

# How to Write Publishable Papers

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The postings follow a logical, systematic structure which I originally developed for my book [How to Get Research Published in Journals](#).

(Day, A., 1996, *How to Get Research Published in Journals*, Gower, Aldershot, UK)

Much of the material derived from my long association with Emerald, publisher of the world's widest range of journals in management, including HR and marketing, and library and information services. In particular, Emerald sponsored original research I conducted on quality variables in academic journals which led to me conducting further independent research to test the findings more widely (Day, A. and Peters, J., [Quality Indicators in Academic Publishing](#), *Library Review*, vol. 45 no. 2/4).

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### Part 1.1 - Four good reasons to publish your work

During the last 10 years my colleagues and I have led writers' workshops at universities and colleges around the world. We have asked hundreds of people why they want to publish, and why the successful ones keep publishing year after year. Their responses tend to group in four main themes.

1. [Because I have to](#)
2. [Because I want to get ahead](#)
3. [Because I need to learn through others](#)
4. [Because I need clarity](#)

## **1. Because I have to**

This is how some people explain the propensity to publish. It's not a choice, for them, but a demand. It's not a joy, but a chore. It's therefore not surprising that they approach the forthcoming paper with dread or, worse yet, with procrastination.

In one sense, of course, there is an obligation which comes with the vocation. You belong to a body of knowledge which only grows as people add to it. You may earn a living through teaching or through research or both but as you do, you are keenly aware of the contributions to the field which other people have made. Those are the books and articles you read, the concepts which underpin your work, the evidence which strengthens it. Writing up your findings or articulating your concepts is your way of contributing to the academic community, potentially for generations to come.

Some of us may be tormented by something called "writer's block" which prevents us from committing our thoughts and ideas to paper. That, combined with the daily pressures of teaching, research, administration, student support and other jobs conspire to force publishing to the bottom of our list of priorities. So, let's move beyond the writing and publishing project being a chore and put it back to where it belongs - an obligation, yes, but one which can be fun, easy and fruitful.

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## **2. Because I want get ahead**

People who can communicate well with their peers are in demand. Research itself is worthless unless it is disseminated. For academics and many professionals, this usually happens with publication.

Too often, fine work is not recognised simply because no one knows about it. That means that future work is compromised and the possibilities of working near the top of the field become limited.

Publishing in journals increases the chances of being invited to conferences, being asked to review papers and join advisory boards. It opens and strengthens networks and helps you promote your work, your skills, and your interests.

It's fair to say that those who publish in competent journals are judged competent themselves. Are they really so smart? Yes. They've recognised the importance of publishing and they've done it. And do they know something you don't know? Yes to that as well. They know how to write good papers and how to target the right journals. They know how to prioritise. They know how to get ideas out of their heads and onto paper where others can see them and respond to them. And they enjoy doing it.

### **3. Because I need to learn through others**

A published paper is only part of a life-long membership in a community. It is through beginning and maintaining contact with that community that we are able to receive the comments and the responses that will tell us more about our field and ourselves.

As we develop a conduit to allow our work to connect with others, we create something even better. Whether or not it happens when you show your draft to colleagues, or after the paper has been published, someone will comment on your work. As interest grows, people add other evidence and theories. Another person's perspective can enrich what you have done, or allow you to reconsider, and change some of it.

Sometimes feedback can lead to collaboration from unexpected sources. When the first edition of *How to Get Research Published in Journals* was published in 1996, I received a favourable review from Sally Brown, contributor to the popular '500 Tips . . .' series of books published by Kogan Page. Sally suggested we collaborate with her and her partner Phil Race on a forthcoming book called [500 Tips for Getting Published](#). That project was so successful we did two other books together - [500 Tips for Developing a Learning Organization](#) and [2000 Tips for Lecturers](#) . None of that would have happened if I had not published in the first place.

Feedback and collaboration are valuable components of the publishing process - and they're free. Referees and reviewers will decide if your work will be accepted, rejected or sent back for revision. "Revise" feedback usually includes precise comments about which parts of the paper should be revised, and often how; even papers which are rejected are often rejected for a well-articulated reason.

Some people might call it rejection. I prefer to call it learning.

### **4. Because I need clarity**

Nobody, not even a professional writer, can write without focus. What people call writer's block is usually nothing more than lack of focus.

*If you told me to write a love song tonight, I'd have a lot of trouble. But if you told me to write a love song about a girl in a red dress who goes into a bar and is on her fifth martini, and is falling off her chair, that's a lot easier and it makes me free to say anything I want.*

*Stephen Sondheim*

What are you trying to say? Unless you know the answer to that, the words will not come easily.

Many writers like the opportunity to write to clarify their thinking. They know that their research project went well, but the discipline of writing up the findings and implications in a few thousand words jolts them into the art of focusing.

As we write, we structure our thinking and put sometimes difficult and abstract concepts into words. We ask ourselves if it makes sense - even better, we ask others if it makes sense to them.

We write, we edit, we revise, and we do everything we can to make our argument and our evidence clear. It's only then, for most of us, that we can attain a sharpness that comes with having to put something into words.

As I will discuss in future sections, the more we focus on who we are writing for, and what their needs are, the more often we will succeed.

## **Part 1.2**

Having reviewed four good reasons to publish, we'll look now at . . .

### **Four even better reasons not to publish your work**

Asking people why they want to publish is easy - everyone has an answer. We reviewed four of them in the previous section. But ask them why they don't want to publish and there are a few moments of hesitation, and then the answers come. People aren't stupid - most of us have good reasons not to do something: articulating those reasons often helps people expose and overcome obstacles. Let's look at four of those most commonly expressed reasons why people don't publish.

1. "It's not good enough yet"
2. "I'm a failure"
3. "People might steal my ideas"
4. "I don't have time"

#### **1. "It's not good enough yet."**

One of the smartest marketing professors I know nearly wasn't published. He began as what we would call a perfectionist. Everything had to be just right: all the detail had to be checked and double-checked; every word had to be precise, every tiny bit of argument and evidence completely foolproof. But he remembered the advice of his doctoral supervisor who warned him many years ago about the dangers of procrastination:

*"There are only two types of articles; those that are perfect and never get published and those that are good enough and do."*

Now, don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying it's excusable to be sloppy or lazy, and the professor I have in mind, Dr. Christian Grönroos at the Swedish School of Economics, is neither. Today, Dr Grönroos is a formidable mind in the field and is well-published both in books and journals. Some of his ground-breaking work is published in Emerald journals, has been acknowledged by Literati Club's Awards for Excellence and has featured in a previous spotlight interview on [Emerald Now](#).

