Informal Talk on how to Publish in Philosophy and Political Theory

Bilkent University, 2 June, 2017

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I – The Process

1. What to publish

    - There are a great many ways to publish your ideas and work: blogging, online forums and academic websites, conference papers and proceedings, book reviews, replies to other authors and papers, survey articles, book chapters, handbook chapters, peer-reviewed journal articles. There is a value in doing each of these and most academics will do most at some point in their careers.

    - I focus here on peer-reviewed journal articles. These are focused, tightly argued treatments of a particular idea that has been worked through in meticulous detail.

    - From this perspective, publishing some of the other kinds of writing listed above (e.g. book reviews or blog articles) can often serve as preparation for later article writing. They give us some practice at writing and provide opportunities for criticism and feedback (this isn't to say that these forms of writing don't have their own unique value too, only that if you are aiming to publish journal articles then your plan should include these too).

2. Journal Articles: Overview of the process

    - *Publishing in journal articles is an extremely slow process*. Acceptance rates are very low. Rejection is normal for all academics even well into their careers. The review process always takes several months and can even last up to a year. It will certainly take months if not years before even an accepted article actually appears in print!

    - *Don't make acceptance your sole purpose*. Your primary aim at first is to get good feedback. This is a worthwhile goal in its own right. A reviewer is someone who will read your work more closely than almost anyone other than your supervisor. Getting as many fresh and new perspectives from reviewers is the most valuable thing you can have in philosophy.

    The review process is roughly as follows.

    i. *Review by the editorial staff* (typically this takes about 30 days, though I've had between 3-50 days). The editor decides if the paper is good enough to

send out to reviewers. Even getting past this stage is an important milestone in anyone's career.

ii. *Peer review by 2-3 reviewers*. This normally takes about 3 months (though I've had it take over a year). Personally, I chase up the editor at the 100 day mark.

iii. *The decision*. There are normally four outcomes: (1) accepted as it is (rare); (2) accepted with some fairly innocuous changes to be made; (3) rejected outright (sadly very common); (4) rejected but with an invitation to resubmit often with some very detailed comments to help you do this ("revise and resubmit", an extremely common step towards eventual publication).

If you are asked to revise and resubmit the normal time frame is 12-18 months. You can do it much more quickly but since you have the opportunity to get it right if you do what the reviewers ask then it is wise to take a good proportion of the time they offer. The revisions are normally substantial and the invitation to resubmit is invariably a one-time offer.

It may easily take another couple of months before the final decision.

iv. *Print*. Once your paper is accepted it may well be another six months before it appears "online early" at the journal and another six (I've had much longer) before appearing in print.

v. *Duration*. Assuming that it took you a year to write an article that was ready to be sent out (a fairly typical length of time), then based on the timings given above, an article that goes through the revise/resubmit process could easily take an additional 18 months before being accepted, and further year before anyone actually sees it. From start to finish, that's three and a half years!

3. Acceptance rates

   - Journal acceptance rates are astonishingly low. It is not unusual for a top tier journal to have a 2-5% acceptance rate and most reputable journals have no more than 15-20%. Given that these journals attract the best writers, then even seasoned academics are routinely rejected.

   - You can check journal acceptance rates on their websites and a number of academic site run comparisons.

4. Feedback

   - The quality and quantity of critical feedback from editors and reviewers is very varied. If you haven't received any, then always ask. Every editor knows how important this is to you. Most are sympathetic.

Even when you've had some feedback, it's amazing what a politely worded response – thanking them for having helped you even though the outcome is disappointing – can do. More than once an email like that has triggered a far more personal and detailed set of comments and advice that I've been genuinely grateful for.

- Very quickly one learns the kinds of things that only come with experience: how to express yourself more clearly and precisely; how to formulate a single, clear line of argument that others actually can follow; what is strictly necessary for your argument; what kinds of details or side issues to leave out; and what sort of literature base to include.

5. Selecting a journal

    - Even being rejected can take a long time so it's important to make sure you pick a suitable journal. You don't want to sell yourself short but neither do you want to waste time. If you are aiming at the job market then finding a journal will have the right level of credibility for you will be a determining factor.

    - You should also be sure to choose a journal that is likely to publish on your subject. Editors are apparently frequently astonished at the number of people who seem not to have ever read their journal before submitting. So always browse the website first. You should also look at the names of people who have published there to see if they are in your field and check the members of the editorial board (the group of academic advisors who oversee the journal. There will be a list on the journal's website). If you have never heard of any of them then this does not bode well.

