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How To Choose the Right Journal for Your Manuscript*

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A M E R I C A N C O L L E G E O F



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How To Choose the Right Journal for Your Manuscript*

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Key words: impact factor; medical journals; medical publishing

There are many variables influencing the choice of journal for manuscript submission. Factors involved include the visibility of the journal, the focus of the journal and how well it matches the topic of the manuscript, the impact factor of the journal, the timeliness of the editorial office process and whether feedback is constructive, journal accessibility, author costs, and the governance of the journal. Among these, the impact factor plays a particularly significant role in choosing a journal, and yet it is also one of the more controversial areas in terms of the way it is utilized. Having a set of guidelines to assess which journals will suit your manuscript best is invaluable and may make a significant difference to your publication success.

Choosing the right journal for a manuscript can be a challenging exercise, and many factors are likely to influence the final decision. It is important to be clear about what is motivating the decision to publish and to have a set of criteria by which the merits of a journal can be assessed, thus maximizing the chance that the author's expectations will be met. Finally, a system or checklist to actually help choose the best journal for one's manuscript can be invaluable.

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WHY PUBLISH?

There are a number of reasons why authors are keen to publish. Some reasons are inevitably more altruistic than others, and for many authors multiple reasons apply. Ideally, there is a desire to advance human knowledge and/or enhance patient care, and to communicate this to others in the field. Submitting for publication should provide useful peer review of one's research, and the publication of a manuscript has the potential to encourage networking with individuals and groups with similar research interests. At a more pragmatic level, publication in a peer-reviewed journal can aid career advancement, assist in winning grants and research support, and act as a catalyst for attracting high-quality staff and students.

POSITIVE FEATURES OF A GOOD JOURNAL

The factors that contribute to a journal being successful and being valued are many and varied, and there is also a complex interplay between authors, editorial office, publisher, sponsoring organizations, and citation rates and, if working positively, will create a perpetual cycle that enhances the reputation of the journal (Fig 1). Some of these issues are discussed below.

Recognition Factor

If a journal is well known and readily recognized by one's peer group or target audience, then the published material is likely to be seen, read, and acted on by the same groups. What characterizes such a journal? It is usually highly valued by the author's peers and mentors (and so is mentioned in conversation and at scientific presentations), and it is usually readily accessible. There will often be a built-in readership, such as the members of a sponsoring Society. It will need to be listed in Medline and in other search engines and be present in libraries and on institutional electronic access systems. Not infrequently, such journals will have ac-

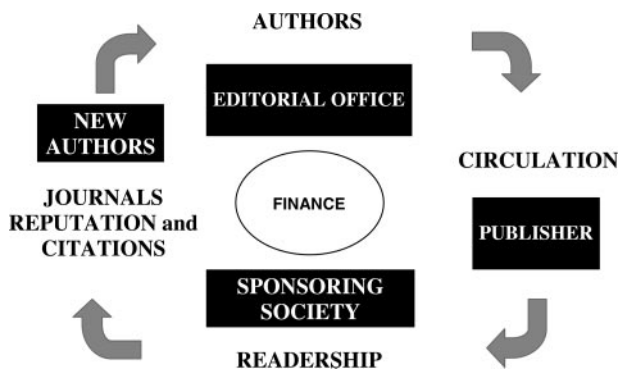


FIGURE 1. Interactions that influence a successful publication and can create a perpetual cycling.

cess to good public relations services, and so the published data will often be visible in the popular press. There are probably other elements that provide populist appeal but are hard to define and may reflect the mix of publications and the general ethos and philosophy of the journal in question.

TYPE OF PUBLICATION

It is important to match the scope of the journal with the topic of the research work being submitted. Does the journal publish articles that are clinical, basic science, or translational research? Is the journal general in nature, or is it organ based or targeting a subspecialty area of pulmonary disease such as epidemiology or a specific cell or cell-signaling pathway, and is it the best match for the area of research interest being reported? Journals vary in the types of articles they publish and include the following: review articles and editorials, hypotheses, short and technical reports, scientific letters, case reports, letters to the editor, supplements, original articles, and review series. Ideally the submitted manuscript will fit neatly under one of these headings, and it is important that the journal chosen has this particular form of publication in its portfolio. All of the above factors will also influence the target audience and the breadth of appeal of the journal.

CITATION AND IMPACT FACTOR

Citations and impact factor play a major role in how journals are perceived by authors and by external agencies such as granting bodies and universities. The impact factor was devised by Eugene Garfield, the founder of the Institute for Scientific Information, now part of Thomson Scientific, a large, worldwide, US-based publisher. Impact factors are calcu-