The central issue is 'going public'. The word 'publish' derives from the Latin *publicare*, to make public. It is not without reward, and it is not without risk. Today, it is becoming less of an option and more of an expectation, whilst at the same time the competition is increasing and the standards are rising. Fortunately, the process is well understood and can be managed.

Why aren't perfect papers published? Because they never leave the author's desk. Those are the papers that remain a work in progress, papers that become obsolete before they see print because the author waited too long before even sending it to a publisher. And the author was right: it was a work in progress; it wasn't perfect. But the mistake was in not submitting it anyway, where it can be reviewed and (horrors!!) criticised and revised - which brings us to the next point.

## **2. "I'm a failure."**

Hard to admit, but many people don't submit their work because they fear rejection. It may be hard to admit for some, but what can be more understandable, more justifiable, more human? After all, people who have no fear are not brave, they are fearless. Bravery is having the fear but doing it anyway.

No one likes rejection. Few of us can separate rejection of our work from rejection of our selves. That's honest and realistic. Being rejected can strike at your feeling of self-worth. To get over that hurdle, you can do two things:

- reality check
- risk minimisation

By reality check, I mean employing some basic tools of cognitive psychology. Really look at the exact thoughts that are congesting your thoughts and unravel them. Force yourself to state the unthinkable: "by being rejected I will feel a complete failure". Now, assess the evidence. Will anyone else but you actually think that? Is that how you assess someone who is trying hard to learn a new field? Do you call it failure when someone doesn't succeed the first time, or do you call it learning?

To minimise the risk of failure, focus on the few critical success factors that will actually determine acceptance or rejection. There are not many and most are easily understood and practised. We will be working out how to do that later, but for now it's enough to say that the three most critical are target, purpose and implication.

Too many authors throw themselves into the publishing process without a plan or any idea about what is important or not. Being rejected then is a likely, but avoidable, outcome.

### **3. "People might steal my ideas."**

Surprisingly, people who are well-published are rarely afraid that their ideas will be stolen. They understand that ideas are cheap, that no one gets anywhere because they thought about something. People only succeed when they actually do something.

If your work is original, it can't be replicated easily. If you have followed a rigorous research method, it can't be replicated quickly. And, if you have carefully demonstrated why your work is important then it will stand as an original piece attached to your name. Just coming up with a brilliant insight or great idea does not gain you entry into the domain of scholarly publishing - it's communicating that idea or insight that counts.

Sir Douglas Hague put it rather well:

*The whole point of academic research, of course, is that its findings should not be opaque and inaccessible, but available to those who could benefit from them - not least those outside universities.*

### **4. "I don't have time."**

Of course you don't. No one has enough time nowadays. Time has become a scarce resource but a valued commodity. I'm not asking you to find several hours each day to devote to writing, somewhere amongst the teaching, the kids, the research, the laundry, and maybe even the occasional treat like a movie or a walk in the park. I'll ask for 15 minutes to begin with and maybe half an hour each day for a few weeks.

Those who study time management always seem to reach the same conclusion: people who use time well concentrate intensely on whatever they are doing. As one chief executive is quoted as saying:

*'If someone focuses on what they are doing, they can do in 15 minutes what would otherwise take them four hours.'*

Successful, prolific authors are probably as busy as, or busier, than you are. They may only block out one hour every two days to work on their manuscript, but in that time they concentrate on what they are doing. The question, therefore, is not 'How much time do I have?' but 'How can I use the time I have most effectively?' The exercise then becomes one of efficiency and priority: if it matters to you, you will find the time. If you know how to focus and what to focus upon, your time will be spent more effectively.

Adopting a systematic approach, following steps one by one, helps the project become more manageable and achievable in short bursts of time. As a professional, experienced and well-published author, I would freeze at the thought of sitting down at my desk to write a seven-thousand word paper. Those seven thousand need to be broken into hundreds before I can focus on them.

### **What's the worst that can happen?**

Those are four good reasons not to publish; you may have others of your own. Think about what they are and about what the worst case scenario could possibly be. Even the best authors have been rejected. If that's the worst that happens, is it really so bad?

The famous science fiction writer Ray Bradbury put it well:

*"If you write a hundred short stories and they're all bad, that doesn't mean you've failed. You fail only when you've stopped writing."*

At worst, it means you need to do some more work on the topic. That's no problem. After all, that's your job - researching and contributing to the body of knowledge. Just as not all of your students will get an 'A', so not all of your papers will hit the mark first time.

More likely, if you've done your homework, you will be asked to revise your paper before it can be accepted for publication. We will discuss later how to do that well. But, for now, remember - the comments from an editorial review are free, honest and expert. Revising is therefore a learning experience; a positive activity, not one to fear or be embarrassed about. Concentrate on the benefits and minimise the risks.

In the next section I will focus on what referees say is the most common reason for rejecting a paper which otherwise fits the objectives of the journal.

### **Part 1.3 - So what?**

Having reviewed reasons to publish or not, we'll look now at . . .

1. Answering the question: so what?
2. Step outside for a few moments
3. Start with purpose

#### **1. So what?**

Most papers are rejected because they've been sent to the wrong journal. We'll look in the next part on how to properly target your work to make sure it gets into the right hands. But before you can do that, are you sure you know what your work is about?

Naturally, you may assume that you understand your work completely. After all, who could be more familiar with it than you? Somewhat paradoxically, that's just the problem. Having

been so closely involved in your research, you may easily lose sight of its value for others. The implications of what you have done may be obvious to you, but will it be obvious to anyone else?

## **2. Step outside for a few moments**

It's now time to step back and look at your work from the reader's perspective. This means re-stating the purpose, the essential points and the implications of your research. This is when you crystallize the value of your work.

This can be a disconcerting experience, for we are boldly setting out in black and white what we believe other people should think about the work we have done. We are answering the question - so what? A paper which doesn't clearly answer that question lacks clear implications. And that's the most common reason reviewers reject a paper which otherwise suits the journal.

However brilliant your literature review, appropriate your research design, however well you've analysed your findings and however fluidly you've written it all up - the paper may not be good enough for publication. You need to move further.

