

What are the Characteristics of a Manuscript Acceptable for Publication?

For the best chance of success, authors should avoid these five shortcomings.

Aurora Denial, OD, FAAO



Scholarship can be defined as the “creation, discovery, advancement or transformation of knowledge.”¹ The knowledge is then evaluated by peer review and made public.¹ The peer review process is designed to ensure publications of the highest quality. This process evaluates research design, analysis of data, conclusions, discussion, etc. Experts within a topical area

may review with full identification of the author or blindly depending on the protocol of the individual journal. The journal editor usually has the final opinion on acceptance or rejection of a manuscript while taking into consideration the reviewers’ recommendations. Most times acceptance is contingent on revisions of the article. Acceptance/rejection rates can vary depending on many factors, including size limitations in relation to online vs. print journals, topical areas for general vs. specialty journals or size of the profession. A journal’s acceptance/rejection rate is sometimes posted on its website. The *New England Journal of Medicine* posts a 5% acceptance rate, and the *Journal of the American Medical Association* posts a 9% acceptance rate.^{2,3}

Understanding a journal’s philosophy, readership, acceptance rate and demographics can be helpful in deciding where to publish and the likelihood of success. This brings us to the question “What are the characteristics of a manuscript that is acceptable for publication?” To provide insight into the peer review and publication process, I have listed the five most common reasons manuscripts initially get rejected by *Optometric Education*: poor study design, lack of scholarly qualities, information not relevant or new, inappropriate or incorrect analysis or interpretation of data, and poor writing. In some cases the concerns are fixable and the manuscript will get a second chance with a successful outcome.

1. Poor Study Design

Poor study design can involve many different aspects of a project. A methodology that is not sufficient to investigate the hypothesis is the most common. This may include a lack of a control group, lack of specificity or clarity in the methodology, or outcome assessment that reflects only students’ satisfaction. Student satisfaction surveys are important in determining students’ perceptions but can be controversial when trying to demonstrate learning. The use of student surveys in addition to other outcome measures for learning tends to produce more reliable results. A successful manuscript is one that reflects a high-quality study and research design. Therefore, consult with as many experts as possible when in the design phase of any project. The goal is to prevent a weak or poor experimental design, which is not fixable after the project has been implemented.

2. Lacks Scholarly Components

A lack of scholarly components is another common reason a paper would not get accepted for publication. Scholarly elements may include novel insights, interpreting themes in discoveries, identifying connections between discoveries, linking theory and practice, or comparisons or analyses of teaching methodologies. A successful manuscript reflects scholarly elements that are linked to past and current scholarly work.

3. Not New, Innovative or Impactful

Information that is not novel or new may not be worthy of publication. The important questions of “so what?” and “who cares?” must be considered when designing a project. The potential impact and generalizability of the project will help to answer those questions. A literature search that demonstrates a lack or paucity of information can be helpful in demonstrating novelty of a project. In the writing phase, the

authors must clearly and obviously explain to the readership why the topic and project are important. Brainstorming with colleagues to make sure your project will answer the questions above is important because this is not fixable after the project has been implemented.

4. Inappropriate Data Analysis

Inappropriate or incorrect analysis of data often leads to results and conclusions that may not be accurate. Misinterpretation of data may lead to conclusions that are ambiguous, not supported by the data, or fail to consider alternative explanations. Consultation with a statistician and colleagues knowledgeable in the area being studied can help resolve this issue before the review process and lead to a more favorable outcome.

5. Poor Writing

Poor writing includes a lack of clarity, poor spelling and grammar. This can be very distracting to reviewers and negatively impact the review. Although this is a very common issue, it is also one that is most easily fixable. Most articles

published in *Optometric Education* are submitted by optometric faculty. Therefore, utilize your colleagues to review a manuscript before sending it out. It is often also helpful to have the manuscript read by a lay person who can comment on the clarity and organization of the paper from a different perspective. Authors rarely are able to spot deficiencies in their own writing.

Make the Best of an Opportunity

In summary, to increase the likelihood of success in publication, consult with a design/statistical expert upfront, read the journal of intended publication, provide concrete evidence for relevance and novelty, ensure the paper includes scholarly elements, and have both a lay person and expert review the manuscript before sending it into the journal.

Contributing to the optometric education literature is a tremendous opportunity to serve the profession and improve individual skills as a researcher and writer. Peer reviewed publications support the growth and evolution of the profession.

References

1. Kennedy RH, Gubbins PO, Luer M, et al. Developing and sustaining a culture of scholarship. *AM J Phar Educ.* 2003;67(3):Article 92.
2. New England Journal of Medicine, Information for Authors. [cited May 30, 2014] Available from: <http://www.nejm.org/page/author-center/publication-process>.
3. Journal of the American Medical Association, Why Publish in JAMA? [cited May 30, 2014] Available from: <http://jama.jamanetwork.com/public/WhyPublish.aspx>.

Don't Miss It

Between now and August 1, watch your Inbox for the announcement that the Summer 2014 issue of ASCO's newsletter *Eye on Education* is available.

In addition to the news from ASCO, the schools and colleges and industry that you've come to expect, the issue will include insights from ASCO leaders as they discuss the recently released findings of the AOA/ASCO National Eye Care Workforce Study.

In the meantime, visit the ASCO Newsroom at <http://www.opted.org/newsroom-media/> to read top-line results from the study and learn how to obtain a digital or printed copy of the findings.