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# Writing for Publication

## STEPS TO EXCELLENCE

If you want an insider's tips about how to improve your chances of getting published, you could attend a workshop on writing for publication. Or you could read Mr. Henson's excellent advice and benefit from the results of his biennial survey of journal editors, published right here.

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**BY KENNETH T. HENSON**

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**E**DITORS ARE often misunderstood. I learned this fact from serving as guest editor for several journals, teaching writing for publication classes, and giving more than 300 writing for publication workshops from coast to coast. Because editors reject far more manuscripts than they accept, their contributors may conclude that editors are perverse people who enjoy rejecting manuscripts or that they are callous and do not care about the feelings of their contributors. Both assumptions are dead wrong.

Editing is like prospecting for gold, and editors live for those moments when they open up an envelope — or more often a file attachment — and discover a well-written manuscript that focuses on a topic of high interest to their readers. Contributors should remember that editors, like successful prospectors, are very good at detecting the difference between pyrite (fool's gold) and the real thing. Though highly skilled, editors are servants who always keep their clientele, their readers, in mind.

This bizarre opening has two purposes. The first is to remind you, the would-be published writer, to always keep your readers in mind and put their best interests first. The choice of topic, the writing style, and the choice of language found in the manuscripts I read —

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along with the questions I am asked in my writing for publication classes and workshops — tell me that a great many novice writers do not put concern for the readers first. Instead, they aim to impress the editors.

This is a big mistake. Forget the editor and align yourself with the readers. But to do that, you must know the readers, and this is where most novice writers fall short. At least, that is what editors have been telling me for over 25 years in my biennial surveys. I always ask the editors to tell me the most common, serious mistake

that their contributors make that leads to rejection, and they always say that it is their contributors' failure to know their readers.

My second reason for wanting to correct the misperception about editors is that most editors are willing

to help novice contributors. In my workshops, I hear it over and over. Contributors tell me about helpful comments that editors wrote on their manuscripts and rejection letters. To be perfectly honest, I know that many contributors receive rejection letters without a hint of

**TABLE 1.**  
**Characteristics of a Selected Sample of Education Journals**

	Number of Readers	Refereed*	Research Articles (%)	Themed Issues per Year (%)	Rejection Rate (%)	Weeks for Decision (Avg.)	Months Required for Publication (Avg.)	Preferred Length (in Ms., Pages)	Number of Additional Copies	Required Style	Electronic Submissions	Prefer Letter (L), Phone Call (P), E-mail (E)
<i>Action in Teacher Education</i>	3,000	3	75	50	84	24	3	25	5	APA	N	L/P/E
<i>Current Issues in Middle Level Education</i>	150	3	30	—	10	7	4-6	—	—	APA	Y	E
<i>Education</i>	3,500	2	10	25	30	5	9	12	11	APA	N	L
<i>Educational Forum</i>	4,000	3	10	5	57	4	4-6	14	E	Chicago	Y	P
<i>Educational Horizons</i>	17,000	2	—	90	90	—	—	—	—	Other	Y	L/E
<i>Educational Leadership</i>	185,000	0	15	95	90	—	—	6-12	1	Chicago	Y	L
<i>Educational Technology</i>	3,000	0	—	—	85	2	3-6	12-15	1	APA	Y	P
<i>Elementary School Journal</i>	2,673	3	95	40	90	10	8-12	40	3	APA	N	P
<i>Exceptional Children</i>	60,000	2	75	—	80	4	9	40	4	APA	N	L/P/E
<i>Executive Educator</i>	Online	3	85	—	69	8	3	20	E	APA	Y	L/P/E
<i>Harvard Educational Review</i>	10,000	0	50	—	93	18	3-6	1-45	2	All	Y	None
<i>Journal of Adolescent &amp; Adult Literacy</i>	16,358	3	—	—	—	7	4-12	20	E	APA	Y	L/E
<i>Journal of Instructional Psychology</i>	400	2	75	—	35	4	6	10-14	1	APA	N	L
<i>Journal for the Liberal Arts &amp; Sciences</i>	350	3	30	50	35	3	3	8-12	1	APA	Y	L/P/E
<i>Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance</i>	17,000	3	5	20	68	12	6	10	—	APA	Y	L/E
<i>Journal of Res. in Science Teaching</i>	18,000	3	99	80	70	12	7½	30	E	APA	Y	L/P/E
<i>Journal of School Health</i>	6,000	3	75	10	75	14	6-12	14	E	AMA	Y	L/P/E
<i>Kappa Delta Pi Record</i>	50,000	3	40	—	80	16	8	8	E	Chicago	Y	L
<i>Learning and Leading with Technology</i>	15,000	0	10	33	35	6	4-6	4	0	Chicago	Y	L/P/E
<i>Middle School Journal</i>	35,000	3	33	80	80	16	9	20	4	APA	N	E
<i>Phi Delta Kappan</i>	60,000	0	50	40	95	10	6-18	15	0	Chicago	Y	L/E
<i>Planning &amp; Changing</i>	500	3	90	25	65	14	2-6	16-20	2	APA	N	L/E
<i>Presidency</i>	7,000	0	0	—	90	12	2	3-8	E	Chicago	Y	E
<i>Principal Magazine</i>	29,500	0	10	25	85	6	2-12	6-8	1	Chicago	Y	L
<i>Reading Improvement</i>	1,000	2	25	—	20	6	6	10-16	2	APA	N	L
<i>Reading Research Quarterly</i>	11,000	3	90	—	90	10	6-9	25-50	—	APA	Y	L
<i>Reading Teacher</i>	55,000	3	80	5	85	6	8-12	20	3	APA	Y	L/P/E
<i>School Administrator</i>	22,000	0	10	66	75	9	9	3-12	—	A. Press	Y	L/P/E
<i>School Science and Mathematics</i>	3,500	3	40	15	76	16	2-5	20	4	APA	N	L/P/E
<i>Theory Into Practice</i>	1,200	3	—	100	1	8	6-8	15	1	APA	N	L/E

