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Writing for Publication: Overcoming the Barriers that Block Us

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For many new academics, getting published seems like a difficult and mysterious process. It is threatening and stressful, too, because promotion and tenure are linked to publishing in respected journals. The purpose of this paper is to dispel some of the mystery and stress associated with publishing by addressing four common barriers to effective writing and publishing. We often cite these barriers as excuses for why we aren't publishing. Fortunately, each can be overcome relatively easily.

Barrier 1:

“I Don't Know Where to Submit My Manuscript.”

Too often, our writing is blocked because we don't know where to submit a manuscript. After all, a manuscript needs to be written to the audience of a particular journal, so it is important to have the journal and its readership in mind when you begin writing. The way around this barrier, then, is to *do your homework*.

Your homework begins in the periodical section of the library. Do you realize how many journals there are that are possible outlets for your writing? Spend an afternoon examining the journals. Gather information about each journal's purpose, audience, publication cycle, and themes. Copy the guidelines for manuscripts, editor's contact information, and an article representative of the journal's style. Then set up a file to have this information about target journals readily available to you. Update the information in the file at least annually and add to it as you become aware of additional journals which are potential outlets for your work.

As you identify target journals, think divergently. How can you slant your manuscript to address different audiences? A study of second graders' use of math manipulatives is obviously appropriate for a mathematics education journal, but with a different focus certain aspects of the study might also be interesting to the readership of journals in early childhood education, teacher education, and cognitive psychology. If the research was conducted in an urban setting, consider targeting urban education or multicultural journals. Finally, consider reporting the study in both research journals with academic audiences and applied journals aimed at practitioners. If you think divergently and write with specific audiences in mind, you can potentially publish various aspects of one study in three or four different journals.

And don't be afraid to aim high. Lacking confidence, inexperienced writers often target only less competitive journals with high acceptance rates. These are good outlets for many manuscripts, but if you have a strong study of national interest, submit it to a more competitive national journal. Even if the manuscript isn't accepted, you will gain valuable feedback that will make the revised manuscript stronger. As a rule of thumb, if you have a credible study to report, submit it to a leading, national journal first. If it is not accepted, try a less rigorous national journal, then a regional or state journal.

Barrier 2:

“I Don't Have Time to Write.”

Without a doubt, this is the excuse we use most often to explain our lack of publications. Remember, though, that everybody has the same amount of time. The difference between prolific writers and those who are less published is how they use that time; how much of it they carve out for writing. The way around the time barrier is to *know yourself*.

You may already be aware of your optimum work times. Do you work better in the morning, afternoon, or late at night? What environment enables you to be most productive? Some people need lots of light, loud music, and a cluttered desk. Others need soft light, a comfortable chair, and no distractions, including music. Identify when you write best, and focus on using those times and creating conditions conducive to writing.

Many people block out one day a week as their “writing day.” While this sounds good, in reality it doesn't work well for most of us. Inevitably, meetings or other distractions gradually erode that block of time. Further, it is difficult to stay focused on one project for eight hours. Experts agree that maximizing a small chunk of writing time each day is more productive, especially if it is the same time every day. For example, you might write for one hour first thing every morning. This routine provides more focused writing time and enables you to easily maintain your line of thought from one morning to the next.

No matter when you decide to write, protect your writing time. Stay at home, if possible, to avoid distractions inherent to academic offices. Schedule no meetings during that time; simply say that you are not available. Post a sign on your door: “I'm writing. Please do not disturb.” Your colleagues should respect your writing time, and you may inspire them to find more time for writing themselves.

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Barrier 3:
“I’m Writing but Not Getting Anything Done.”

Some people spend a lot of time writing but have few publications to show for it. They may be working on multiple writing projects so lack the focus needed to complete any one of them. They may be perfectionists who continually rework manuscripts trying to make every word and thought just perfect. They may be buried in data and literature reviews, and confused about the next steps. All of these barriers can be overcome by *getting organized*.

Make no mistake, there are no shortcuts to good writing. Successful writing involves gaining information from a variety of sources, organizing it logically, and presenting it precisely. These processes can be done manually or with the aid of a computer. Circumventing any of these processes results in a disorganized, weak manuscript.

Copy machines have ruined many inexperienced writers. They copy dozens of articles then read and highlight important points. When the time comes to organize the ideas into a manuscript, they spread the articles out around them and try to retrieve bits of information that are related. The result is rambling, disorganized manuscripts and writers who are frustrated because they took shortcuts.

What is a better way to retrieve information and organize it? Try using 4X6-inch notecards. Start with bibliography cards. As you read articles, list the complete bibliographic reference for each source on the bibliography cards. Number each entry sequentially for later reference. Now you are ready to begin gathering information. First, draw a one-inch square in the upper left corner of each notecard. Next, begin reading and taking notes directly onto the notecards rather than highlighting the articles. If you are writing a manuscript on teacher reflection, for example, you might find a definition of reflection. Copy the definition onto the notecard, and in the left corner square, write “definition of reflection.” This note tells you what concept or information the notecard contains without having to read the card. After the definition, write the number of that source from the bibliography cards and the page number where you obtained the information. This way, you will be able to locate the original text for any notes you have on notecards. Report only one definition or bit of information on each notecard.

By the end of your literature search, you might have five notecards with definitions on them, ten with notes about the importance of reflecting, two with examples of teachers engaged in reflective practice, and three with benefits of reflecting on teaching. Putting the articles aside, look through the notecards to see the sort of information you have and additional information that you might need. Using the notes in the corner of the cards, arrange the cards into a logical outline based on the information they contain. By sorting

the cards into an outline, you can then write a well-organized paper directly from the notecards.

Designate a space where you are comfortable writing. Have ample supplies, including pencils, highlighters, notecards, staples, paper clips, folders, and scratch paper, readily available. That way you will not be distracted by searching for needed materials. Keep your work-in-progress in an easily accessible place on top of your desk or in a drawer so that you can pick it up and continue working on it without wasting time.

Barrier 4:
“I’m Waiting to Hear Back From the Journal.”

Once you have a manuscript out under review, it is not time to sit back and relax! It may take six to twelve months for the journal to respond to your manuscript. Waiting to hear creates a barrier to continued writing productivity. The way around the response barrier is to *pace yourself*.

A productive professor once shared her secret: always have one manuscript in press, one under review, and one in process. That is, while you’re waiting to hear back from a journal, begin working on another manuscript. Once this cycle is established, it provides a comfortable and productive writing pace.

It is important, too, to handle rejection productively. First, don’t take it personally. A rejected manuscript doesn’t reflect on who you are. The write-up may have been flawed, and you can fix that. The topic may not have been of interest to the journal, and you can send it somewhere else. The manuscript may have been reviewed by biased or tough reviewers. Remember, reviewers are people just like you. They aren’t perfect. They have opinions, bad days, and busy schedules that may affect how they evaluate your manuscript. Learn from reviewers. Consider their advice against what you intend the manuscript to communicate. Rework the rejected manuscript immediately and send it to another journal within two weeks. This helps you handle rejection realistically and productively and keeps your writing cycle flowing.

It is also important to know when to give up. Reviewers usually differentiate between a weak write-up and a weak study. If the write-up is weak, it can be fixed. If the study is weak or flawed, it can’t be fixed and may not be publishable. If you know that your study is flawed, don’t try to hide it. In the manuscript, address the study’s weaknesses as limitations and focus on what can be learned from the study in spite of those limitations. If the study is seriously flawed, as sad as it is to say, you may need to abandon the data. Don’t waste months trying to rework the write-up or to find another outlet. Recognize what you learned about research from the faulty study and undertake a stronger, more publishable study.