

TEN STEPS TOWARDS WRITING AN ACADEMIC PAPER: A GUIDE TO YOUNG AUTHORS

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Preface

When you finish your PhD and start your academic career it is almost certain that the only goal in your mind is publishing papers derived from your dissertation. Publications are important to get you tenure or promotions in the future and they also serve to reassure you that you spend a significant part of your time doing something that is relevant to the profession and valued by your peers. However, many young economists end up finding out the hard way that publishing a paper is no ordinary task. A large number of them will give up the idea of trying to publish a paper after getting rejected a few times. In what follows, you will see a short list of ten steps that should increase the chances of getting your papers accepted. This note is not comprehensive and those interested in more detail are referred to previous work of the same kind such as the guide prepared by Choi (2002), the ten commandments for presenting a conference paper by McAleer and Oxley (2002), the guide for young economists by Thomson (2001), and the guide to professional etiquette in the economics profession by Hamermesh (1992), *inter alia*.

Step 1 – Explain Your Idea Clearly

This might sound obvious, at first, but many people give up the idea of publishing a paper after trying several journals and get rejected for lack of clarity. So the first requirement is that you manage to express yourself very clearly as to what is the question you want to raise with your paper. But that is not all. You must also have a very clear idea of the relevance of the point you are going to address. You can do that in two ways: (i) referencing the most important papers in the field to show the reader and the referees that you know that the issue you are focusing on has also been of concern to other authors; and (ii) based on your preliminary literature review pointing out what the contribution of your paper is. Do not choose to write about obsolete topics. Use search tools such as EconLit and the Social Science Research Network (www.ssrn.com) to keep informed about the most recent publication in your field.

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Step 2 – Discuss Your Methodology

The second important step you have to observe is concerned with the discussion of the methodology you are going to use in your paper. After spelling out the main contribution of your paper, you must explain how you are going to accomplish that. This is valid both for applied and theoretical work. For empirical papers, use the Introduction to advance some of the most attracting features of the methodology you have chosen to use². For theoretical papers, try to sell the idea that the modeling strategy that you have chosen is better than any other available in the literature. Later in the paper, present further details of the methodology without being boring and do not try the easy way by stating “it is straightforward to show”. Remember, referees are not stupid and at the first hint that you have not treated your paper seriously they will make their mind up and decide for rejection.

Step 3 – Discuss Your Results with Parsimony

After motivating your paper (Step 1) and presenting your methodology (Step 2), you are ready to tackle another very important step of the challenge that is writing an academic paper. The discussion of your results is the climax of the game. You have to be clear cut in your analysis by deciding what is relevant and worth mentioning and what is tangential and could be discarded. A rule that young authors learn by experience is that editors and referees like short papers. If you spend 5 pages in your Introduction, 5 pages with a literature review, and another 5 describing your methodology, you have already reached the size limit of a publishable paper without discussing your results. That is, if you have spent 15 pages of your paper and have not delivered your message, forget it as no referee will recommend publication of your work.

Step 4 – Relate Your Results to the Relevant Literature

When writing about your results make sure that you are always careful about similar results found by other authors by giving credit to them through citations to earlier papers in the literature. This is a mandatory practice for empirical work and of utmost importance for theoretical pieces. By referencing the relevant literature not only in the Introduction but also when you talk about your results you are linking your results to previous findings. This does not mean that you are lacking originality. On the contrary, by acting like this you are showing maturity and academic honesty and are more likely to convince the referees that your paper should be accepted for publication. Otherwise referees will probably regret that they have reached the end of your paper just to find out that you are another big head who thinks that the wheel can be reinvented. It is amazing how many people like that are out there complaining about how unfair referees are for not accepting their brilliant ideas.

² Choi (2002)’s *Writing Strategies* recommends that you should acknowledge the limitations of your paper only once in the conclusions to avoid building the impression that your approach do not have any contribution to the literature (see his recommendation # 16).

Step 5 – Write a Perfect Abstract

Many papers are rejected because of a bad abstract. Referees are normal people like you and have their own professional obligations other than reading your papers. They usually screen the several papers they receive for refereeing through the abstract. So it is easy to imagine that a busy referee will not bother reading a paper carefully that includes a badly written abstract to start with. This increases exponentially the probability of rejection and if the referee does decide to read it s/he will simply be looking for reasons to reject it. Therefore, your challenge is to try not to have your paper rejected in the initial 15 seconds of being screened by the referee. The abstract must be clear, free of typographical mistakes, provocative, and easily readable. It should say what you are doing, how you did it, how important your paper is, and how you are contributing to the literature. And remember, just because the abstract appears first you do not have to write it before you write the paper. Write the abstract after you have finished the paper and change it several times until you feel it is clear enough.

