

What a Journal Editor Wants to See

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Journal editors and prospective authors of journal articles have different primary objectives for manuscript publication. The editor is concerned with the audience – readers and libraries and other major subscribers. Authors, on the other hand, depend highly on the credentialing function of journal publication. The two perspectives need not be incompatible. In fact, they can be extremely complementary. In what follows, I outline 7 desirable characteristics for manuscripts that, while comprising a bundle of traits that journal editors want to see (and thus increase the probability of acceptance), also make the author look good professionally.

1. The manuscript is well written

This should be self-evident. But an amazing number of submissions are not well written. To qualify as well written, a manuscript:

- a. Is organized in a logical, coherent fashion (Outlining before writing helps!)
- b. Follows basic best practices for writing, e.g.:
 - Each paragraph has a topic sentence
 - There are clear transitions between sections
 - Proper grammar is used throughout, etc.

Why is this important? All else equal, the well written article has a higher probability of acceptance, and will get accepted more quickly. Also, referees' reading moods are conditioned by the quality of writing. A referee who is frustrated by poor presentation of material is less likely to embrace even good analysis. Many editors will not send a poorly written manuscript to referees.

If English is not your native language, it can be very helpful to have someone look over the manuscript to review the quality of writing *before* sending it in to a journal editor.

2. There is a good match between the journal's niche and the manuscript's substance and style.

Read how the journal describes its scope and objectives, and carefully review the guidance it gives to submitters to make sure that your work is appropriate for submission. This also seems like a no-brainer. But while the *Review of Agricultural Economics* quite clearly states that it is an applied journal seeking practical analysis applied to real problems, we do get a purely theoretical or purely methodological submission every once in a while. Those inappropriate submissions are immediately rejected, not because they aren't good (they could be reporting path-breaking, outstanding contributions), but because they're just not right for the journal.

And please, do not submit an article that has been rejected by one journal (say the *AJAE*) to a differently oriented journal (like the *RAE*) without at least rewriting it to address the different audience.

3. The manuscript addresses comments and suggestions solicited from professional critics *before* submission to the journal.

Why would anyone send a raw, unreviewed manuscript out to be scrutinized and scoured by strangers, some of whom will be quite unsympathetic? Doesn't it make sense, first, to have had it reviewed by a true peer – a credible professional you know, who knows you and has your best interest at heart; someone who will be critical, but in a constructive manner? You would think so, but, again, this is not a desirable trait that journal editors see with absolute reliability. I once sent a series of negative referee comments out to a pair of authors who were student and professor. The student had turned a term paper into a manuscript that did not fare well in the review process, and had added the name of the professor as a courtesy, without telling the professor or asking for his review prior to submission. The professor called me to express his mortification, and the student's first experience with a professional journal was, needlessly, a bad one. Prior, professional review precludes bad editorial experiences.

4. The manuscript provides clear answers to the questions, “Why?” and “So What?”

Why did you do this work?

What motivated it?

What is your hypothesis and why do you pose it?

“Nobody else has done it” is not sufficient motivation. (Maybe nobody else has done it because there is no good reason to do it.)

“So what?” is a related question that needs to be answered. Ideally, you can explain how what you are doing *could* make a difference (whether to theory, methods, or decision makers relying on applied analysis). This is most important as a part of one's conclusions. OK, you found something (or failed to find something), but...what are the implications of your findings? How can others use your findings? Why should your audience care about or value what you have done? Making this clear is a real asset.

5. Creativity, originality, elegance, and parsimony are evident in both analysis and writing.

The ideal submission is based on an original idea, and attacked in a creative way, but is presented elegantly and in parsimonious fashion.

Elegance and parsimony mean that the manuscript is no more complex than it needs to be to make the points that need to be made. For example, it is great to see equations used to shorten and simplify a presentation. It is not desirable to add equations when they are unnecessary and complicate rather than simplify a presentation. The rule of thumb is to use thriftiness in *what* is presented, and *how* it is presented. More is not necessarily better!

6. Respond seriously to referees' comments if/when invited to revise and resubmit.

Referees rule!

If you receive comments on your original submission, and are invited to resubmit, journal editors really do want to see you address the referees' comments and suggestions. Help the editor to recognize that you took the referees' comments seriously, and made appropriate revisions based on those comments. If you choose to disregard a suggestion for improvement/revision, make sure that you clearly justify your decision to the editor, and back up your choice with clear evidence showing why ignoring the advice is a good idea.

7. Be a good referee.

A good referee spends considerable time and effort reading and thinking about how well a manuscript under review accomplishes the author's and journal editor's goals, and in offering detailed, *constructive* criticism – and does it in a timely manner. A good referee can be an advocate for the author's ideas and an ally in getting a manuscript in the kind of shape that will get it professional notice upon publication.

If you are asked to referee a manuscript (and have the time to do it; It is OK to say “no,” as long as you do so as quickly as possible), you should know that your performance in that regard will be noted (and often recorded in a referee log) by the journal editor(s). If you expect to get a referee for your submitted article who is carefully chosen on the basis of professional expertise and has a track record for providing good, thorough, constructive, timely reviews, you will want to demonstrate to editors that you appreciate a good referee. You can do that by being one, yourself. On the other hand, if you fail to submit a review on time, or do a superficial job in reviewing a submission, how could you possibly expect *your* submission to be reviewed well and quickly?

While all of these points address things a journal editor wants to see, each also will generally serve you well in your career as a food, agricultural, resource, or development economist.