## **3. Start with purpose**

The most compelling implication of the research I carried out in [Quality Indicators in Academic Publishing](#) (Day, A. and Peters, J., *Library Review*, vol. 45 no. 3/4, 1995), was that only two criteria matter - across all subjects and all disciplines:

***What is this paper about?  
Why does it matter?***

In other words: what are you trying to say and why does it matter?

Ask yourself the first question: what is this paper about? When authors fail to answer those questions, reviewers respond with comments like:

***Lacks a sense of purpose  
Author does not explain why he is writing this paper  
Not clear where paper is going or why***

Defining your purpose is something you probably did early in your research. Now, your purpose isn't to do research, it's to communicate research. That means narrowing your focus further still. One effective way to do that is to put your purpose statement on paper, trying to confine yourself to a few sentences.

That may seem difficult, but remember it will not necessarily be the exact words you will use for the paper itself. This is an exercise in focusing your attention. So, try it now: take



your idea or your research overview and write in 20 words or less the purpose of writing a paper about it.

Once you have done that, try to build a few sentences expanding on the purpose and implications.

Here is a good example:

***"What we propose in the following paper is that each of the major world religious traditions, having endured the test of time, contains a set of values which are relevant, indeed necessary, for organizations in the twenty-first century. Collectively these value systems provide an inner, often invisible, governance system which can allow individuals and their organizations to stay on course in turbulent times. We argue that these values are necessary to enable both economic and spiritual ideals to thrive and grow. The values we have selected - truthfulness, trust, humility, forgiveness, compassion, thankfulness, service, and peace - are not intended to be exhaustive, for that would be beyond the page constraints of this paper. We also propose a set of supporting activities which we believe are necessary to foster these core values. These core values and beliefs constitute what a number of authors, including Ray Guenon and Aldous Huxley, have termed "the perennial philosophy" (Smith, 1991). Our overall intent is to shape aspirations - to identify and to articulate desirable values and behaviors, rather than reflect current reality. If this paper increases the awareness of what organizational leaders and members could or should aspire towards, then it will have achieved its aim."***

From: "A value-based paradigm for creating truly healthy organizations" by Mark P. Kriger and Bruce J. Hanson, *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, vol 12 no 4 1999

As the example above demonstrates, you need to be sure you know why your paper matters, and to whom. If you don't know the answer to that, you'll be guilty of merely describing what you did. So what? As one reviewer expressed it:

***'Presented some facts and shown some differences, but has not shown that these findings are important.'***

Consider the reader as someone whose interest in your work may only be peripheral, or who may be a student approaching the subject for the first time. You need to help the reader identify and articulate the worth of your work.

That's why stating implications isn't something to be left as an afterthought in the last paragraph. Implications must direct the paper from the beginning and inform the structure. Knowing your implications helps you decide what to include in your paper and what to leave out.

Ask yourself essential questions:

- What wider principles emerged from your research?
- How can people in your field use it?
- Can people in other fields use it?
- How can other researchers take your work forward?
- How can your research be applied in practice?
- Who is able to apply your findings?
- What might they do?
- When and where might it be done?
- How might they approach it?

The answers to some of these questions may be 'don't know' or 'not applicable'. Which ones do apply, and what are your answers?

If your paper has implications for further research, look at the implications of your method. Each decision you have made needs to be explained. For example:

- What were the implications of your scope and limitations?
- What were the implications of choosing particular methods of data gathering and analysis?
- Did certain techniques cast some doubts or further veracity on your findings?
- What did the literature say and how does it matter to your research?
- How did your methodology affect the findings?
- What are the implications of other potential answers to the problem?
- How far are you prepared to go and why?

Don't leave it to you reader to guess. Don't wait for a reviewer to say, as this one did:

***"The 'surprising result' would not have been particularly surprising if the authors had thought at the beginning of the study what they had expected to find."***

This now completes Part One. In Part Two, "Relationship Publishing" I will explore in detail how to select the right publisher and target your work to specific journals.

## **Part 2.1 - When quality doesn't matter**

I want to examine first a concept that has vexed many authors over the years: how do you know if your papers are good? How can you determine if you are meeting the quality measures of a specific journal? Quality is the buzzword, so let's take look at it closely.

1. When quality doesn't matter
2. Whose quality?
3. Quality counts
4. Components of quality
5. Content is king
6. Authors drive quality
7. Journals aren't judged by their covers

## 1. When quality doesn't matter

Articles and books are frequently criticised not because they are badly written or poorly presented, but simply that they don't suit the purpose of the audience. On average, half of all papers received by a journal's editorial department are rejected immediately: they are simply not suited to the objectives of the journal.

Many writers become easily discouraged as they read rejection letter after rejection letter, thinking that their fine work is substandard. Often, this is not the case. The editor or publisher is being honest when writing "this is not suitable for our publication". The key word is 'our'.

Somehow along the way, the writer forgot the difference between writing and communicating. This is one of the most difficult parts of the writing task: we need to orient ourselves not only to our purpose, as we discussed earlier, but to the purpose of our audience.

No writer exists merely to please an audience, but we all need to communicate with that audience. Sometimes, that means taking a different stance for a different group, or altering the tone and style of what we write.

Some, notably unpublished, authors complain that the editor doesn't understand them, that they are not going to change their precious work just because some review board thinks they should; that they are not going to lower their standards. Perhaps they are right; perhaps they are wrong; most certainly they remain unpublished.

Anything which is written for publication is intended to be read eventually by someone, somewhere. Just think how easy it is to misunderstand each other in our daily lives, simply because different words mean different things to different people.

## 2. Whose quality?

Of the several schools of thought which exist in total quality management, there is one which should preoccupy us here: quality is not defined simply as "fitness for purpose" or "zero defects". It is anything the customer says it is. There is no absolute standard, but that doesn't mean there is no standard.

People familiar with total quality management already know that the customer defines quality. The definition of whether something meets a customer's quality expectations is whether it is 'fit for the purpose' intended.

Every decent writer knows that great writers do not always write the top best-selling books. John Grisham, Jeffrey Archer and Danielle Steele are good storytellers, but they don't excite the literary imagination as do, say, Joyce or Austen. That doesn't mean they are poor quality, for they precisely suit the purpose of anyone wanting a straightforward, untiring bedtime read.