Step 6 – Revise, Revise and Revise

After you have finished the paper, it is time to revise it. It is a big mistake to submit a paper just after you finish writing it. You must be aware that publishing is no easy task and that a job only half-way good is not good at all. First revise your paper and then put it away for a couple of days before revising it again. This will prevent you from not seeing those obvious mistakes that your eye will not catch after spending a long time on the same task. Remember to check basic things such as: avoiding very long or very short paragraphs – a page should have at least three paragraphs; not using I in the paper as referees may not like egocentric authors³ – you can try that after you become famous; the balance between theory and applications; not forgetting to include all cited papers in the references; and whether your notation is simple and consistent. After you are satisfied that the paper is a good preliminary draft, send it to a couple of colleagues from your department for comments. Although they may not offer a great deal of innovative ideas, as they might not be specialists on the subject, there is always a chance that they can catch some mistake or point out something that you have neglected.

Step 7 – Present Your Paper in Conferences Before Submitting It

Do not send your paper immediately to a journal after you have finished revising it. Present it first in academic conferences and department seminars in other universities. This practice may be of help when you are new in the profession as potential referees might attend your session and have an initial explanation about your paper. Remember that you have to do a good job in selling your paper in conferences and seminars. Your presentation must be well prepared in advance and not one night before the conference or seminar.⁴ Never, ever think

³ See recommendation # 9 of Choi (2002)'s *Writing Strategies*.

⁴ The interested reader is referred to McAleer and Oxley (2002) for a guide on how to present a paper in a conference.

about making a photocopy of your paper and transform it into overhead transparencies. If you make a poor presentation and someone sitting in the audience becomes your referee think about the likely recommendation s/he is going to make about publication of your paper.

Step 8 – Revise the Paper Once More

After you have presented your paper in at least two good conferences, it is time to revise it one last time. In this round you might already know who the likely referees of your paper are. Give them credit by citing their papers in the Introduction. The chances are that the editor will choose someone working on the same area as you and someone who is quoted in your paper to be your referee. Explain the relevance of their work and how it relates to your paper. Be nice and accurate about the work of others and avoid heavy criticisms. People are sensitive and so are their friends. If you criticize someone and this person or one of his/her friends becomes your referee, they will make every effort to reject your current paper as well as your future work. If you have already spotted enemies in your field, exclude them from your list of references in the first draft of your paper as a survival strategy.⁵

Step 9 – Choose the Right Journal

The choice of journal where to send your paper to is as important as anything else in the process of getting your paper published. Think about that with care and, if possible, before you start writing the paper. Scan journals to check whether they have been publishing papers on issues related to your work. You do not want to send an empirical paper to a journal specialized in theory and vice-versa. Choose good journals to start with and if you get rejected the first time try another two good journals before sending your paper to lower quality journals. One gets rejected more often than accepted and you must remember that only the tough can survive.⁶ Do not send papers to journals that have the habit of rejecting your work consistently and do not send more than one paper to a same journal in a short length of time. Two papers in two different journals are better than two papers in the same journal. It is also a good idea to talk to more experienced people about their history with journals.

Step 10 – Write a Polite Cover Letter

You have finished your paper, got comments from your peers, presented it in at least two conferences and seminars, revised it once again, and chosen where to send it to. Now you must worry about the letter that will accompany it to the editorial office. Do not try to replicate your

⁵ Choi (2002) mentions that sometimes it is wise to ask editors to exclude people from the list of possible referees, as long as you ask the editorial office informally in advance if that is appropriate.

⁶ Check this site <http://www.columbia.edu/~xs23/reject.htm> and see what a famous macroeconomist has to say about having a paper rejected.

paper in the cover letter by explaining in detail your methodology and how relevant your paper is. Editors will not waste their time reading it. Just be polite and include the title of your paper and one or two lines about the issue you are dealing with. Ask the editorial office to acknowledge receipt of the manuscript and send the package with the necessary number of copies through registered mail.

Epilogue

A good journal will send you a letter within 6 to 8 weeks saying that they have received your submission and whether it has been sent to referees or if you were lucky enough to get rejected up front by the editor. Sometimes it is better to receive an honest evaluation about the prospects of your paper straight away than having to wait a long time for a disappointing referee report⁷. If you struggle to receive an answer confirming receipt of your submission, you have obtained enough information to make you think twice about sending another paper to that journal. Referee reports should reach you anytime between 3 to 6 months after the initial submission, although this varies considerably from journal to journal. Be prepared to wait for at least 1.5 year before your paper is published.

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⁷ Referees can be very nasty and unfair. For your future comfort, see what experienced economists have to say about bad referees by consulting these home pages: www.journalsfeedback.org and www.geocities.com/nastyreferee/index.html.