Assistance in constructing this table was provided by George Bosilkov, a doctoral student at the University of Alabama.

\*For an explanation of the rating scale used in this column, see page 784.

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suggestions, but in the numerous instances when contributors have been bold enough to ask the editor for suggestions, many have been shocked to learn how helpful editors can be.

Do not overreact to this tidbit of information, because editors are extremely busy. Many editors teach classes and perform a host of noneditorial roles, leaving them with little time to hold our hands or write our manuscripts for us. Obviously, we should not abuse the practice of asking for editors' advice, and if we phone them, we should have a *short* bulleted list of questions in hand so that we can ask them quickly and keep our phone calls brief.

**MY ADVICE TO NOVICE WRITERS IS TO IDENTIFY A COUPLE OF IMPORTANT PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL GOALS AND USE PUBLISHING IN THESE JOURNALS AS A MEANS OF REACHING THESE GOALS.**

Along with reporting that contributors fail to know the readers of their journals, the respondents to my surveys have consistently said that the second most frequent mistake novice writers make — close kin to the first — is a lack of familiarity with the journals themselves. The purpose of my biennial survey of editors (and of these biennial articles) is to help you become familiar with some of the journals in the field. My advice to novice writers is to identify a couple of important professional and personal goals and use publishing in these journals as a means of reaching these goals. Having identified your goals, study Table 1 and choose a couple of journals with good acceptance rates and turnaround times that also meet the criteria required for you to meet your goals. For example, if your goal is to attain merit pay, tenure, or promotion and you teach in a department that recognizes only research-based, national, refereed journals, then you must be sure to select journals that meet these criteria.

Once you've chosen an appropriate selection of journals, read at least an issue or two of each from cover to cover. Coupled with the information in Table 1, doing this will give you some insights into and feelings about these journals and will enable you to design manuscripts that sound, look, and feel like the articles published in them. I invite workshop participants to bring copies of their favorite journals so I can show them how to use the journals as blueprints to tailor their articles to fit. I believe that, when you make sure that your manu-

script offers information that is important to a journal's readers and when you design it so that it reads clearly and looks and feels like an article in the journal, your chances of acceptance will shoot sky high. The moment the journal's reviewers forget that they are reading a manuscript instead of an article in the journal is the moment your manuscript will be accepted.

Each time I conduct this survey, I use feedback from my workshop participants and students to make adjustments to the instrument, and I look at the new results differently and gain new insights. In discussing the current survey below, I'll note the items that are new this time around.