What we can see here is that the need being satisfied and the purpose being met are not universal. There is no such thing as a standard need or a general purpose. The needs of your audience will differ from mine, and will even differ from other audiences you have.

***"If you can change your style, why stick to one style? Style is a vanity because it gives you product identification"***  
***Norman Mailer***

### **3. Quality counts**

Refereed journals are the bastions of quality in a given field. They have set themselves up to select only those articles which meet the journal's objectives and the standards within the field. The standards are not set by the journal alone; they reflect standards within the community that the journal serves. In other words, they reflect the quality standards demanded by the customers.

In 1993 and 1994 I conducted research on behalf of Emerald into the nature of quality in academic publishing (Day, A. and Peters, J. 1995 Quality indicators in academic publishing, *Library Review*, vol 45 no 3/4). The research was commissioned by Emerald because they were seeking to understand how their own journals rated against other leading journals in the field. Not only did we discover and refine a list of seven determinants of quality in an academic paper, we also discovered that the relative importance of that list varied from journal to journal. Different customers were demanding something unique each time. The only exceptions were the twin standards of purpose and implications which have been discussed in the previous installment.

### **4. Components of quality**

The research disclosed that editors, reviewers and authors defined the quality of a journal according to three criteria: content, prestige, and presentation. But, most importantly, the definition of each criterion and its relative importance varied by journal.

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### **5. Content is king**

The findings showed content was most important, followed by prestige and presentation factors. The components of content, such as applications, rigour, etc. varied by journal. In other words, it was not possible to say which content component was most important in general, although originality was a consistently important factor in all types of journal. The content factors, in no particular order, are:

- The practical applications which can be drawn from articles - does the journal favour practicality and pragmatism?

- Its originality of findings and approach - does the journal favour new and original work and approaches?
- Its clarity and readability - does the journal favour articles which are written for ease of reading?
- The rigour of research methodology employed - does the journal specify a level of rigour to the conclusions and findings in published articles?
- Its contribution to the appropriate body of knowledge - does the journal have a history of groundbreaking articles which make a significant impact on their selected field?
- Its mix of features and subject matter coverage - does the journal favour a wide-ranging approach which includes reviews, news, editorial comment and so on?
- Its internationality - does the journal favour articles which draw on international perspectives?

*The definition of the quality varies by journal.*

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## **6. Authors drive quality**

The prestige of a journal depends on the perceived prestige and reputation of people involved with it - the authors, editor, editorial advisory/review board members.

The prestige of authors in the journal was found to be the most important, even more so than the prestige of the editor and a his or her advisory board, which ranked about equally.

*Authors are more important indicators of quality than editors or reviewers.*

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## **7. Journals aren't judged by their covers**

How does a journal look? How appropriate is its appearance to its content? How well does the presentational form facilitate the message?

Ease of reference, and typography and layout were most important in determining quality of presentation. It's important to note here that while layout may seem to be a function of graphic design, it also reflects the structure of the paper itself. The more complicated the subject matter, the more important it is to clearly structure and signpost a paper.

*Design quality means easier reading*

Finally, even quality is an arbitrary notion depending upon who is defining it. Our next step, therefore, is to work out how we can find out more about who the readers are and how they, and the editorial team, drive quality.

## Part 2.2 - Who cares about your work?

Having looked at when quality doesn't matter we will now look at...

1. Who cares about your work?
2. The Editor's role
3. The role of the reviewer
4. Looking after the reader

### 1. Who cares about your work?

In this section, I want to examine further the concept of relationship publishing. This is where you, as an author, can build a clear picture of the other people involved in the publishing process. Most importantly, you can see what their different needs are and how you and your work can satisfy them. To borrow a concept from the world of business, we will call these different but interconnected relationships the 'value chain'.

Each member of the chain has a different need:

Author: 'Can I get my paper accepted in this journal?'

Editor: 'Does it meet the aims of the journal and its audience?'

Review board: 'Is it the right quality?'

Publisher: 'Is the journal performing to market expectations?'

Librarian: 'How can I give access to it - direct, interlibrary loan or online?'

Reader: 'Where can I read it? Is it useful to me?'

I want to focus here on who the editors, reviewers and readers are and why they care about your work. That's not to say that publishers and librarians are not important, but they are not involved in the decision-making process on whether papers are accepted or not.

Publishers like Emerald respect editorial freedom and judgement. I'm not, however, aware of any other publisher which puts such effort into the professional development of editors and authors. You are in the website of Emerald's dedicated service for authors and editors, [Literati Club](#), there is also a separate site [Library Link](#) just for librarians:

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### 2. The Editor's role

Editors are busy people, constantly involved in teaching, researching, writing and editing. If they weren't, they wouldn't be editors. No publisher wants an editor who is out of touch with the field or has a poor reputation amongst his or her peers.

Editing a journal typically involves hundreds of extra hours of work. Part of the editor's job usually includes:

- advising the publisher on the direction of the journal;

- agreeing editorial strategy;
- advising on membership of the review board;
- monitoring the workings of the review board;
- accepting articles for the review process;
- corresponding with reviewers;
- taking their feedback and passing it on to the author;
- seeing the paper through one or several revisions;
- making sure all the documentation is in order;
- selecting which issue the paper should appear in;
- sending it to the publisher in time for the agreed production schedule;
- looking over the proofs;
- answering queries from sub-editors;
- and finally sending the approved version back to the publisher on schedule.

Why do they bother? Most editors say they get a thrill from being at the leading edge of their field. They like being on the academic network and they like helping new authors. And then, of course, there is the personal benefit gained from being an editor. It looks good on the CV and it's good for the institution. It certainly isn't for the money. Most are paid an annual or per issue 'honorarium' to help defray the expenses of administrative support, telephone and postage. Were they paid what they are worth per hour, publishers could not afford them.

Having all the poorly paid work to do, what makes an editor's job unbearable? High on the list are careless authors. These are editors' pet peeves:

- Receiving an article which is not in tune with the editorial aims of the journal
- Not hearing back from authors when revisions are requested
- Finding out, after the article has gone through the review process, that it has been accepted elsewhere. The author ignored the clear instruction not to submit the paper to more than one journal at a time
- Wanting to rewrite 'just a little' at proof stage. Most publishers will refuse or charge for the luxury.

So, take a few moments to consider the needs of the editor. It might not guarantee acceptance (see the next section, [2.3 Guaranteeing Acceptance](#) for that one!) but it will make life easier. And, it will make it more likely that your paper goes through the editorial process smoothly.

