

Chapter 2

The Research and Publication Process: Why Papers Get Rejected

2.1 What are the aims of PhD students and researchers?

A PhD student is someone who has already done one or more bachelor or Master's degrees.

Their main aims in life are to do research that they enjoy and survive economically at the same time. Both aims can be achieved to a large extent if they manage to publish their work.

They need to publish their work in order to:

1. justify the funds that they have been given by the institute where they work
2. share their knowledge and results with the scientific community (i.e. others working in the same or similar fields)
3. get noticed by other research labs that may be interested in funding them to carry out new research

Most researchers tend to think that point 2 above is the most important thing. In reality, that in itself is not enough to survive in academia. Your students need to get a name for themselves (Point 3), to network heavily at congresses, and to promote themselves and thereby get the funds that will allow them to continue in their privileged position as someone who spends most of their day doing something that they are passionate about.

2.2 How important is it for my students to write good papers?

In a New York Times Magazine article, economist Steven Levitt, author of the best-selling book *Freakanomics*, explained how his approach as a student at Harvard differed from his fellows. While other students were working on solving problems based on what they had been taught during lectures to ensure they would score well in examinations, Levitt focused on doing research and writing up what he had found: “My view was that the way you succeed in this profession is you write great papers.”

Later in the article Levitt gives insights into a couple of tricks he used when writing a paper:

- story telling - structure your paper to guide readers along a certain path in preparation for reading the results - if they get lost in the story they won't be able to comprehend and believe the results
- be honest about your limitations - readers and reviewers prefer you to be clear about any limitations or weaknesses in your research; they don't want the limitations to be hidden

Levitt's two points - results and limitations - are covered in Chapters 17 and 9, respectively, in *English for Writing Research Papers*.

2.3 What are the main steps in getting research published?

Again, let's imagine you are a PhD student - so below when I write *you* I mean a student.

While you are doing your research you need to publish results (for the reasons given in the previous subsection) even if these are not your final results.

The process is more or less as follows:

1. You (or your professor / tutor / supervisor / instructor - these people are called different names in different universities) decide on an appropriate journal to submit your paper to.
2. You download the "instructions to authors" from the journal's website in order to ensure you follow their style rules (regarding layout, use of *we* vs passive, bibliography etc.).

3. You write your paper possibly in conjunction with other co-authors to whom you submit the various drafts of the paper.
4. When everyone is happy with the paper you then submit it to your chosen journal by uploading it onto their website.
5. The editor of the journal quickly browses your paper and chooses two or three referees to judge the quality of the paper: scientific quality (i.e. its contribution to the state of the art) and the level of English (which is supposed to be as near to perfect as possible).
6. These referees write their report and send it back to the editor. The referees may or may not know who the author of the paper is. In a blind review they don't know who you are and thus are supposedly less likely to show any bias.
7. If the referees accept the paper with no changes then the editor will proceed with the publication. However 'acceptance with no changes' is very rare and the editor is likely to request some changes - these may be of a scientific nature or simply a 'linguistic review' (i.e. due to supposedly 'poor English').
8. You make the changes requested justifying any that you feel should not be made. You write a letter to the editor (called a *rebuttal*) explaining the changes made.
9. You wait and pray that your paper will be accepted.

2.4 What about conferences - how do they affect the publication process?

Conferences normally get organized up to a year before the actual date of the conference itself. Several months before the conference they issue a 'call for abstracts / papers'. This is an invitation to researchers to submit an abstract (in some cases a full paper) for review by the conference organizers. If the abstract is accepted, then the author will be invited either to

- give a presentation; or to
- conduct a poster session (see Chapter 18 in *English for Presentations at International Conferences*)

Researchers often use conferences to test out their ideas and get feedback on their research. This feedback then gets implemented into the final manuscript that they produce. This manuscript will then be submitted to a journal and / or published in the 'proceedings' of the conference, i.e. a collection of the papers submitted to the conference. These proceedings may simply be abstracts or certain authors may be asked to write a full paper.