*Required membership.* My workshop participants and students frequently ask me whether being a member of an association or subscribing to the association's journal is a prerequisite to publishing in the journal, so I always ask the editors. All of the editors, except one, who responded to the 2006 survey said no. The editor of *The Presidency* said that contributors must be affiliated with an American Council on Education member institution and advises potential contributors to phone before submitting their manuscripts.

*Effect of photos on acceptance.* Two-thirds (66.7%) of these editors said that submitting good photos along with your manuscripts would *not* improve your chance for acceptance; however, one-third said that sending along good photos *could possibly* make a difference. One editor (*Journal for the Liberal Arts and Sciences*) said that good photos would probably make a favorable difference. If you do send photos, try to get pictures that show the subjects in action. For example, a photo with a teacher and students standing in a line facing the camera is not as exciting as a photo showing these same subjects at work in a lab or in the field.

*Research versus nonresearch journals.* Sooner or later, my workshop participants ask about the differences between the various kinds of journals — research-style journals, practitioners' journals, reviews, and theoretical journals. I frequently hear the question, "Are my chances for acceptance better or worse if I write for research-style journals?" (Here, research-style refers to those journals that, like dissertations, follow the scientific method of reporting a study.) This year, I analyzed the survey data to learn how the average acceptance rate of research-style journals compares to that of other kinds of journals. I learned that the acceptance rate of research journals is slightly higher than that of nonresearch journals.

*Number of readers.* Some of my workshop participants tell me that their major reason for publishing their research is to help others. For them, journals with large

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circulations are far more attractive than journals with small circulations. Notice in Table 1 that the size of readership among these journals varies from 150 readers to over 185,000 readers. Always consider your reasons for writing when you select your target journals.

*Refereed status.* Most workshops attract some parti-

**THE ADVANTAGES OF WRITING ON THEMES ARE SO IMPORTANT AND THE PAYOFF IS SO LARGE THAT I CANNOT IMAGINE WHY ANYONE WOULD FAIL TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THIS OPPORTUNITY.**

cipants who are feeling pressured to publish quickly to meet tenure requirements, so I nearly always discuss the refereed status of journals.

Because I know that much confusion surrounds this topic, I try to introduce some clarity. Several years ago, when a search for a definition of *refereed* produced more confusion than clarity, I wrote my own definition and had it copyrighted. My definition has three parts, to which I assign equal weight: 1) if the manuscripts are evaluated by experts in the field at large, rather than solely by the editors, I award one point; 2) if the manuscripts are evaluated anonymously, without readers' knowing the author's name or institutional affiliation, I award one point; and 3) if the editors send along a rating scale to be used by the reviewers, I award one point. The second column in Table 1 shows each journal's rating.

About two-thirds of the journals surveyed in 2006 show at least some degree of refereed status, and just over half of these journals (55.5%) meet all three criteria. Because many participants in my workshops harbor the idea that only refereed journals are high-quality journals, I always point out that some of the most prestigious journals are nonrefereed (e.g., *Educational Leadership*, *Harvard Educational Review*, and *Phi Delta Kappan*). But, because my workshops are designed to help the participants meet their needs, I always recommend that those pursuing tenure consider writing for the national, refereed journals. Some writers may target nonrefereed journals because they suspect that these journals have higher acceptance rates than refereed journals, but this, too, is mistaken. In fact, the current survey found that the average acceptance rate for refereed journals (18.3%) is higher than the average acceptance for nonrefereed journals (12.5%).

*Research articles.* A quarter century of surveying jour-

nals has taught me that each one is unique. A quick look at several of the columns in Table 1 supports this conclusion. It is certainly true regarding the degree to which these journals publish articles that report research; the current survey found a range of zero to 99%. I advise writers to report data in every manuscript. If you have no fresh data on hand, you can use a one-page survey to gather enough data for at least one or two good articles.

*Themed issues.* Everything I do in my workshops is designed to increase the participants' acceptance rates. Writing for themed issues is an example of a strategy that will yield gigantic improvements in your chances of publication.

On average, these journals receive about three times as many manuscripts for nonthemed issues as they receive for themed issues. So just by submitting your work for a themed issue, you can increase your acceptance rate by about 300%. And you will have plenty of opportunities to write for themed issues. This year's survey found that between one-third and one-half of all the issues of these journals (42.4%) are focused on a theme. You can identify coming themes on the websites of the journals or by examining recent issues.