lated each year by the Institute for Scientific Information for the journals it indexes, and the factors and indexes are published in *Journal Citation Reports*.^{1,2} The validity of the impact factor is controversial because many extraneous factors that are not necessarily directly linked to the quality of the publications of a journal can influence the rating achieved. Nevertheless, it remains the default method for assessing the publishing success of a journal. The impact factor is calculated by dividing the number of citations to publications in the previous 2 years by the number of articles published. The impact factor reflects the citation rate of the average article in a journal and not a specific article. Published critical appraisal of the impact factor is limited.²⁻⁹ There appears to be a weak relationship between the impact factor of a journal and the subsequent citation rate of a given article.³ In recent times, many new journals have had an increase in their impact factor, while many journals with long standing reputations have not, and in some cases their impact factor has fallen.⁴ Journals with an increasing impact factor cite active recruitment of better articles from researchers, offering better author services, boosting the journals media profile, and more careful article selection. Editors frequently report mixed feelings about using the impact factor to evaluate journals.⁵ There is limited information on how scientific information is distributed among journals. Only a few journals out of many have contributed significantly to a specific topic or area, and not surprisingly these are mainly journals that are topic based rather than being general. Recent citation analyses in the sciences have revealed that 150 journals account for 25% of publications and 50% of citations, while 2,000 journals account for 85% of publications and 95% of citations.⁶ However the core group of significant journals is not static, and its composition is changing constantly. There is a proliferation of new journals and the Institute for Scientific Information reviews 2,000 new journal titles annually but selects only 10 to 12% for longer-term impact factor evaluation.⁶ Other methods of assessing journals and their publications exist, such as overall citation rate, citation half-life, and immediacy factor, but these have not gained much traction as yet. Within any one journal, the percentage of articles being cited can vary. One study⁷ has reported that approximately 17% of articles accrued 50% of the total citations for the journals studied. These authors⁷ have also argued strongly for quoting the noncitation rate of a journal because it is independent of the total number of citations. Despite diversity of opinion on the merits of the impact factor, it remains an important variable in choosing the journal in which to publish. Furthermore, it is sensible to

try to assess which journals are on the ascent with respect to impact factor and which are not.

EDITORIAL OFFICE STANDARDS AND EFFICIENCY

The approach and efficiency of the editorial office of a journal can have a large bearing on how an author and manuscript fare. The first important aspect is the "Instructions to Authors"; are they readily accessible, are they comprehensive, and do they clearly set out what is expected from authors and how the manuscript will be handled by the journal? A journal is much more attractive to authors if it has a reputation for using good referees and for providing helpful and constructive comments from their associate editors and editors. Journals that have a friendly and personal interface are more likely to be supportive if problems arise. Timeliness is an increasingly important issue for all authors. Journals with a high rejection rate should ensure that submitting authors receive a rapid decision on whether the manuscript is accepted or not. In the future, being able to access information on the turnaround time of a journal will have a major impact on journal choice. In some instances, it may be important to the author whether fast-tracking for publication is available or not. Electronic submission systems that are Web based are also an important feature of a journal and allow easy submission processes, rapid management of manuscripts, and a record of all activities that then allows authors to track where their manuscript resides in the review process, and is increasingly being used by authors to benchmark journals.

PUBLISHING AND DISTRIBUTION FACTORS

In the final analysis, how a manuscript is presented by the journal will have a significant impact on readership, and therefore the quality of the layout, the typeface and paper quality, and the way figures and tables are handled are important. Communication between the authors and the publisher with respect to galley proofs is important, as well as whether free print or portable document format (PDF) copies are available, or if there is the freedom to post articles on one's own Web site. As with the editorial office process, timeliness in publishing is important, with the increasing use of electronic prepublication being fundamental in ensuring that readers have timely access to an accepted manuscript.

How readily available the journal is will influence its visibility and accessibility; journals should be available in print format and electronically, in libraries, and in prepublication systems. Copyrighting and grant body demands are an area of some conflict, but

Table 1—Checklist for Choosing a Suitable Journal for Your Research Work

Will the journal meet the author's aspirations in terms of publishing his or her work?
Is the impact factor and the "prestige factor" of the journal sufficient for the authors?
Is the focus of the journal similar to the main theme of the manuscript?
Is the review process supportive, both in terms of timeliness and in providing constructive and useful criticism?
Is there some rapport with the journal staff?
Is there a desire to support the organization that sponsors the journal?
Is cost or rapidity of publication an issue?

this is slowly being resolved. Some journals are more active than others in dealing with this.

COSTS

For some authors, cost is an important factor. Many journals charge no fees to authors. However, many charge either a submission fee, an acceptance fee, or a per-published page fee. This may influence authors' decisions. The cost of publishing color figures may also influence some authors for whom color figures are of scientific importance, and for some the cost of reprints can be an issue.

GOVERNANCE AND FUNDING OF THE JOURNAL

This can subtly influence submission decision making. Will the manuscript be treated in a fair and equitable manner? The stature of the editorial board may provide some reassurance as to the standard of the journal both in terms of governance and journal stature. The processes in place for managing publishing ethics may influence some authors and certainly can reflect on the overall way the journal is managed. How the

Table 2—Principles and Advice for Choosing the Most Appropriate Journal

Is the manuscript basic science or clinical, and is it of a general nature or very specific?
Aim for the highest possible journal in terms of visibility and quality
Balance the use of top-quality journals with the need for rapid publication in possibly lesser journals
Read instructions to authors and ensure they meet your requirements
Look at recent issues of the journal and make sure you understand journal style
Consult your peers and mentors for advice
Be cautious about new journals; will they survive?

editor is appointed and who monitors the editor's performance are other less visible factors that sometimes can become an issue. For journals that are new or not well known, the financial security of the journal may be important in terms of its longevity, and those journals supported by organizations with a strong financial support base are more likely to survive long term.

HOW TO CHOOSE A JOURNAL

Currently, there are 33 respiratory journals that are monitored for citation rates. This clearly provides a significant choice for authors. In addition, there are many other nonrespiratory journals that accept manuscripts that are relevant to respiratory science. There are some essential questions that an author should ask when trying to choose the best journal for his or her manuscript (Table 1), and there are some general guidelines to ensuring a wise decision (Table 2). Finding the best journal for your manuscript is complex and multifactorial and will also change over time. Nevertheless, careful analysis and advice from mentors will increase the success of one's publications and research.

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