

Publish or Perish! An Editorial Perspective

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It is a great honor and privilege to receive this Lifetime Achievement Award. I thank the Southern Agricultural Economics Association (SAEA) and each of you for this recognition. As I recall, the Association presented its first Lifetime Achievement Award to twelve honorees in 1987. I was the secretary–treasurer at the time and was responsible for designing/ordering the award plaques. In retrospect, perhaps I should have ordered the plaques in gold.

In receiving this award, I would like to pay my tributes in memory of two extraordinarily good friends and mentors, Dr. Joseph Havlicek, Jr., and Dr. Robert Raunika, who guided and nurtured my professional life with encouragement and sound advice. They showed me the ropes and inspired me to serve our profession. Without them, the opportunity to even be considered for such an award would not be possible. I am also very grateful for my colleagues' unselfish hard work, especially Dr. Michael E. Wetzstein, who nominated me for this award. There are a lot of other people in the Association who are worthy of this honor, and I am humbled to be present in the company of the current and past award recipients.

Publishing in scholarly journals is considered by many as the primary means of intellectual dissemination among scholars. The concept of “publish or perish” was impressed upon me early while I was still in graduate school, and to this day it remains one of the time-honored rules of the academic professional—especially for the young assistant professors. As we are all keenly aware, our promotion/tenure process and merit-pay scales are to a large extent tied to journal

articles and other scholarly research. Although it is certainly not a perfect or ideal process, we recognize and reward scholarship more readily through refereed publications. Hilmer and Hilmer suggest that academic agricultural economists received significant positive returns for publishing in top agricultural and applied economics journals, regional journals, and the top 36 economics journals.

Reflecting on my career path, I have spent more than one-third of my academic years serving as editor/coeditor of our professional publications, including the *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics* and the *Journal of Agribusiness*. I thought it would be appropriate to offer some comments and viewpoints on this process that has played an important role in my life as a scholar. My observations will be focused on “publish” (naturally), and I will direct my remarks primarily to the young aspiring authors in terms of what I have learned from the perspective of an editor.

Why a Paper Gets Rejected

More often than not, we have all experienced the inevitable dreadful moments when we opened the ego-shattering “Dear John” letter (more popularly now an e-mail) of rejection from a journal editor. How embarrassing! The editor and referees of the rejecting journal are in effect telling you that your work is of no value. It feels devastating to have your confidence and belief in yourself trampled. As a person who has more than his share of rejections, my take is—don't take it personally. The process of publishing journal articles is complex and variable. The acceptance rate for the top-

quality journals in agricultural economics is only about 15% or less, while the second-tier regional journals publish perhaps 30% from the submitted manuscripts. What you need is a strategy to overcome this common and regular recurrence of editorial rejection.

An analysis of editorial decisions by economics and political science journal editors suggests that unimportant or insignificant contributions (29.3%), methodological shortcomings or flaws (26.0%), inadequate theories or concepts (21.3%), poor writing or presentation (10.0%), and being out of scope for the particular journal (9.6%) are the most frequently cited reasons for rejecting manuscripts (Bonjean and Hullum). Clearly some problems are correctable or salvageable, while others probably cannot be rectified with any amount of revision or rewriting: for example, a methodological flaw using improper sampling techniques is simply not revisable.

After overcoming the initial shock and anguish of receiving a rejection letter, you should reflect on the reviewers' criticisms objectively and try to understand their point of view in a constructive way to improve the manuscript. Do not simply turn around and resubmit the rejected manuscript elsewhere without making any revisions based on reviewers' comments and suggestions. There is a real chance that you may encounter the same reviewer(s) again. How you respond to the rejection can go a long way in ensuring a more favorable outcome in the future. As the saying goes, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try, and try again!" In fact, you should probably try three times (third time is a charm?) before concluding that there must really be something wrong with your paper and filing it away for good. The simple fact is that most manuscripts submitted for publication in refereed journals get rejected at one time or another before they find a publication home (Klingner, Scanlon, and Pressley). Persistence is a required virtue in getting your research published.