Because we tend to produce better work when writing on topics that we enjoy and find engaging, don't just try to write for every themed issue you come across. I recommend that you write about your own research interests (your dissertation topic, grants, and surveys) and then align your topic with a journal theme. Sometimes this requires a little sidestepping, a move I learned from writing grants. For example, I wanted to design a performance-based teacher education program, but no funds were available. I learned that funds were available to study teacher burnout, so I created a performance-based teacher education program and collected data to study teacher burnout. The advantages of writing on themes are so important and the payoff is so large that I cannot imagine why anyone would fail to take advantage of this opportunity.

*Rejection rates.* Most of my workshop participants are aware of the importance of rejection rates, but many faculty members who are desperate to get a manuscript or two accepted quickly nonetheless submit their work to journals that have 90% or higher rejection rates. On average, the journals surveyed reject about two-thirds of the manuscripts they receive, but that is no reason to be discouraged. A closer look at the data in Table 1 shows that almost half of these journals (46%) accept at least 25% of the manuscripts they receive and that almost one-fourth (23.5%) accept over half. This means

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that you have plenty of opportunities to submit your manuscripts to national, refereed journals with decent acceptance rates. I recommend that novice writers and desperate writers target their manuscripts to journals that accept 25% or more of the manuscripts they receive.

*Revising and resubmitting.* In practically every workshop, a participant shares a horror story of a personal experience in which an editor returned a manuscript

**WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS ASK HOW LONG THEY SHOULD WAIT FOR A RESPONSE WHEN THEY SUBMIT A MANUSCRIPT. ON AVERAGE, IT TAKES EDITORS JUST OVER TWO MONTHS TO MAKE A PUBLISHING DECISION.**

dripping with red ink, indicating a need to change almost every sentence. Understandably, this participant wants to know whether it's worth attempting to satisfy this demanding reviewer or editor. Perhaps time would be better spent submitting the unrevised manuscript to another journal. I adjusted my 2006 questionnaire to find an answer, asking the editors about their rejection rates for resubmissions. Although making revisions does not guarantee acceptance, the chance for acceptance is much improved (75.8% compared to 33.9%). With the chance for acceptance more than doubled, I strongly suggest revising and resubmitting if you are offered the chance to do so. But I also suggest including a cover letter detailing the changes you've made and reminding the editor that these changes are in response to the editor's suggestions.

*Turnaround times.* The next two columns in Table 1 give the time it takes editors to make a decision and the time that elapses between acceptance and publication. Often my workshop participants ask how long they should wait for a response when they submit a manuscript and whether they should phone, mail, or e-mail the editor. On average, it takes editors just over two months (9.5 weeks) to make a publishing decision. If you have sent your manuscript to one of the journals listed in Table 1, check the last column to see whether the editor prefers phone calls, e-mail, or letters. If you don't know your target journal's average decision-making time, I recommend waiting three months before making an inquiry.

Because of improved technology, the time it takes for an article to get from acceptance to publication has decreased from about nine months to just under seven

months (6.8 months). For those professors who are using their articles for promotion and tenure and for whom time is short, I suggest using their acceptance letters in the same way as they would use their published articles: enclose a copy of the manuscript and a copy of the acceptance letter when submitting materials for promotion and tenure review.

*Preferred length.* When I ask editors how long they like articles to be, the responses are given in terms of *manuscript* pages. For any journal article, you can estimate how many manuscript pages the author submitted by counting the number of words across a page (ignoring any column breaks), counting the number of lines on a page, and multiplying these numbers together. Then multiply the result by the approximate number of journal pages in the article and divide by 250 (the average number of words on a double-spaced manuscript page).

Here is one additional tip for using article length to improve your chances for acceptance. When preparing each issue, editors go through their supply of manuscripts, choosing the best ones on hand. But when they come to the end of the issue, because of varying manuscript lengths, they almost always find that the last available space in any issue is shorter than average. Thus they begin looking for a short article, often referred to as a "filler." You can up your chances of acceptance if your manuscript is about as long as the shortest article in your target journal.

*Number of additional copies.* This topic would seem to be self-explanatory. However, this year's survey reveals that a number of journals strongly prefer electronic submission. This preference is noted by the letter E in this column.

