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## 5 Tips for Publishing Your First Academic Article



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Publishing an article in an academic journal can be a frustrating process that demands a substantial commitment of time and hard work. Nevertheless, establishing a record of publication is essential if you intend to pursue a career as an academic or scientific researcher.

These five suggestions will help you turn the odds in your favor and make the publishing process less daunting.



### 01. TARGET AN APPROPRIATE JOURNAL

It may be tempting to submit your article to one of the top journals in your field: after all, these are the journals that you and your peers are most familiar with and the ones that you will see referenced over-and-over again in the literature you consume.

But remember, the top professional journals are *exceedingly competitive*. The types of academic projects that get published in such journals are generally groundbreaking studies of great significance, many of which rely on the scholarship of multiple authors. Moreover, these articles are often the result of considerable research budgets and institutional support. Not to mention the decades of experience and the publication records of the authors.

**If you're strategic in selecting a journal to target, you will greatly increase the odds of publishing your first article.**

Those who are still completing degrees should consider submitting an article to a student oriented journal such as *Student Pulse* (the Council on Undergraduate Research also publishes a good list of [student oriented publications](#)). Student journals are a good place to begin your publication record while at the same time improving your understanding of the publication process and receiving feedback on your ideas.

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When choosing a journal, you want to keep in mind two factors: *review times* and policies on *multiple submissions*. You should expect most reviews to take several months at a minimum. Meanwhile, most journals do not accept an article for review that is simultaneously being reviewed by another journal.

As a result, the journal you target is particularly important because it's not practical to submit your work to many publications. If you aren't interested in waiting 6-months or longer to hear back from several journals (one after the other), start out by targeting a publication that's more likely to give your article the green light. You'll have a better chance of publishing in a top journal with this experience under your belt.

## 02. SAY SOMETHING NEW

No journal is going to take interest in your work if it does not present new or novel ideas. To get your work published, you need to *say something new* without saying something that calls your credibility into question.

Successful academic articles do two things: they position themselves within existing scholarship (often in a 'literature review' section, although strategic authors don't always label it as such) and they subsequently *build on existing knowledge*. The common expression "stand on the shoulders of giants," often attributed to [Isaac Newton](#), emphasizes this strategy precisely. By using existing work as a starting point (the shoulders of giants), we can push the envelope just a little further and discover new things.

**"If I have seen further than others, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants."**

New authors commonly err in this area. On one hand, it's not enough to merely review or summarize the existing literature on a particular topic. For a good article, this is only the starting point: the real work comes when you use the existing literature to establish new questions and then attempt to answer them (this is where you get to say something *new*).

On the other hand, remember that Newton's expression directs us to "*stand* on the shoulders of giants," not to jump off! To be attractive to an academic publisher, your work needs to strike a balance between saying something *new* and at the same time remaining *grounded* in the existing pool of knowledge. You're not likely to receive a thumbs up if you 'stretch' the meaning of existing work to fit your new argument, or if your new argument is a huge jump from the existing literature. Remember, your argument doesn't have to be revolutionary to be new or interesting, it just needs to be original enough to make a contribution to what's already out there.

## 03. EDIT YOUR WORK EXTENSIVELY

You need to have a serious editing and revision process if you intend to publish your work, one that goes beyond the quick skim you might give a paper before passing it in for a class. Start by doing something very old fashioned: fire up the printer and grab a pen.

When you edit your own work, you need to give yourself plenty of time between when you actually do your writing and when you do your editing. When we're writing, we have a lot of ideas swirling around in our heads; all these ideas allow us to make logical jumps in our writing that, while they might make sense to us *at the time*, end up confusing others (or perhaps, even ourselves when we're not in the same head space).

There are two things you can look for in your editing process that, when addressed, will markedly improve the quality of your paper:

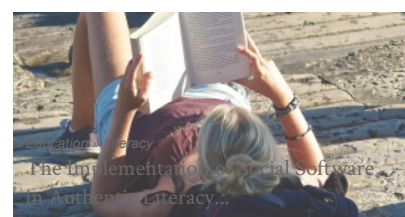
1. **Fix Confusing Passages:** When it comes to your writing style, *simpler is better*. Nothing will doom your work more definitely than if no one can understand what you're trying to say. This point should be emphasized:



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**“Brilliant writing is simple writing, a relevant idea delivered clearly and directly.”**

Write in short, concise sentences. If your writing is littered with commas, semi-colons, and dashes, go back and simplify. As you edit your paper, be your own worst nightmare: read critically and ask yourself, “does this make sense?” Make sure that your ideas are connected, and never assume your readers will be able to follow your line of thinking.

Remember that the reader is not responsible for figuring out what you’re trying to say: you’re responsible for conveying your ideas clearly.