Improving Your Odds of Acceptance

Aside from the issues of substance and content, there are a few simple things that an author can

do to enhance the probability of getting his or her work published in a scholarly journal. First and foremost, if you are an untenured assistant professor, maintain a stock of at least five or six papers under review at all time. Diversify your research as well as your publication portfolio. Submitting all your manuscripts to the first-tier journals is risky, while sending all your papers to low-quality journals is equally unadvisable. Maintain a good balance between quality and quantity of publications. Moreover, try to publish in different journals of comparable quality. It is better to have three papers in three different journals than three papers in one journal, assuming the relative quality of the journals is the same.

If you have two good ideas about a topic, develop them into two manuscripts instead of putting them into one paper. With two manuscripts for publication consideration, your chance of getting at least one of them accepted is more than doubled. As an additional bonus, this strategy also shortens the length of your manuscript and as a result shortens the wait for an editorial decision. Long papers take longer to read and review; and the longer a manuscript, the more likely that the referees will either misunderstand it or find something wrong with the reasoning or interpretation of results.

Assuming you have attended to all the technicalities in preparing your manuscript, one of the common mistakes that many would-be authors make is not paying enough attention to getting the title and the abstract right. Your title and abstract are what readers see first, so you want to create a favorable first impression with the reviewers or anyone who might read your paper. Invest the time to develop the right title that accurately describes the content of your study and stimulates readers' interests. The abstract is important because it is an informative summary of your work. An abstract is where you communicate the most important result of your study and entice readers to learn more about your findings by reading the rest of your paper.

Next, identify the problem that is to be solved early in the introduction. The reader needs to know clearly what problem your

study seeks to resolve and why. Keep the main content of your manuscript sharply focused without wandering off into a multitude of side issues. After setting up the problem, a literature review should then follow to set the stage for what is to be the major contribution of your study. Failure to convince the reader how and why your study would fill an important gap in our knowledge could be a fatal blow leading to eventual rejection of your manuscript by the reviewers.

Once you have amassed all the right ingredients and prepared the manuscript based on a well-conceived and soundly executed study, make certain that your manuscript is free of careless mistakes. Check the manuscript thoroughly to ensure it is as error free as possible. Some common errors that can be found in many submitted manuscripts include inconsistent format and style, grammatical and typographical errors, and mismatching citations and reference lists, to name a few. These careless errors speak for themselves that you didn't care enough to find and fix them—they become detractors from your work that annoy most reviewers in their evaluation of the manuscript.

Journal editors tend to be risk averse; they are concerned more with the risk of making a type II error (accepting low-quality papers) than with a type I error (rejecting good articles). When a manuscript is rejected, the editors pay more attention to the negative points than the positive attributes of your paper. Thus, the more you do to eliminate or minimize the negative elements in your initial submission, the better your odds for eventual acceptance (Klingner, Scanlon, and Pressley). Last but not least, research and select an appropriate journal that best fits your research and intended audience before submitting your manuscript. Matching your manuscript with the scope of the target journal and improving on presentation can easily increase your odds of acceptance by 20%.

Peer Review: A Two-Way Street

Scholarly journals serve a variety of purposes. They provide a forum for communicating new

findings, disseminating new knowledge to a wide audience and informing public policy. Peer review is the standard mechanism that journals use to ensure the scientific quality of their publications by asking other scholars in the related field to assess the value and merit of a research article and the accuracy of its results. The peer-review process remains a controversial topic, and its effectiveness continues to be criticized and investigated. After surveying 200 studies on the peer-review system, Weller concludes, "Like a democracy, editorial peer review is messy and does not always work as it should, but it is essential to the integrity of scientific and scholarly communication."