*Reference style.* Over half of these journals (60%) use the APA (American Psychological Association) style, and about one-fourth (26.7%) use the Chicago style.

I advise my students and workshop participants to think about their personal writing goals. Then examine the journals that your administrators and colleagues deem acceptable. From these journals, try to locate a couple that use the same citation style. This will save you the time required to change a rejected manuscript to another citation style and will give you more time to write.

*Writing style.* Oscar Wilde once expressed his view of the importance of style when he said, “I spent the whole morning putting in a comma. I spent the whole afternoon taking it out.” Write simply, and put clarity ahead of everything else. Keep your sentences short and free of unnecessary jargon. Keep your paragraphs short as well. Wherever possible, substitute for wordy phrases such as “at this point in time” and “as well as” such direct words as “now” and “and.” If you mean “use,” say “use,” not “utilize.” Use concrete nouns for subjects, put them near the beginning of your sentences, and follow immediately with action verbs.

Develop your own personal writing program: designate times during the week for writing, and protect that time as you would the time you set aside to prepare for your teaching. I find that using a thin, three-ring binder to hold data from my surveys and quotes from the literature is almost a prerequisite to successful publishing. I use these data and quotes over and over. I also use sticky notes to flag passages in articles that I think I might use. I make a quick-and-dirty index for each journal by writing a key word on each sticky note and attaching the flag to the journal page. When I begin writing an article, I put all the flagged articles on that topic on my table and ignore the rest of my library.

*Electronic submission.* Almost two-thirds (63%) of these editors said that they will accept electronic submissions, but just over one-third (37%) refuse to accept electronic submissions. Check Table 1 to see if your target journal is in this group. If not, unless you know that the journal welcomes electronic submissions, do not submit online. You might phone the editorial office and ask someone whether electronic submissions are welcome. This practice will save you time — time that can be used for writing.

## A FINAL WORD

My 25 years of conducting surveys, giving workshops, writing articles, and teaching this subject have convinced me that by taking a few easy steps, nearly all the faculty members I have ever met can take their personal writing programs to any level for which they are willing to work. I leave you with the following reminders:

- *State your writing goals.* It sounds so simple as to be trite, but it is a prerequisite for getting the most from your writing efforts. Using a short sentence, I state my writing goals. First, I write one or two professional and personal goals that tell me where I am headed with my life. Next, I select a couple of journals that my peers find acceptable and that align with my goals. I am careful to select journals with decent acceptance rates and turnaround times. Then I write a couple of time-specific goals stating what I hope to accomplish and when. For example, by the beginning of summer, I plan to have a survey completed and in the mail. Or, by the end of summer, I plan to have an article drafted, revised, and in the mail. This moves me from my natural state of inertia, and I always feel better when I reach one of these steps because I know I am making progress.

I begin drafting my article, using the target journal as a blueprint. If the journal uses headings in the text, I put in headings. If it routinely uses tables and charts, I design tables and charts. I always look for Authors’ Guidelines, Calls for Manuscripts, and Announcements of Coming Themes, and I use each of these journal features to help make my manuscript more likely to be accepted by my target journal.

- *Design the first page to capture the readers’ attention.* I begin working my data and citations into *the first page* of my manuscript, always using recent data and citations. I write a title that should capture the readers’ attention and then — if my target journal welcomes such titles — use a colon to try to capture the attention of a second audience. To grab readers’ attention, I often use a number in the title to make a promise to the readers. For example, “Eight Ways to Avoid Litigation” or “Seven Ways to Reach Reluctant Learners.”

- *Build a personal writing library.* It is never too soon to start building your personal library on writing for publication. I attend writing workshops at professional conferences and take copious notes, always careful to record the date, quote speakers accurately, and note the exact titles of the conference and the speech. In a recent workshop, a seasoned writer made this comment: “Writing is not a spectator sport.” He was right. The business of a writer is to write. Don’t worry about mistakes; your primary job is to get your ideas down on paper. There’s plenty of time to fix grammar and spelling, and there’s plenty of time to organize and reorganize your article after you have captured your ideas.

The more you write, the better you will become, and the more you will enjoy it. Half the payoff in writing is in crafting a product that you can see getting better and better. Happy writing. **K**

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