How to get published: What editors and reviewers are looking for

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Aim

• To provide insights on how to maximise the chances of publication
Overview

• Understanding what editors and peer reviewers are looking for
• Providing a working appreciation of the editorial and peer review process
• Sharing experiences and tips on how to maximize the chances of acceptance of a manuscript
First, a bit about me...

- Clinical academic with almost 20 years of experience of undertaking and reporting research
- Editorial positions with numerous journals e.g.
  - BMJ: GP Editorial adviser
  - PLOS Medicine: Methodology adviser
  - JRSM: Research Editor
  - npj: Primary Care Respiratory Medicine: Joint Editor-in-Chief, etc
- Over 700 publications – so plenty of experience as an author!
WHAT ARE EDITORS AND PEER REVIEWERS LOOKING FOR?
What are editors looking for?

• Papers that:
  – Align with their mission/vision
  – Will be of interest to their readership
  – Are scientifically cutting-edge
  – Present work that they can trust
  – Are carefully presented
  – Are likely to be cited

• In summary, work that will help move the scientific field on and in so doing also raise the standing of their journal
What are peer reviewers looking for?

• Papers that:
  – Are scientifically cutting-edge
  – Present work that they can trust
  – Are carefully presented
  – Are respectful of and build on their work and that of colleagues
THE EDITORIAL AND PEER REVIEW PROCESS
Summary of editorial and peer review process

• Most journals will have some variant of the following:
  – Initial screening by editorial assistant to ensure that the manuscript is in scope and that the ‘Instructions for Authors’ have been followed
  – Initial ‘high level’ review by the Editor or Assistant Editor to establish if it is likely to be of interest and is scientifically robust
  – If of interest, detailed peer-review by 2 or more specialists
  – Anywhere between 1-4 rounds of further review for papers that are considered potentially publishable
  – Final technical and linguistic review prior to moving the paper into the publication queue
MAXIMIZING THE CHANCES OF ACCEPTANCE: 5 KEY TIPS
1. Choose an appropriate journal

• The choice of journal is crucial; ideally:
  – It is known for and has a track record of publishing papers in the field
  – It is known to the prospective authors through:
    • Regularly reading the journal
    • Peer-reviewing
    • Contributing as an author

• Tip 1: Have a realistic appreciation of the scientific importance of the paper and choose the target journal accordingly
2. Spend time on the cover letter

• Write a cover letter that is:
  – Personally addressed to the Editor
  – Highlights why the paper is likely to be of interest to the journal’s readership
  – Succinctly summarizes its key contribution(s)
  – Addresses head-on any conflict of interests and how these have been handled so as to minimize the risk of a biased manuscript

• Tip 2: Keep the letter short and to the point!
3. Carefully craft the abstract

• Many papers will be rejected after review of the abstract
• It is therefore important to ensure that the abstract:
  – Tells the ‘story’ of the paper
  – Provides details of the methods, demonstrating that these are robust
  – Highlights the most important findings
  – Summarizes the ‘bottom line’ of the paper

• Tip 3: Spend a lot of time on the abstract and, if possible, get it critically reviewed before submission
4. Key areas to focus on in the paper

- Carefully choose the keywords as these will often be used to identify potential reviewers
- Highlight the importance of the work, but don’t over-egg it
- Ensure that study limitations are thoughtfully discussed
- Take time to check that references are accurate and up-to-date, ideally with some that demonstrate that the journal should be interested in the subject
- Be prepared to go through numerous drafts prior to submission
- Carefully proof the paper prior to submission

*Tip 4: Follow the instructions for authors and focus on the above often ‘make or break’ points*
5. Following editorial and peer review

• If invited to resubmit, then consider this a half-open door...
• Be respectful of editors and peer-reviewers when responding to the feedback
• Try and accommodate all the suggestions as far as is appropriate/possible; where this is not the case, respectfully explain why
• Make it as easy as possible for editors/reviewers to quickly see what revisions have been made in response to the feedback

• Tip 5: Recognize that editors and peer-reviewers have already invested their time and effort in the paper – therefore never be discourteous in your letter of response
CONCLUSIONS
Summary

In order to maximize chances of acceptance:

1. Take a lot of time in choosing an appropriate target journal
2. Write a succinct cover letter highlighting why the work matters and why it is of interest to the journal’s target readership
3. Spend a lot of time on crafting the abstract
4. Avoid key trip-wires in the peer review process when drafting the manuscript
5. Thoughtfully and courteously respond to the suggestions for improvement

Finally, imagine yourself as the editor and peer-reviewer and prepare your submission accordingly
Thank you!

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