

Editorial *A Primer for Academic Authors*

Introduction

Nearly ten years ago, as a naïve and hopeful graduate student, I submitted my first paper to an academic journal. The paper was the product of a semester-long independent study, and it earned an A from my professor, a fine scholar in the field (early church history). Several months after submission, I received the editors' decision: rejection. They included the two peer reviews, the second of which was severely and—I believed—unfairly critical. The first had only recommended an R&R (revise and resubmit), so the more critical review likely tipped the scales against the publication of my paper.

In an instant, my youthful optimism gave way to (self-)righteous indignation. I wrote a hot-blooded (albeit polite) e-mail attempting to contest the second reviewer's recommendation. For this I received no response. Years later, now an editor myself, I count the editors' shrewd silence as a gracious act of mercy. Just as surely as a manager will not succeed by arguing balls and strikes with an umpire in a baseball game, an author ought not to expect any answer to such objections.

The Other Side of Publishing

Perhaps that sounds overly harsh. Have I simply joined the enemy by becoming an editor myself? Well ... yes and no. In my capacity as a research fellow for the Acton Institute, I still write and submit to other publications, submissions that are sometimes accepted and sometimes rejected. The difference is that I know now

what the other side of publishing looks like. I am both an author and an editor, but even when I receive “unfair” reviews or decisions, my sympathies now lie first with the editors. Why?

It is not as if editors and reviewers never make mistakes or lack good etiquette or basic ethics.¹ I once submitted a paper to a journal and did not hear back for three years, and then only when the journal published my paper without giving me any opportunity for revision. That is the most egregious example, but I have had other papers that, it seemed, were simply submitted into a vacuum as well. I do not write this essay to defend the indefensible, but I do write with the intention of showing that sometimes what seems indefensible may be more complicated than authors realize, and that etiquette and professionalism—moral responsibility even—rest with authors as much as editors and reviewers. To that end, I hope this editorial will function as a primer in both the publishing process and good practices for academic authors.

Why Does Peer Review Take So Long?

While journal practices vary from publication to publication, the *Journal of Markets & Morality*'s process will be representative enough to give a few rules of thumb, at least for the sort of qualitative research we typically publish. I write from my personal experience as managing editor with the hope of opening a window into what one example of the editorial process looks like, rather than simply surveying general trends.

Our publication process looks roughly like this:

1. **First review.** When we receive new submissions, I personally review each one to make sure it is not lacking any essential elements such as proper spelling and grammar, a thesis statement, literature review, clear conclusion, or a significant number of primary and secondary source citations. If any of these aspects are obviously lacking (they may still be lacking, just not obviously so, and pass this stage), I issue a bench rejection and the submission ends there. This usually happens a week or two from the submission date.
2. **Associate editor review.** Not all journals have associate editors, in which case this stage will be combined with the first and the primary editors will do a more detailed read-through. That said, in our case, if there are no glaring problems as detailed above, I assign the submission to one of our associate editors. Their job is to give a closer (though still not thorough) read to be sure I did not miss any of the above and determine if the paper is worth putting

through review. If not, I issue a bench rejection and the submission ends there. This generally takes one or two more weeks, sometimes longer.

3. **Peer review.** If a paper passes my initial review and an associate editor's review, it moves on to the peer-review stage. This stage takes the longest. How long? I wish I could say definitively, but the level of variance is high. We require a minimum of two completed reviews before making a decision at this stage. We often query more than two peer reviewers, and we often get fewer than two reviewers to commit—not to mention deliver—from that first group. Sometimes we get no responses at all. Sometimes reviewers initially agree to review a submission but then cannot find the time and back out later. If a scholar agrees to act as a reviewer for a submission, they are given six weeks to write a review. If we do not receive one in that time, I send a reminder. If we still do not receive one after a few more weeks, I look for other reviewers and query them. Finding the first reviewers can be a challenge, and finding more to query after the first decline is no less challenging. Indeed, this is a problem that a recent report has shown is getting worse. According to a summary of the report in the “News & Comment” section of *Nature* online, there is “a growing ‘reviewer fatigue,’ with editors having to invite more reviewers to get each review done. The number rose from 1.9 invitations in 2013 to 2.4 in 2017.”² Thus, to get two completed peer reviews as of 2017, editors on average must query roughly five potential reviewers. In all, this phase of the publication process can take anywhere from three months in the best-case scenario to a year or more in the worst cases.
4. **Editorial decision.** Just getting two reviews is not always enough. If the reviews do not agree, or if both recommend R&R, we may decide that we need a third review to tip the scales. This may add months to the process as well. As we take the academic publishing process seriously, we do not wish to rush our decision-making at this stage.
5. **Acceptance.** If a paper passes peer review to our satisfaction, we send an acceptance letter and then schedule it for the next open issue. That next issue may be six months or even a year away, and the publication process can run into countless other delays at the revision, layout, printing, and shipping stages as well.

A few additional aspects of the process are worth noting:

First, unlike the *Journal of Markets & Morality*, most journals are edited by professors who must find the time to edit in addition to their teaching and research responsibilities. While editing is not all our editors do, we are able to give editing higher priority than the editors of many academic journals, which tend to be understaffed by overworked editors in exchange for often meager compensation. Delays at every stage may not be desirable, but they are common.