### **3. The role of the reviewer**

The editor's task is to enter the paper into the review process if it generally seems to suit the journal's objectives. The reviewer puts the detailed time into reading it. Unlike most editors, reviewers will read each paper closely with pen in hand to make notes. Who are these people, destined to remain anonymous? People like you and me: after all, the proper term for the process is 'peer review'. A peer is someone who is your equal.

They may read one or two papers a year or several papers each month, but they read each one carefully and in detail so that they can send constructive comments back. Only the editor knows who the author is and to which reviewers the paper has been sent. Double-blind review means it has gone to two reviewers; triple-blind to three, and so on.

What can you expect to hear from them? Something like:

***"To increase the value of the paper, I recommend that the authors go back a step or two to show how the attributes are selected, rated and then analysed to achieve the final equivalent-value prices. The subject matter is very interesting and the cited examples are very relevant to the services industry."***

In other words - good, constructive and free advice. So, why do some authors persist in making the job of a reviewer difficult? After all, like editors, reviewers aren't here for the money. They may receive a small reward and a Christmas card from the publisher if they're lucky. The real benefits are like the editor's: they stay current in their own fields and improve their own reputation by being associated with a good-quality journal.

The most common complaint from reviewers is "poor proof-reading". A reviewer may expect an author to need further guidance on clarifying the research method or being clearer about findings, but spelling mistakes? There are no excuses for spelling or punctuation mistakes. The reviewer is trying to make a fair judgement about the paper and offer constructive opinions. Don't put obstacles in his or her way. Use your computer spell-check, but remember it won't recognise all mistakes, such as their/there, our/hour/are, its/it's. Ask a colleague or friend to read it.

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#### **4. Looking after the reader**

Both the editor and the reviewer strive to satisfy the needs of the reader. By identifying more strongly with the reader, authors can help the journal's team meet their needs. Readers are not uncertain about their needs. When I conducted the quality study described in the [last section](#), I found consistent agreement amongst readers, authors, editors and reviewers

***How people view each journal is unique per journal, but common within its readership***

Writing a paper for any given journal therefore involves the author in an undertaking to the reader. If the reader is expecting descriptions of innovative research applied in practice, then that is what we must deliver. If the reader is expecting a quick overview of where leading-edge research is heading, with implications for other researchers, then that is what the author must provide.

In summary: each member of the value chain has slightly different needs. If each member of the chain understands the others' needs, they are more likely to be able to satisfy them. As an author, this may make it more likely that you will be published not just once, but



again by the same journal. You might even become a reviewer or an editor yourself some day. After all, we all belong to the same community. Academic publishers, editors and reviewers aren't strangers, they're people like you.

### **Part 2.3 - Guaranteeing acceptance**

So far, we've explored the needs of those involved in the publishing process. Here, I want to focus on the three variables which, properly managed, can guarantee acceptance.

1. Guaranteeing acceptance
2. Targeting journals
3. Focus on the right stuff

#### **1. Guaranteeing acceptance**

There are only three success criteria in publishing:

1. Targeting the right journal
2. Focusing on the requisite quality variables (unique to each journal)
3. Answering the question: so what?

If you meet those criteria, your paper will be published. That may mean it is published after revisions, but revisions are to be expected. After all, why have a subject expert review your work if not to suggest a few improvements? But outright rejection should not happen if those three criteria are met.

These principles are not original. You can look at other activities from industry or business and you will see that the same apply. Borrowing from the field of total quality management, we can see that publishing an academic paper follows the same steps as creating a Total Quality Management system to guarantee that the right products and services are created:

- understand what people want from a service or product, and deliver it to match those needs ("fitness for purpose");
- draw detailed specifications based on the articulated customer needs, and deliver carefully to them ("conformance to specification");
- identify and manage the variables in the manufacturing/service delivery process which can lead to deviation from specification ("process control");
- keep detailed records of the process, allowing deviations to be traced and rectified ("quality audit/document control").

Knowing how important picking the right journal will be - the wrong judgement will guarantee rejection - you will need to do some homework to discover which journal is right for you.

For now, remember that half of all papers sent to a particular journal are rejected immediately because they do not meet the editorial objectives of that journal. That doesn't mean they are bad papers; they are just not suited to that publication.

*What I had to face, the very bitter lesson that everyone who wants to write has got to learn, was that a thing may in itself be the finest piece of writing one has ever done, and yet have absolutely no place in the manuscript one hopes to publish.*  
(Thomas Wolfe)

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## 2. Targeting journals

There are several ways to research journals.

**Directories:** While the directory's information can be helpful, particularly for gaining a quick overview of the journal, it will only give you a superficial feel for what the journal requires. Directories are inevitably out of date. Even last year's directory won't tell you the name of a recently appointed new editor. And it won't give you a flavour of the papers.

**Colleagues:** Which journals matter most to those you respect? Which do professors and supervisors read? If your reference group rates one journal more highly than another, you need to know - and why. Where do *they* publish, and where did they publish first? What alternatives do they know to the journals you have selected?

**Reading journals:** The best way to understand a journal is to read it. Copies may be available in your own library, or you can contact the publisher for sample copies (see Emerald's [Sample Copy Request Form](#)). Try to read at least two issues. The first and last issues in any one volume (year) are the best for this purpose; that's when editors discuss their objectives for the next year and reflect on the last volume.

Look carefully at what the editor says. Editors often ask specifically for certain types of papers or certain types of perspectives. They may also comment on a paper or article which particularly impressed them, giving further insight into the sorts of standards they maintain and want. Sometimes, editors change and with them changes the direction of the journal. The new editor will often comment on this direction in his or her first editorial.

Editors will often comment on a paper that has made a particular impact, and discuss the reasons why. Each of the journals published by Emerald has an annual Best Paper Award, the results of which are published in the individual journals. Authors are recognised at the annual [Awards for Excellence](#).

All journals publish notes for prospective authors. Some carry them in each issue but if they do not there will be a reference to them and to the issue in which they appear. The notes vary in detail from general to specific. At the very least, and of most importance to the author, they should include the editorial objectives.

**Databases:** You can easily find out where the journal positions itself in relation to your subject area. Try an on-line search to find out how the journal covers your particular field. Within Emerald, for example, its [Emerald database](#) can help you search by journal or topic. You can then create a map showing how the journal has traced the development of your topic, and what previously published authors have said and how.

