducted using first-year students at a medium-sized state university in the Midwest, the results should not be generalized to all college students who are enrolled at the university nor to first-year students at a large state university or private small college in the Mid-west and to first-year students in New York or California. The fact that results cannot be generalized to a larger population should be mentioned in the limitations. The discussion of a study's limitations needs to be short. Some authors fail to discuss any study limitations.

REFERENCES

Poorly prepared reference lists can influence a reviewer's impression about the manuscript. For example, the year of publication or page numbers might be missing. Sometimes authors fail to verify whether all of the sources used in their manuscript have been included and also that sources not used in the manuscript were deleted. Sometimes authors do not differentiate between a journal that is paginated by issue and one that is not. According to the *APA Publication Manual*, the journal issue should be provided if page numbering starts anew with each issue in the same volume. However, if page numbering is continuous from one issue to the next, the issue number is not necessary

HELPFUL SUGGESTIONS

In addition to the manual, the APA has a helpful website at www.apastyle.org. Some universities have websites that provide information on manuscript preparation. For example, the Purdue Owl (Purdue Online Writing Lab) at <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/> provides in-depth information on the mechanics of writing, APA formatting style, and grammar, spelling and punctuation tips. It is the best APA resource that I have found. Some universities employ staff who help faculty with manuscript preparation. Finally, it is helpful to read your manuscript out loud and also to ask a colleague to provide feedback.

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