    - Personally, I invariably write to the journal editor first with a brief email asking whether my idea sounds like a good fit. I've always had a nice response and it has given me a positive lift during the long months of waiting.

II - Writing

Writing an article is something of an art form. Any good PhD candidate has mastered enough general philosophy and knows enough about a specialised area to publish something in a decent venue. The stumbling block comes in how to present your ideas. It takes time to develop the requisite skills in presenting an argument. You have to identify a suitably interesting and narrow argument, you need to express yourself in a way that inspires confidence in your readers, and you must avoid raising unnecessary objections in their mind. Often this will be as much about tone, pace and pitch as it will about logic and principle.

1. Focus

    - More than perhaps any other piece of writing, a journal article is a focused piece of work. An article should say only one thing. (If it says more, then the supplementary messages should not distract from the article's main focus but be merely bi-products of making that primary point).

    - For an editor and reviewer to agree that a paper is ready for publication it must be clear what its contribution to the literature and debate is. Focusing on a single point achieves two aims. (1) First, your reader can see what the paper's contribution is. (2) It gives you the opportunity to go deeply enough into an issue to say anything worthwhile.

    - A good article gets straight to the point. The first lines tell you exactly what it will be about, and why this is important and interesting.

    - The only material that makes it into the final article must be justified according to whether it helps make the paper's overall argument. If it doesn't then it must be left out. While this might seem disappointing, it should be seen positively. Save this point for your next paper!

      (A piece of advice a film documentary maker once gave me was that almost invariably, the idea to which you are most wedded and which excites you most, that's the idea that has to be cut! It often just doesn't fit and is being shoehorned in because you like it so much. Be ruthless, she said.)

    - Identifying a single line of argument isn't always easy. It is particularly difficult for someone is doing or has recently completed a PhD because they have so much to say.

      Depending on how original or offbeat your work is, you may often find that to make a point, you have to first prove something else, but this second point only seems to make sense once you have established that first point.

Extracting just one line for an article sometimes seems hopeless! But as you build up a body of work, this problem normally diminishes as you can then simply cite your earlier paper and concentrate on the matter in hand.

(By the way, **writing a BA or MA essay is no different** from writing an article in respect to focus: **Get straight to the point. Make one point. Go deeper into it**. It's that simple).

2. Voice

    - It's important to find a style and tone that suits you. This takes time to work out. Generally, you should use as much natural language as possible. Short, direct sentences, using your own words are invariably easier to understand than technical jargon. It also exudes confidence and is actually more impressive than long-winded turns of phrase.

    - Sometimes brevity is forced upon you. It is often difficult to meet the journal's word count limit (often only 8,000 – 10,000 words) while saying everything you want to say. In these cases you will often find yourself editing out all unnecessary words, not only shortening the paper but making it sharper and crisper into the bargain.

    - As a general rule I can usually cut around 1,000 words without actually losing any substantive points. It's amazing how many additional 'that's other tiny words creep into one's writing.

3. Structure

    - *Sections*: Articles comprise several sections. There is no fixed number of these. But a section needs to be long enough to say something worthwhile and yet short enough to address a coherent sub-topic. Between 3-5 sections is a good number. Each represents a mini chapter, having an introduction to the new point, an argument and a conclusion that links it to the next section. I find that it usually takes 1,500 – 2,500 to do this effectively. But articles vary considerably so look through papers you found clearly written and find what works for you.

    - *Paragraphs*: A good paragraph makes a single substantive point. If the paragraph is too short then it's doubtful that a serious enough point has been made (if a paragraph is less than about five sentences or 100 words then perhaps it should be extended, cut or reworked to fit with another point). If a paragraph is too long then it probably contains too many separate ideas. I find that 200-300 words works best for me.

Combining the two points above, if we assume an average paragraph length of, say, 250 words and section length of, say, 2000, then a section might contain 8 paragraphs. This means that you can make about 8 separate points in that section. In that case, you should be able to get from the start of the new topic that the section introduces to the brink of the next new topic in 8 clear steps corresponding to your paragraphs.

The same principle applies to the whole paper. If there are four sections in a shortish paper, then you will have around 24 paragraphs – or discrete moves – at your disposal. When you are planning and organising your paper, it is sometimes helpful to set these out as 24 bullet points to assess the flow of your argument.