Finally, however well you target a journal, remember that it is not the only journal available. During the course of our benchmarking study, we asked authors to name the chief competitors of the journals we were researching. That question generated between three and 12 responses, with an average of four competitors per journal.

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### 3. Focus on the right stuff

The research you do for targeting a journal will show you which quality variables to emphasise. As I discussed in [Part 2:1](#), how a particular journal defines quality varies per journal. You need to be clear now about what those variables are.

Some of the most important questions to ask yourself are:

*Who will want to know this? Why?  
Will my reader understand? How do I know?  
Will my reader care? Why?  
Is it interesting?*

Your paper should create some sense of excitement in the reader. It should be engaging, otherwise it is merely reiterating what everyone else already knows and will probably, for this reason alone, never get past the review board. Many referees comment that although papers are well written and describe sound research, they just aren't interesting. As one said:

*Neither the underlying propositions nor the research method offer interest. The topic is of great importance; however, this is not the way to go about it.*

We have explored in this section how important it is to target the correct journal. If you follow the steps proposed, you will have done the hardest and most important part of the job. You've researched the journal, understood what it expects, empathised with its editorial team, considered the reader, and made sure you're clear about the implications. Now, all you have to do is finish writing it! We'll look in detail in the next instalment - "Seven days to a perfect paper", how to do that easily and effectively.

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## Part 3.1 - The first draft

So far, we've explored why to publish, why to not publish, the importance of understanding the needs of those involved in the publishing process and how to target and focus on the right journal.

1. The first draft
2. Lead with structure

### 1. The first draft

Conducting research into how people perceive communication, Professor Siegfried Vogele of Munich University discovered that readers always engage in what he terms a "silent dialogue". From the moment they look at an envelope that has arrived for them in the morning's mail, they are asking questions like - Who is this from? How did they get my address? When they begin to read these letters, they are also asking questions as they scan the page: What is this? What do they want from me? Should I read it? In his research, Vogele discovered that even with the most basic communication, consisting of simply a letter, readers might ask at least twenty questions. Therefore, he concluded, the more complex the presentation, the more questions there would be asked.

Applying that to a journal article, you will need to structure the paper to answer your reader's questions as they arise.

Any article should have a beginning, middle, and an end, evident to the reader. En route through the article, the reader needs to know not only what is being said at the time, but also where it's leading. Some may argue that a more individualistic and idiosyncratic style is preferable, but my personal bias is that any communication's objective is to achieve understanding with the reader. The more idiosyncratic we become the more barriers we may raise. People who become too self-conscious of their personal style begin to lose respect for the reader's needs.

*I write as straight as I can, just as I walk as straight as I can, because that is the best way to get there (HG Wells)*

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### 2. Lead with structure

A sensible structure will have a strong beginning to explain to the reader:

- the purpose of your paper
- why it is important
- to whom it is important
- what they will discover by reading it.

A good introduction of this kind may run from five to seven hundred words. Use them sparingly: too many academic articles drift through a turgid mass of rationalisation and explanation before they say anything of interest.

What is your reader's next question? They know what your article is about and what it can do for them; they want to find out more, yet something is nagging at the back of their minds - they know you have something significant to say, but how do you know? Who are you, anyway? What they need is background. Explain who you are and why you tackled the problem. Remind them of the reasons everyone in the field has been searching for answers.

This section should be about the same length as your introduction - somewhere between five and seven hundred words. This, again, is an easy section to write. You know yourself and your research team, you are aware of how the problem came to light and what other people have said about it. Remember the 'So what?' question. The purpose of this section is solely to lend credibility to what you say and reassure the reader.

Now the readers are genuinely interested, but they have moved into a more critical phase. What are they asking now? Questions such as: how did you decide to go about it? Readers dislike being misled just as did the reviewer who wrote:

***"The first, very general, point is that we are told virtually nothing of the research method employed, e.g. why the sample cities were selected, how the data collection was performed, and the time period."***

In a classic research student's textbook, *The Management of a Student Research Project* (Howard and Sharp, 1983), the authors gave the following advice to authors of research reports, based on the reader's thought process:

**Question-answer**

Every time you generate a question - 'But, what is the critical variable?' - the reader will expect an answer to follow quickly.

**Problem-solution**

When you describe a problem the reader wants to know what the solution is or, if there is not one, why not.

**Cause-effect/effect-cause**

Cause and effect - if this, then that - must be linked, in whatever order you present it.

**General-specific**

When making a general or sweeping statement the reader will want to see how you qualify it with specific examples and evidence. The converse is also true. When you make specific statements the reader will want to know if that comment can be generalised. Adding to the body of knowledge usually requires generalisation, but

not to the point of obscurity. Along these lines, one reviewer wrote: "The writing goes from disturbing generality to syrup".

Having explained the method, your reader is now asking 'So what?' How did your approach work in practice? Now that you've described your methodology, you should explain how it went. This section is not simply descriptive, but also analytical. What happened and why? This is a critical phase of your work. This is where you show your ability to reflect on your methodology and offer constructive comments about how you, or others, might approach it differently next time.

Next, you need to offer your findings and analysis. Remember to relate this to the research question you began with. By now you will have noted the critical implications of your work and analysed them from the reader's perspective. You prepared the reader to expect certain reassurances, and now is the time to give them. Prove yourself here - not in 20 words or less this time.

Finally, your readers are wondering what it all means. This is where you make your conclusions, again tied back to the research question, and articulate implications. If you review your earlier work on implications, particularly from sections [1.3](#) and [2.3](#) you will see that you are now in a good position to pull this section together. Take your previous notes and see how you can expand them. Relate the implications to your previous sections by summarising the key points of your argument and your findings. We have done enough work on implications so far not to have to belabour this point. You should be able to write this section clearly and fluidly. Devote up to 20 per cent of the total words to this section.

Now that you have mapped out your paper, it's a good idea to return to the introduction to make sure that you have included the main points. Reviewing your introduction ensures that you won't inadvertently miss a point which may have only occurred to you strongly in the body of your paper.

This work gives you the outline, notes against each section and a clear idea of what you are saying. Using the right words and syntax is mere finesse. We'll discuss that in the next section.

