



## Short communication

## How to get published in English: Advice from the outgoing Editor-in-Chief



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## ABSTRACT

Language teachers and applied linguists in universities across the world are under increasing pressure to publish in prestigious international journals. This article draws on very extensive experience as author, reviewer and editor to provide practical advice to academics on how to maximise their chances of getting published in an international journal. It details how a thesis differs from a journal article, how to select target journals, and how to avoid junk journals. It explains the whole process of submission and peer review. It discusses the challenges of writing in academic English. A section on research ethics defines plagiarism, and describes why and how authors must ensure that their submissions contain no plagiarised material.

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## 1. Introduction

In universities across the globe, academic staff are under pressure to publish in high-status international journals. In a few countries, no research degree can be awarded until an article arising from the thesis has been published. When stakes are so high, so are authors' emotions. Some early-career academic researchers can become so anxious that they ask journal editors to fast-track their submissions. I want to counter unrealistic expectations with a fuller understanding of the submission, review and publications process.

What follows is a distillation of more than forty years' experience as a university teacher and researcher. I have just retired after 3 years as Editor-in-Chief of *System*, but I have also authored a hundred-odd publications, supervised and examined doctoral theses in several countries, and acted as reviewer for more than twenty international journals as well as for research funding bodies and book publishers. This article gives my own personal view, and does not necessarily represent the position of Elsevier, of *System*, or of its new editorial team. I concentrate on academic journals, but do not forget professional journals and less specialised media, which can have more public impact.

## 2. Why publish?

Publication makes available to interested readers the latest empirical findings and theoretical understandings, thus adding to what we know in a particular domain. For *System* the domain is language learning and teaching, and importance is attached

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to the value of the research for pedagogy, in other words the way in which the teaching and learning processes are conceived and implemented. The best research can, directly or indirectly, influence actual practice and thereby help language learners.

Getting published in a respected international journal also brings prestige to authors and to their institution. National research assessment is a typical feature of state-funded education systems, while in the complex global market which higher education has become, publication and citation rates contribute to all of the national and global university rankings, advancing the authors' professional career and making their institution more attractive to students.

The worst reason for publishing is 'to qualify for a research degree', but regrettably some countries insist on publication of research findings before awarding a Masters or Doctorate. This has had at least three very negative outcomes: confusion between thesis and article, explosive growth of junk journals (see Section 11 below), and time pressures which authors seek to transfer to editors.

### 3. Thesis and article

Think about the purpose of a doctorate, and the intended readership of your thesis. Compare these with the function of an academic article and its intended readership.

People undertake postgraduate research for personal reasons including interest and accessing an academic career, as well as professional reasons such as exploring a real-world problem or unknown domain, and challenging orthodoxies. The function of the thesis is to show your ability to conceive, design, conduct and report on an original piece of research. Good supervisors will ensure that you become familiar, through your reading, with relevant current theories and the latest state of knowledge in the field, and will embed in the doctoral years a training in research ethics and in qualitative and quantitative methods of data elicitation, analysis and presentation.

The function of the thesis, which will usually be read by just a small handful of people, is to demonstrate your ability to undertake and successfully complete a study whose results will be interesting, original and significant, to show that you have knowledge and critical understanding of previous work in the area, of relevant theories, and of relevant research methods, and to show that you can report research in a professional way. A PhD is a sort of licence to undertake individual research.

Publishing an article can also be personally motivated by a desire for public recognition, reward for several years of very hard work, career promotion, and professionally motivated by a desire to inform other professionals of your findings and make a real contribution to your field of theory and practice. Your article is designed to disseminate your research findings: it has a different purpose from your thesis, and therefore a different shape and length. In adapting a thesis into one or more articles, you therefore need to rewrite and abbreviate.

Even a good thesis, especially at Masters level, may not make a good article. It will typically have a local focus, perhaps small scale, and may explore – especially if quantitative – two or more variables whose combination is dictated by the need to find a suitable Masters topic rather than by a genuine need to push back the threshold of knowledge. In a thesis, the readers (examiners) know the context and know the literature, and the author's aim is to convince them, often through an extensive essay chapter, that s/he also understands them. In an international journal, readers normally do know the literature, so they just need the study to be rapidly located within it. But they often do not know the context, which needs to be quickly described. Always explain local references like 'fifth grade' or 'K-12' or 'CET-4' or 'DAF', which are transparent to a national readership but obscure to an international one.

In a published article, the purpose of the literature review is not to show an interest in and some knowledge of the area under investigation. It is to contextualise the study in terms of both theory and the current state of knowledge. You must justify undertaking the study. Many rejected submissions seem to start from a choice of factors which can be investigated statistically using questionnaires or simple test measures, rather than from an authentic need to know. The function of the literature review is to offer a compact, critical survey of previous studies in the field that helps to show the need for the present study by identifying a real and significant gap in knowledge. There must be a clear rationale, a logical link from the review to the research questions, and from there to the methodology, the results and the conclusions.

What makes for good doctoral training in statistical methods does not necessarily make an article suitable for international publication. As an author, you need to identify a research gap. Why is the study necessary? What lack of knowledge will it address? For international publication it is not enough that you know the literature, know the research instruments and data elicitation techniques, and have explored something in a satisfactory way. You have to convince the editor and reviewers that your research questions needed to be asked.

### 4. Basics

Select your target journal(s) carefully, and aim high. Where are the key articles in your field published? Ask your supervisors and colleagues. Access the homepage and study the Aims and Scope and the journal's requirements. Skim several issues to appreciate its approach. Does it accept both quantitative and qualitative studies, theoretical and empirical articles? If you are concerned with prestige, look at citations and impact factors (<http://www.info.sciverse.com/scopus/> or <http://wokinfo.com/>) or some of the available journal lists such as ERIH or ERA (<http://www.esf.org/research-areas/humanities/erih-european-reference-index-for-the-humanities.html>; [http://www.arc.gov.au/era/era\\_journal\\_list.htm](http://www.arc.gov.au/era/era_journal_list.htm)) – but use these with caution, since journal reputation is very subjective and there are many other ways of measuring real impact. I know

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