Second, peer reviewers are not typically paid at all, and they must find time to review submissions on top of their own teaching and researching. It is largely a volunteer endeavor, and it is undertaken out of a sense of duty to one's colleagues and one's discipline. While we encourage cordial reviews at the *Journal of Markets & Morality*, it is helpful to remember in all cases that reviewers are indeed one's peers who have taken time out of their schedules, on the authors' and editors' behalf, to read submissions and offer their professional opinions. The proper moral response to such a service should be gratitude, even when one does not like the results.

Third, as the above outline of the process should make clear, generally speaking the better a submission is, the longer an author will need to wait for a decision. The authors who get decisions right away are the ones whose submissions are rejected because they require considerable revision before even being considered for peer review. Perhaps it is a small consolation, but no news—or at least slow news—is typically good news for one's submission. At the least, it means one's paper has not been rejected yet. Just to be put through the peer review process indicates that the paper has some merit, even if it may ultimately be rejected.

Rules of Thumb

While I cannot offer a definitive list of “thou shalt nots” engraved on stone tablets by the fingers of God, I offer here a few best practices for peer review for authors related to the foregoing, though not limited to it.

1. Concerning the long waits so many must endure, remember that while one is waiting others are working. Though long waits may be the result of negligence, they may just as often be due to the nature of the peer review process. As an author, I try to wait at least six months before sending a query regarding the status of a submission, and six more months for any additional queries. As an editor, I do not mind answering author queries, but if the same author queries every month, it suggests that he or she does not quite understand the editorial side of the peer-review process.

2. Related to #1, if the wait has truly been too long, one should formally withdraw one's submission. I have had to do this as an author as well. It is worth noting that, unlike fiction or popular biography or memoir, simultaneous submission is typically prohibited in academic publishing. Our submission page requires that submissions be neither simultaneously submitted nor previously published. Sometimes exceptions will be considered, but they cannot be considered if the editors are not informed. If they are not informed, one may be prohibited from submitting to the journal in the future (sometimes called "blacklisting") for violating this policy—it needlessly wastes the time and resources of everyone involved.
3. While it should go without saying, submitted work must be original to authors and sources must be properly documented. While the "publish or perish" world of academia may incentivize cutting corners, sometimes plagiarism is unintentional and simply due to lack of proper citation. For the sake of transparency in one's work, it is always best to err on the side of citing too many sources rather than too few. Not only does plagiarism lead to blacklisting—and published plagiarism to retractions—it may also lead to a watchdog like Retraction Watch being informed, making one's identity public and potentially ending one's academic career.³
4. Related to #3, authors should take the time to properly format their submissions. Journals may not reject a submission out-of-hand for failing to adhere to their style guidelines—though some may—but disregarding formatting requirements handicaps one's submission. There is no need to give editors any avoidable reasons for rejection. Always submit one's best work. That said, sometimes journal guidelines are oddly unique and genuinely onerous. In my experience, this is a great task to enlist the help of a research assistant. It may be tedious, but one's student or intern will get the opportunity to see a bit of what the academic writing and publishing process looks like, and authors will get an extra set of eyes to check their work. I recommend thanking assistants by name in a footnote or endnote if possible.
5. I know this can be difficult to achieve—especially for young scholars who often have large teaching loads—but if at all possible it is best to have more than one research project in progress at the same time. Thus, while waiting to hear about one submission, one

can continue working on another. This makes long waits more bearable, and having multiple papers to submit increases one's chances of publication. This is one of the best pieces of academic advice I have ever received.

6. Try to have a particular publication in mind when writing or revising a paper, and try not to submit to the same journal repeatedly in too short a time span. On rare occasions, authors will be rejected for no other reason than that they previously submitted another paper in the same year. This is related to the problem of reviewer fatigue. Finding qualified reviewers is difficult, and authors' research often does not so significantly differ from paper to paper that a whole new set of reviewers would be qualified to evaluate it. Journal policies will likely vary, but typically there is more than one journal the scope of which could include one's research, and thus spreading around one's submissions can actually be a service to the academy as well.
7. When revising a submission, whether for an R&R, acceptance with revision, or to prepare to submit to a new journal after rejection, one should try to address each reviewer criticism, no matter how unfair it may seem or actually be. At some level, the reason for every criticism is grounded in the text being criticized. Perhaps one has truly been misunderstood—how can one rephrase what was misunderstood to better communicate one's point and minimize misunderstanding? It is rare that literally nothing can be changed for the better in a submission, as any perfectionist knows.

Ultimately, it is my conviction that submission, revision, and even rejection are parts of an essentially ascetic aspect of all ethical scholarship. Good research is hard work. Handling rejection well and having the courage to submit again takes great virtue. It may not be easy, but one may as well make the most of it and look on every criticism and rejection as an opportunity to hone one's skill as an author and a professional.

It is my hope this short primer might assist academic authors in that ascetic and honorable endeavor.

—Dylan Pahman, Managing Editor

Notes

1. Regarding proper ethics and etiquette for reviewers, see Dylan Pahman, “Editorial: A Primer for Peer Review,” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 1–7. Regarding the moral vocation of editors, see idem, “Editorial: The Editor as Steward,” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 20, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 221–23.
2. Inga Vesper, “Peer Reviewers Unmasked: Largest Global Survey Reveals Trends,” *Nature*, September 7, 2018, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-06602-y>.
3. For more on the problem of plagiarism, see Jordan J. Ballor, “Editorial: Plagiarism in a Digital Age,” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 17, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 349–52.