As a rule, the first line of a paragraph should tell you what it's about. A good way to review your own work is to read off the first line of each paragraph, watching to see if this does correspond to the shape of the argument you have outlined. Is this story coherent or complete?

- *Repetition*: There is no room for any repetition when you have only (say) 24 points to make. Always try to keep related material together in one place and refer back to it only rarely. This isn't easy to do but it is good a practice to learn.

- *Pitch*: It is often hard to know how much background to include when writing an article. Context is very important and not all readers will be familiar with the subject. On the other hand, too much detail is tedious and confusing. Often when you first encounter a new area the temptation is to put in too many basic or elementary points that don't distinguish your paper. I find that by telling myself (and telling others) the story over and over again, I naturally start to drop the deadwood and eventually cut straight to the chase.

- *Editing*: A polished paper buys you a lot of goodwill with editors and reviewers. While it may not make the difference between acceptance and rejection, a carefully written paper that is free from typos and actually conforms to the style guidelines of the journal will very often receive more detailed and helpful feedback from reviewers who appreciate the care that has gone into the production.

4. Putting pen to paper

    - Start writing straightaway. Putting pen to paper clarifies one's thoughts. You can have a great idea in your mind but it is only when you put it into written words that it becomes clear how much preliminary explanation is needed, how many convoluted separate strands of argument there actually are, how

significant the objections actually are, and how vague and unclear many of your brilliant-sounding points turn out to be when they are set out in writing.

- Of course you need to plan your article carefully and so writing and planning go together as part of an iterative process. You should always write to a plan. But when you are first faced with a blank piece of paper the mere act of writing often serves as a catalyst for ideas to flow.

- It is always best to block off substantial chunks of time. Writing philosophy is intellectually challenging. One has several balls in the air (or plates spinning on poles) at the same time. A good argument brings together several complicated ideas and objections. All of this takes a fair amount of time and concentration to work up in your mind. I have heard it said that it takes about an hour to 'warm up' and get to the point at which you have all the different parts of the argument in your mind. If you have only set aside an hour then you may well not benefit from this.

5. Responding to review points

    - Getting feedback from reviewers is one of the best things that can happen from the publishing process, irrespective of outcome. This is true even when the review is severe.

    - It is through the review that you improve your writing. Even if the reviewer is wrong it is extremely useful to understand how your arguments are perceived by people from outside your circle. I had learned to write for my supervisor during my PhD. She came to understand everything I was saying and I learned to anticipate her particular viewpoint. So I was astonished to find just how differently my writing was perceived by others, especially in the harsh world of anonymous peer review. (It's only harsh at first. Once you find your way around it you soon discover how to avoid many of the negative comments).

    - Review points should be taken seriously. Publication depends on it. This does not mean, however, that you have to accommodate every comment that each reviewer makes. For one thing, this might not be possible as there can be three or even four separate reviewers. For another, reviewers do not always get things right. Nevertheless, since the comments have come from the people who hold the future of your paper in their hands, you must engage seriously with them.

    - I often find it helpful to write a response letter to the editors and reviewers explaining how I understood their points and setting out my proposed course of action. If I want to push back against a comment, I do it there explaining

why I cannot accommodate that particular point. The advantage of doing this is first that it allows me to take stock of the situation as a whole, linking related points and distilling these into various levels of seriousness to the argument and importance in terms of action from me. A second benefit is that it allows the editor to give me at least an indication that this approach is acceptable before I dedicate several months to the process. Finally, from the feedback from reviewers it does often placate them by showing that I thought carefully about what they'd said even if I reacted differently.

- Finally, it's not unusual to receive two reports with opposite conclusions. (Perhaps editors choose referees with this in mind.) There is often a 'good cop' that understands what you are saying and is broadly supportive and a 'bad cop' that hates what you've done and isn't afraid to say it. Sometimes the latter comes from a slightly different part of the discipline (especially if you work in a cross-disciplinary field) which highlights the often very precise locations of the tight borders that exist between very narrow fields. While this is irritating, you should take heart. It is all useful feedback.

Appendix – Some links and resources

- General advice (Thom Brooks)

  https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1085245

- Acceptance rates

  http://www.reviewmyreview.eu/acceptance-rates-turnaround-time/

- Advice from editors

  https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/jan/03/how-to-get-published-in-an-academic-journal-top-tips-from-editors

- Writing tips

  http://faculty.washington.edu/mbrown/writing.pdf

- Embracing rejection

  https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2013/07/08/essay-importance-rejection-academic-careers