2. **Avoid the Passive Voice:** If you are unfamiliar with the passive voice, start by reading a [basic overview](#). Particularly in non-scientific writing, overuse of the passive voice can lead to writing that is unnecessarily verbose, indirect, and lacking in specificity. If you address your use of the passive voice, you are likely to improve your writing in two ways: first, eliminating the passive voice will *simplify your writing* (see above); and second, changing passive constructions to active constructions may force you to be *more specific* or to add additional details.

For example, consider this simple passive sentence:

“The bill was signed into law.”

- Use of the passive voice allows the writer to easily leave out an important detail: who signed the bill into law?
- By converting the same sentence into the active voice, the author is forced to add specificity: “President Obama signed the bill into law.”

While there are [some situations](#) where use of the passive voice is OK, in the vast majority of cases you will improve the clarity of your writing by using the active voice.

Overall, your editing process should make up a significant portion of the work you do until you reach a final version of your paper. If you approach this process with a critical eye, you will end up cutting out superfluous passages and elaborating on important details. The result will be a much stronger paper.



## 04. REFERENCE STRATEGICALLY

References are your source of credibility in an academic paper. It goes without saying that if you want your work to be seriously considered by any publisher, you need to rely almost exclusively on academic references (forget Wikipedia and other stand-alone websites). But that is only the beginning of your task, and if you choose your references strategically, you will greatly improve your chances of being perceived as a credible source yourself.

How can you pick the right references? Pay attention to these details:

1. **Go to the original source:** the most important studies will be cited by hundreds or thousands of other scholars. You may in fact learn about the most important studies *by way of* the references of other scholars. But if you want to use one of these field-defining studies to situate your argument, pull up the original work and cite the original author instead of the secondary source where you encountered the work. Not only will you learn more in the process, but the reviewers considering your work will be much more familiar with the ‘big names’ in your discipline. Since they are already familiar with these names, they know they are credible and they’re more likely to see you as credible too.
2. **Reference articles that are widely cited:** you can gain a faster understanding of the state of a particular discipline by reading widely cited articles first. Use a tool such as Thomson-Reuters [Web of Science](#) to search for articles and sort them by the number of citations. This is a quick way to discover the most important articles (according to the academic community) on a particular topic. Referencing these articles within your own work will show reviewers that you have a good understanding of the field.
3. **Cite articles from the journal to which you are submitting :** the reviewers who consider your work are likely regular readers of the journal they’re reviewing for (and that you’re targeting for publication). They may have authored articles in this particular journal themselves, or they might have provided editorial oversight on articles recently published in the journal. In any case, there is a good chance that they will be familiar with any article you reference from the journal. Not only will this help you further establish your credibility and display an understanding of the field, it’s also a strategic way to take advantage of the reviewer’s ego: it reminds them that their work and their journal are important! (If they publish your article, your article will also count as another citation for their journal, which is a good thing.)

Your references need to follow some sort of strategy, both to build your argument effectively and to establish your credibility. Avoid the “random” method at all costs, as this is a surefire way to show reviewers that you lack an understanding of the field.

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## 05. MAKE IT DIFFICULT FOR REVIEWERS TO SAY “NO”

Reviewing an article is a lot of work. With so many submissions, reviewers are always looking for ‘easy outs,’ or straightforward criteria for turning down a paper before they even start reading it. You need to follow their guidelines carefully, including their requirements for citation formatting. (Tip: start using a program like [EndNote](#) to keep your references in order and make it easy to change your citation style.)

Assuming you’ve followed all their guidelines, reviewers will be looking for clear oversights in your argument. For example, if you make overly strong statements (e.g., a statement that clearly reveals your personal bias or one that brushes off a common controversy) you make it easy for a reviewer to decline your submission.

On the other hand, if you formulate your argument in a nuanced way you will make it much harder for a reviewer to poke obvious holes in your work.

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**Make sure to acknowledge opposing viewpoints, don’t present every reference as hard evidence of a particular point, and avoid making one-dimensional assertions — such as *cause and effect* statements — about complex phenomena.**

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In the social sciences and humanities where causal statements are extremely difficult to prove, look instead for language that can be less readily disagreed with:

- **Difficult to prove/easy to disagree with:**

“In Egypt, the lack of legitimate employment opportunities caused young men to take to the streets during the recent ‘Arab Spring’ protests.”

- **Much easier to prove/difficult to disagree with:**

“In Egypt, the lack of legitimate employment opportunities appears to have increased the number of young men available to take to the streets during the recent ‘Arab Spring’ protests.”

In the second version of the statement the author displays nuance and balance while avoiding a black-and-white statement that would be easy to find fault with. If you focus on a balanced approach throughout your paper, it will be more difficult for a reviewer to brush your work off from the start.

In the end, your success will be determined by how hard you’re willing to work and by how compelling your argument is.

Getting published is not the result of *genius*: it’s the result of a strategic and proactive publication strategy coupled with a willingness to *revise* and *revise again*.

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