### **Part 3.2 - The finishing touch**

In this part, we are examining the writing process. If you have followed the preparation steps outlined thus far, you will be focused and thinking clearly. You will have a first draft paper prepared which reflects your focus and your concern now is to revise your work.

You may, like many people, be worried that you don't write well. It's important to remember now that people don't write well when they don't think clearly. You should be in a position now to relax and apply the finishing touch to your work.

1. Engaging with the reader
2. Testing your paper

## 1. Engaging with the reader

I recently conducted a research study at Lancaster University to explore what people mean by "good research" in social sciences. From interviewing a small sample of teachers and researchers and surveying of the literature, I confirmed that good research is more than just rigorous and systematic.

One professor provided a good overview of that basis for good research:

*"Research which meets criteria of rigour, a systematic kind of modelling in its articulation and which ties back its process to a solid grounding in what we know about the area that we're being researched, so that there is a total integration of varying viewpoints in the grounding of the research design. Then in my mind for it to be good, it must then be very focused."*

Good research is also grounded in theory. One of the academics interviewed described not simply 'good' research, which would not follow a single model, but 'ideal' research:

*"For me, the challenge is to do research that is well-rooted in theoretical debates and conceptual discussion. Research can only be good if it stands on a firm footing. It has to be clear about the concepts."*

*"It uses current ideas and methods appropriately. It has a degree of imagination and creative thinking. It engages not only the person doing research, but those reading it."*

This definition contains an interesting assertion; that good research is accessible to all sorts of people and engages people. The involvement of the person, perhaps even a non-scholar, reading the research is now part of what makes it good.

So, how can you make sure your work engages people? Firstly, you have to understand the people with whom you're communicating, but if you reviewed carefully the points in the previous sections, you will have done that. Next, you have to make sure you're using language and tone that ease understanding. There are three main pitfalls to avoid.

### a. **Verbosity**

Why take 200 words to say something when 50 will do? As one reviewer observed:

*"The entire page could be boiled down to one or two statements".*

If you originally thought the section was only going to need 200 words, why are you still writing after 750? It's probably because you've become carried away by your own thoughts and lost touch with what the reader needs. You may have become unsure of what you are trying to say, so you keep avoiding coming to a conclusion. This is the time to go back to your plan. Have faith in what you have already worked out. Discipline yourself to write less than you want. At worst, you may have to go back and insert an extra line or two, but you'll find that much easier than having to reduce four pages of waffle to two paragraphs. Reviewers, much less readers, are unimpressed by long, turgid sentences. Keep it short, keep it simple.

b. **Jargon**

Jargon is the turn of phrase, the word, and the descriptor that we develop as a means of private shorthand. We know we are familiar with it, our colleagues are familiar with it, but the reader is completely lost.

Read your material carefully and ask yourself whether your readers will understand. If you have any doubt, change the word or phrase into user-friendly language. Examine the concepts that you have borrowed. Best of all, have someone outside your field read it.

Is it likely that people unfamiliar with your work will understand? Most journals, however specialised, are unwilling to accept articles only decipherable by a small group of specialists.

c. **Really big very impressive words**

Words are there to convey meaning, to express - not to impress. The best writing is always the simplest and the clearest. When you use a word of three syllables or more, check yourself. Is there really a good reason to use that longer word? The best way to avoid using the wrong word is to keep your words as simple as possible. Use your dictionary, but throw away your thesaurus. Too often, people consult a thesaurus to find a bigger, more important-sounding word for the more common, more familiar word. If you are going to use a thesaurus, use it the other way round, to move from the complex to the simple.



## 2. Testing your paper

Finally, put your work to the test. Ask a colleague or friend to help you. It doesn't matter if they are familiar with your subject area; indeed, it may be preferable that they are not. . Ask them to assess your paper using five criteria:

1. Purpose: clearly stated on the first page?
2. Key points: logically flowing from point to point with signposting, such as subheadings, introductions and conclusions to sections?
3. Implications: clearly specified, with special attention to who the implications are for and what readers can do next?
4. Readability: jargon-free, familiar words, reasonably short sentences, easy to follow theme?
5. Appeal: Would they go back and read the article more thoroughly?

By doing this exercise the reader may not understand the author's subject in detail; indeed, it may take hours and several rereadings for the reader to absorb all the meaning. It may take days or weeks before the reader has truly come to grips with the enormity and complexity of the research and begins to use it. But the exercise only models what we readers - you, they and I - do all the time. We scan, we browse, we sift.

Readers want access to the right information they can understand and use. Given a choice between a turgid, vague paper and a paper which, on a quick scan, reveals what you are looking for, which one would you choose?

Once you think you're happy with your paper, think again. Don't be your own proofreader. Something about our brains allows us to compensate for our own errors. We know what we meant to say and our eye tricks us into seeing what we intended, but not necessarily what is there. It took a sub-editor to spot how I was unintentionally transforming standard marketing theory: I had summarised the four components of a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and treats. In another example, a sub-editor saw that my article which described 'winning teams' later referred to 'sinning teams'.

Have more than one other person read it carefully. Take their advice. If something you have said is not clear to your reader, don't bother explaining it face-to-face: it simply hasn't worked. Rewrite it.

This ends the writing process. Now, you will want to submit the paper in the most appropriate way and navigate it through the sometimes-murky territory known as 'the publisher'. —

### **Part 3.3 - Managing the review process**

By now, you know which journal you are targeting. You've written and proof-checked a publishable paper. All that's left is to submit it. The purpose of this section is to take you through what happens next, what you can expect, and what you can do about it

1. [Submitting the paper](#)
2. [Writing an abstract](#)
3. [An acknowledgement](#)
4. [Handling rejection](#)
5. [Revision](#)
6. [Acceptance](#)
7. [Handling author's proofs](#)
8. [And then . . . ?](#)

Emerald makes a particular effort to make its process as transparent as possible. In its [Authors' Charter](#), it lists the following rights for authors:

Emerald believes that as an author you have the right to expect:

- An efficient and courteous publishing service at all times
- Prompt acknowledgement of correspondence and manuscripts received at Emerald
- Prompt notification of publication details
- A high professional standard of accuracy and clarity of presentation
- A complimentary journal issue in which your article appears plus five article reprints
- A premium service for permissions and reprint requests.