I do not intend to debate the pros and cons of the peer-review process here other than to offer a brief comment. As an editor, I firmly believe in the process and rely heavily on reviewers' integrity and commitment to help maintain the quality of the journal and advance the profession's scholarship. Our commitment is to build a system of trust, not a vault. Reviewers are often perceived as the "gatekeepers" who serve an invaluable role in the improvement and selection of scholarly material that is published. A reviewer may take on multiple roles at the same time discouraging publication of work that fails to meet the standards and offering constructive feedback to authors and guiding them toward publication. The process of peer review is built on the idea of a cooperative community. Reviewing is a demanding task, but being a reviewer also helps to keep a scholar abreast of the latest research. It enhances one's intellectual profile and offers one the opportunity of giving something back to your profession.

The journal editor balances delicately between the authors and reviewers. The editor often plays alternating roles of being a wordsmith, caretaker, and judge. While editors have the discretion to determine the fate of a manuscript, they depend on authors to supply workable manuscripts and reviewers to assess the quality of submissions. I cannot understand why anyone would refuse or decline requests to review a manuscript. If we as an author expect timely and competent

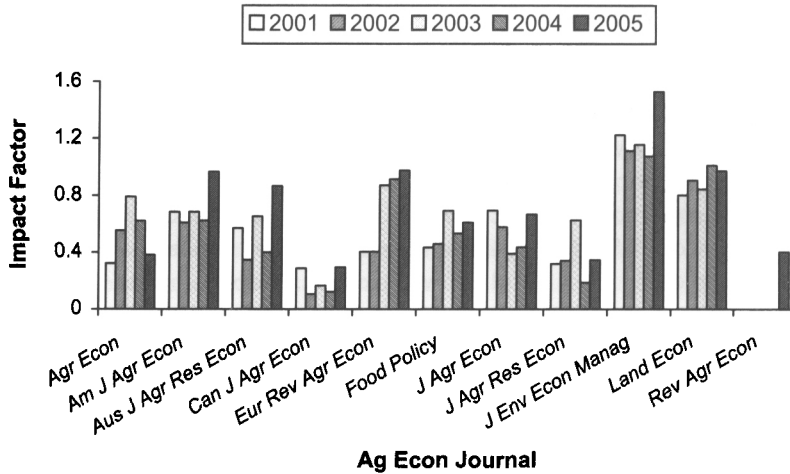


Figure 1. Impact Factor of Agricultural Economics Journals, 2001–2005 (Source: Thomson Institute for Scientific Information, 2005)

reviews of our submitted work, we should be at least as willing to reciprocate. Our peer-review system is a two-way street; the system would not function without reciprocity. If you seem to have been “targeted” repeatedly with requests to review, take it as a compliment and recognition for being a respected member and contributor to the academic community.

What About *JAAE*?

Aside from organizing annual conferences, one of the most important functions of SAEA is promoting scholarship in the agricultural economics profession via publication of *JAAE*. The quality of our publication reflects both on our profession and on the Association. One of widely recognized measures of journal quality is the impact factor compiled by Thomson Institute for Scientific Information. Figure 1 shows the variations of impact factor among agricultural economics journals during 2001–2005 based on the *Journal Citation Reports*. As you will notice, *JAAE* is conspicuously missing from the list. Also note that 2005 is the first year that *Review of Agricultural Economics* was included in the *Journal Citation Reports*. We need to put *JAAE* on the map.

Another important factor in measuring the quality of a journal is timeliness and promptness of publication (Rousseau). Authors are

the producers of knowledge and information, and the journals are the marketers, who have the responsibility to disseminate the information as accurately and expediently as possible to the consumers. In today’s electronic age, the laborious and expensive process of publishing the printed journal is facing stiff competition from the electronic forum of publications. More frequent publications of a journal will reduce the lag time of information dissemination and attract more quality submissions. Judging from the volume of articles that we published in *JAAE*, I submit that we could go from publishing three issues a year to a quarterly publication.

Again, let me express my deepest gratitude to my colleagues and the Association for this award. I hope that my observations and remarks encourage you to actively participate in the Association and offer a bit of guidance as you navigate the occasionally rocky but always rewarding road of publishing in your career.

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