Writing for journals

Writing journal articles

Rosemary L Sherriff

I imagine most people have a similar, yet slightly different approach to writing a manuscript for publication based on experience, personal style and subject matter. In an optimal world, continuous time would exist to work on a manuscript from start to finish, but of course that is rarely possible. I find that if I write notes to myself on where my thought process is headed, I can pick-up where I left off rather quickly when I only have short periods of time to write. If I leave a manuscript as an empty plate without leads to follow, I can rarely step forward before spending a great deal of time moving backwards over aspects already developed. The writing itself is not a linear process for me. As I develop a draft, I examine ideas from new perspectives, try new analyses, revise graphics, and continually refine the interpretations of findings.

As one who is relatively new to publishing, I have found three personal interactions particularly useful: refining drafts by informal reviews, reviewing other manuscripts, and discussing peer-review comments with colleagues after the formal review process. For me, it has been essential to have feedback from one or two people prior to submitting a manuscript. This often involves comments from collaborators or colleagues in the same field who provide feedback on drafts and presentations prior to submission. I have also found reviewing other manuscripts extremely useful. I can only imagine that if I had more experience reviewing manuscripts prior to submitting my first manuscript, the review process would have been smoother. Reading both excellent and less-than stellar manuscripts provides insight on what to include, what to leave out, how to address the main point and broader picture, and the structural form for submission. Although it’s recommended, I have rarely identified a single journal until a draft is developed. Once the draft begins to take shape, I can begin to visualise where the manuscript should be submitted. This involves examining how my work contributes to the broader fields of biogeography and disturbance ecology, where related articles were published, and how my manuscript varies in scale with other articles published from a variety of journals. Most of my research to date has focused on determining variation in past disturbance regimes (fire and insect outbreaks) and vegetation patterns in relation to biophysical factors, climate variation and land-use changes.

My experiences with manuscript reviews have been relatively positive, not because I have not received rejection or harsh criticism at times, but because each time I have been able to revise the manuscript into a much better paper based on constructive comments. Almost all reviews have been helpful, except for a few stinging comments that were less about the research itself and more about contention between different perspectives. One issue that I have found frustrating is the length of time it takes for some review processes, which can be a problem when you have a set of manuscripts planned for publication in a particular order and when you are judged on your productivity for professional evaluation. For example, after revising a manuscript as suggested by the subject editor for resubmission an article of mine was then rejected outright, which was an extremely frustrating experience and a waste of almost a year’s time. As someone relatively new to publishing I have found it extremely helpful to review comments with co-authors and colleagues before addressing review comments or submitting elsewhere. These conversations have always led to minimising my uncertainty or lack of confidence in interpretation, and led in fact, to more confidence, a prioritisation for revision, and an emphasis on the overall contribution to the broader field.

Rosemary L Sherriff is Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography, University of Kentucky.

Writing for journals

Articles, reports and co-authorship

James Rothwell

I am a postdoctoral researcher with research interests in wetland hydrochemistry, sediment-associated contaminants and modelling surface water quality. During the course of my PhD and postdoctoral research I have had 15 papers published, together with a variety of reports.

When I act as lead author on a paper I usually decide where to submit before writing it. This focuses my writing style, but also helps me to use my time efficiently. I have a list of journals where I like to submit my work. After choosing the most appropriate home for the paper and after writing the first draft I send the paper to my co-authors. Some reply swiftly with their comments, others can take longer. This is when some gentle encouragement is needed. My international collaborators can be quicker in responding than a co-author down the corridor! Often the paper passes between myself and the co-authors several times before submission and usually goes through numerous iterations. For papers where I am a co-author, I try to get my comments back to the lead author as soon as possible as I know waiting around for comments can be quite frustrating. Writing the covering letter to the editor justifying the importance and appropriateness of the work is sometimes easier said than done. Crafting the cover letter often involves stepping back from the research and thinking about the broader implications of the work and why people would want to read the paper.

Many of my papers have come back from review within a few months, but occasionally a paper can be stuck in review for almost a year. In this situation I found that a polite email to the editor speeded up the process. Many of the reviews that I have received have been anonymous. In most cases the reviewers have provided constructive criticism. However, I feel that a very small minority of the reviewers have used the anonymity of the peer-review process as a way of giving unjustified and misplaced criticisms of the work.

I find responding to reviewers’ comments varies considerably depending on the nature of authorship. If I am the lead author and the reviewers’ comments are only minor ones, I usually make the changes myself, inform the co-authors of the changes, and re-submit. Most co-authors are happy with this. It can be a more lengthy process for those papers requiring more substantial revision. Under these circumstances this will involve all co-authors. Addressing the reviewers’ comments and incorporating each of the co-authors’ suggestions for the revised paper can be tricky. This is especially true for papers where the reviewers’ comments are contradictory. Inevitably, a paper will be rejected. Luckily this has only happened once to me. Initially, a rejection is a blow, but after re-reading the reviewers’ comments, I select the helpful suggestions, strengthen the paper, and then promptly re-submit it elsewhere.

During my time as a researcher, I have worked on a variety of reports, usually for non-academic organisations, such as consultancies and societies. When writing these reports I have to remind myself not to be too technical and write in a style appropriate for the audience. This is sometimes difficult when switching between writing papers and writing reports. I always provide a summary of the work at the beginning of the report, and have tended to keep text short, often using bullet points, tables or even flow diagrams. I also think it is useful to be explicit about the problems encountered during the work and to even provide a list of recommendations at the end of the report. As with papers, report writing often involves co-authors, all of whom have varying degrees of input. In my experience though, the lead author of the report does the lion’s share of the work. I have often found that when a report is posted off or emailed that’s the last I hear about it. This leaves you wondering whether it was useful and if it is being used to inform new work or policy.

James Rothwell is a Postdoctoral Research Associate in the Department of Environmental and Geographical Sciences at Manchester Metropolitan University.