It also highlights your moral rights as an author:

- Be acknowledged as the author of your work and receive due respect and credit for it
- Object to derogatory treatment of your work
- Not to have your work plagiarised by others

#### **1. Submitting the paper**

Once the manuscript has been properly prepared, it's time to mail it. Don't fax it. You may be able to email it. Check with your publisher or their website. Always enclose a covering letter stating your name, the title of the paper, brief paragraph describing the contents and stating why you chose the specific journal. If there has been previous correspondence relating to a synopsis or a telephone call, refer to it and to any further guidance from the editor which was given at that time.

This is what Emerald advises:

- Carefully read the Notes for Contributors of the journal to which you submit your work
- Ensure that papers are factual in reporting research undertaken
- Carefully check for spelling, grammar and syntax
- Ensure that your references are carefully and accurately cited in Harvard style (name, date)
- Ensure that the work is original and free from copyright encumbrances
- Promptly address any revisions as specified by editors and reviewers

All papers should include an abstract. Emerald has introduced a new format to ensure abstracts are more reader-friendly, increasing the likelihood that your paper will be used by other researchers.

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## **2. Writing a structured abstract**

Each abstract is made up of a number of set elements.

First, choose a category for the paper. The options are:

- Research paper
- Viewpoint
- Technical paper
- Conceptual paper
- Case study
- Literature review
- General review

The following fields must be completed:

- Purpose of this paper
- Design/methodology/approach
- Findings
- What is original about / the value of the paper

The following fields should be completed if they are appropriate to the paper:

- Research limitations/implications
- Practical implications

The finished abstract should contain no more than 250 words and should reflect only what appears in the original paper.

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### **3. An acknowledgement**

The manuscript, even if it is addressed to the editor, will often first be opened by a secretary or editorial assistant. The details from your covering letter will sometimes be logged onto an electronic system for future correspondence.

Within a week or two, you should receive an acknowledgement saying that your paper has been received. That doesn't mean that it has been read in depth or even sent into the review stream. Many editors will look over their papers in batches, every few days or once a week. It may therefore be a few weeks before a decision is made whether or not to send the paper for review. As you already know by now, many papers are instantly rejected because they do not conform to the journal's editorial objectives. If you've followed the advice on [relationship publishing](#) this won't happen to you.

A paper that meets the journal's editorial objectives will most likely be reviewed either by the editor, by specialist editors or by one, two or sometimes three members of the review board. In the case of a fully refereed journal the process is, as discussed earlier, at least double-blind. This may take several weeks or months. If you haven't heard back within 12 weeks, it would be reasonable to contact the journal and ask about its progress.

The reviewers' comments are sent back to the editor with one of three recommendations. One is to accept as is, perhaps subject to in-house sub-editing. The second is to ask the author to revise the paper in view of the reviewer's comments. The third is to reject it outright.

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### **4. Handling rejection**

A rejected paper means that the editor and reviewers do not feel it could be appropriate for the readership even if amendments were made. Why would they think that?

- your paper was inappropriately targeted
- your paper was poorly written, badly structured, badly argued
- your paper was good, but just not as good as some of the others.

We must assume now that, if you have done your research properly, targeted the journal correctly, structured your article, written it well and followed the journal's Notes for Authors, only the latter could possibly apply. In this case, you should find another journal in the same field.

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## 5. Revision

Being asked to revise an article is a compliment. It means that you are regarded as a potential contributor to the journal and therefore also as a potential contributor to the body of knowledge.

And yet, many authors are disappointed with this news. It feels like rejection, although nothing could be less true: it's quite the opposite. The reviewers and editors feel you are worth the effort. They are willing to invest time in you. You should view this process as not extra work but as extra, free, support and advice. Ask experienced authors what it is they value most in the publishing process and the answer will most often be one word: feedback.

Sometimes, less experienced authors can create unnecessary trouble for an editor. Once an article is marked 'revise' it will be sent back to you with an invitation to revise it within a certain period. Respond to the editor immediately, agreeing to make the suggested revisions by the date given. Then, without fail, stick to it. Saying you are busy is an insult to busy editors and reviewers.

Once you send your paper back to the editor it will be reviewed again. Sometimes your revisions will adequately reflect their expectations and sometimes they will ask you to go even further. The same principles as we discussed above apply: do your best to respond to their requests, and tell them you are doing so.

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## 6. Acceptance

Once the editorial team has accepted your manuscript, it will enter the production process. This is where the work is reformatted into the journal's house style, with the figures, tables and illustrations brought into the correct format and the whole paper checked for any errors which were not caught by the author or reviewers. This is what Emerald tells its authors:

To avoid any unnecessary delays in publication of your work:

Please ensure that you:

- Complete, sign and return the Journal Article Record (JAR) Form and include any authorization for the inclusion of copyright materials in your article.
- Keep us informed of any change in your contact details and areas of interest so that we can inform you of requests to reproduce your work and ensure that any communications reach you safely.

## **7. Handling author's proofs**

The author may be asked to see the proofs in the hope that they may catch an error which went unnoticed by the production team. Also, the author's paper may have been edited and it is a courtesy to allow the author to see the changes. It is not, however, expected that the author will disagree with those changes unless a serious problem in understanding has arisen.

Many authors find this stage exceedingly difficult. Each time you see your work you will be tempted to change it. You will think that you could always write a little more clearly; there is always a sentence you think could be improved; there is always something more you think you can say. Of course, you are right. There is always something more. But, remember the advice we heard earlier. There are perfect papers, and there are published papers. Authors must discipline themselves to let their work go.

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## **8. And then . . . ?**

Congratulations, you've done it! Not only done it, but also done it knowing how and why it would work. That means you can do it again. You can also think seriously about joining the wider community of published authors, editors, and reviewers.

There are a number of options open to you, but at the very least you will want to keep up to date with what's happening in the field of publishing and with your field of research. That's what, for example, Emerald does with [Literati Club](#) of which you will automatically be a member as a published author in Emerald's portfolio.

You may also want to explore getting involved with the process of editing. Again, Emerald can offer you advice with this. Many well-known, internationally-respected editors began with just one section of a journal to look after - the research news, for example, or forthcoming events. You may become a reviewer, looking at papers in your field and offering constructive advice to other authors.

Once you begin publishing, you may see yourself following new directions within the field. Most people who are involved will tell you - communicating your work to others and assisting other people to do the same is intensely satisfying. It's even more satisfying when you've learned a process that helps you publish your work more successfully and effectively each time.