

# Estro

The Essex Student Journal

## Why Submit? Why Publish? Why Review?

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*An introduction to academic publishing culture in the UK and the University of Essex  
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We are all likely to get excited at the prospect of seeing our name on the cover of a beautiful, glossy book; perhaps our own listing in Amazon and maybe even our own space on one of the shelves in Waterstones. But perhaps we should not be quite so ambitious at the start of our publishing careers, perhaps we should learn to walk before we embark on the marathon involved in producing a complete book? Perhaps we should begin by submitting an academic paper for publication in a journal serving our specific discipline?

But where do you start? Each discipline has its own list of highly regarded journals, which are ranked according to their 'impact factor', and whilst each of us may aspire to appear in the most prestigious publications in the list as early as possible in our academic careers, it is a good idea to gain valuable experience closer to home. For instance, Ph.D students in a number of departments here at the University of Essex produce peer-reviewed journals of papers submitted by fellow students in their discipline. Publication at this level will ultimately provide you with useful feedback from experts in your field. This is a useful opportunity which I took advantage of twice in my department whilst doing my Ph.D (<http://www.essex.ac.uk/linguistics/publications/egsp11/>). You could also submit a paper to Estro (Essex Student Research Online) which adheres to the same rigorous standards of blind peer-reviewing that is common in academic publishing.

Apart from the personal pleasure of sharing and writing about your work, one of the first and most obvious advantages of publishing a paper is the additional line it provides on your CV – a very important line! In fact, the more of these lines there are on your CV, the more attractive it will appear to prospective employers, particularly

if those employers are academic institutions who keep a careful eye on their ranking in the Research Excellence Framework (REF, formerly the Research Assessment Exercises or RAE). The REF is a matter of utmost importance to all research departments in universities throughout the country. The publication contributions of academic staff nominated by each department of each university are evaluated in order to provide each discipline with a ranking. Prospective academic employers planning to hire a newly-graduated academic will cast a critical eye over the applicant's list of current and pending publications with a view to imagining how this individual will be able to help them climb a few rungs on the REF ladder.

However, you may feel that you have enough work to do with your current studies, without worrying about writing research papers and journal articles. But you can make it easy on yourself. For instance, you can re-work material from an earlier assignment, or from part of an undergraduate or Master's Dissertation; this is something which I did in the first year of my Ph.D research for a departmental peer-reviewed journal (see above). If you plan to have an academic career, it is a very important learning process to receive explicit (and anonymous) reviews of your own work, and then to revise your initial paper according to these comments. Although at the outset you might face the task with a big sigh and much grumbling, after you have finished, you realise that your paper really has been improved and, additionally, that you have learned something new in the process!

Another reason for publishing in academia is the need to get your name out in the field, and build your academic reputation. You may have found a cure for the common cold or discovered that the earth is flat, so get out there and tell everyone! The dissemination of new academic work typically happens at national and international conferences. The proceedings resulting from these conferences are often considered to be valuable publishing opportunities. One of the main advantages is that you can present at a conference venue, get feedback on your research, write a paper based on your presentation and the feedback received, submit the paper, receive the reviews, revise the paper, re-submit the revised paper, celebrate the paper's acceptance, *and* see the paper in print, all within the space of a few months. My CV gained three lines in two years with this tactic!

As an aside, another good thing about attending conferences is the networking you can do whilst you are there. Getting to know other researchers in your field is not only an interesting social activity but it can ultimately lead to further publications, perhaps as a second author, or possibly as part of a group, where your data may contribute to a larger project.

But perhaps you feel that you are not 'good enough' to publish academically. Maybe you believe that if you wrote a paper, it would be rejected. First, an important point to note here is that even the most established

academics receive rejections, so it is not the end of the world if you, as a novice in the field, also receive one. Second, you can still learn from the comments you have received from the reviewers, who are generally not paid for reviewing your paper and certainly do not reject it just for the sake of it. Their comments are not intended to be a personal criticism of you, but should be seen as constructive criticism of the paper you have submitted. Becoming a reviewer yourself can be one method of improving your own academic writing and also extending the knowledge of your field. The first time I reviewed a paper for a renowned journal in my field was just a few weeks before my viva! You may imagine this to be an unwanted burden at a time when perhaps many Ph.D students might simply want to bury their head in the sand and concentrate on their own research, but I was very glad I did that review. It gave me a chance to look at work related to my own research – without it being my own research! It also gave me the opportunity to make an honest critical analysis and it encouraged me to think about how someone else would go through the same process on my own paper – all in all, a very useful exercise! Since then I have reviewed a number of papers for various journals, and it is important to remember that as a reviewer your criticisms should be constructive, and clearly explained. If there is something wrong with the paper you need to say what it is, and how you believe the problem could be remedied. It was quite rewarding to receive an email from an editor forwarding grateful remarks and thanks from an author whose paper I had recently rejected, but rejected with four pages of comments.

Being an editor of an academic journal can also be a thankless job. Like reviewers, this position is generally unpaid. Editors are often blamed for a multitude of sins for which they are rarely responsible, from the delays authors experience in receiving a review, to the type of review received and the comments made. However this is again a valuable experience – and of course another line on your CV! I was co-editor of a departmental journal for a total of three years and the experience was invaluable. Apart from the knowledge I gained from reading some brilliant papers, it also taught me about addressing reviewers' comments and how to make life easier for the poor, unpaid editor, whose job it is to check that all those comments have been properly addressed. It also taught me about printing and formatting issues: for example, that the brilliant (and extremely important) graph you included with the 36 columns – all named and numbered – can only be readable in A5 if a magnifying glass is supplied with the journal. It taught me a lot about the importance of word-counts, and the fact that it will not help the editors to reduce the font size, or increase the page size: those 2,000 words that are over the limit will simply have to go.

Publishing in academia is a particularly important career step but, like all things that are worthwhile, it takes time; it also gets easier with practice. So don't wait any longer. Start writing that paper now.