So, conferences are an integral part of the research process. Giving a good presentation massively increases a researcher's chances of getting useful feedback on their research. It also acts as an opportunity to set up future research projects and thus get additional funds (and thus have enough money to eat and pay rent for the next few months!).

2.5 What steps do the students themselves follow when writing their manuscript?

When writing a paper it helps if students have a template to follow. You can recommend that they create their own template as follows. Note that below *you* and *your* refer to the student.

1. Choose a journal from your specific field.
2. Read 10-15 articles related to your research.
3. Select one article that you particularly like (ideally one that has also been frequently cited by other authors thus indicating it is a good paper).
4. Analyse how the paper is structured as a whole (and the word count for each different section) and then look at the structure of the individual sections.
5. Choose one section in the paper and note down what the author does in each paragraph.
6. Underline useful sentences that you could use in your own paper.
7. On the basis of Points 5 and 6, begin writing the section.
8. Repeat the same process for all the other sections.

2.6 What do my students need to know about referees?

It is crucial that your students write their paper or prepare their presentations with the referees and reviewers in mind. Below are three typical 'types' of referee. Note that *referee* and *reviewer* both mean the same thing with reference to the assessment of a research manuscript.

REFEREE 1: TOP EXPERTS CURRENTLY WORKING IN YOUR STUDENTS' FIELD

These are the ones to whom most journal editors try to send manuscripts for review. They are the experts that know the most about the topic and are therefore most suitable to carry out a peer review of a paper. They are also the ones who may have the least time and inclination to do such reviews, particularly as they may receive up to 10 requests per month for their services. Such referees tend to be most interested in whether the paper makes sense from a scientific point of view. They may be less concerned with language errors provided such errors do not impede on their understanding your student's paper. They do not normally have time to make a detailed analysis of every sentence that the author of the manuscript writes.

REFEREE 2: RETIRED EXPERTS

These referees are like the first type but they have a lot more time on their hands because they are no longer officially working. Because they have more time, they tend to go into much greater detail both from a scientific and language point of view.

REFEREE 3: PhD STUDENTS

With the advent of so many online journals, more and more papers are being published every day. This means that top experts are in great demand. Rather than refusing an editor's request for them to do a review, referees sometimes ask permission to pass the paper on to one of their PhD students. This is often the case when reviews are requested for low impact / low ranked journals. Clearly, a PhD student's knowledge of your student's specific research area may be less than your student's knowledge, but this does not mean that they are unable to make a good evaluation of your student's work.

Students need to keep all these types of referee happy!

2.7 How do referees do their job? Do native speakers always get their papers accepted?

Marcelo J. Lippmann who is an Associate Editor for the Americas Earth Sciences Division explains how referees generally work and what their priorities are when assessing a manuscript:

If the scientists are editing technical journals for a professional organization or a commercial publishing house, they tend to devote only a minimal amount of their time (a few hours a week) in editing the materials that are submitted to them. These “part-time editors” mainly want to make sure the technical / scientific content is correct. If the writing needs improvement, they either may reject the papers or ask the authors to get help from an English-speaking colleague or a science editor.

Thus, the key factor for rejection is issues to do with the technical and scientific content. Interestingly, Robert Coates (see 2.9) found that the acceptance rate for manuscripts (relating to cardiovascular research) emanating from the US and the UK was only 30.4%. Although this figure was higher than for any other nationality, it still indicates that being a native speaker is no guarantee that your manuscript will be published.

2.8 How do I know what to focus on when teaching students how to write up their research for publication? What criteria do referees follow when reviewing a manuscript or abstract?

The review of technical papers is an extremely serious process. Only technical expertise and judgement and high professional standards brought to bear on the review can ensure the publication of high-quality papers.

If the manuscript or abstract is being sent to a conference in the hope that the authors will be invited to give an oral presentation, then - in addition to the technical value of the work - reviewers will focus on

1. the degree of creativity or innovation
2. the contribution of the paper as a stimulant to discussion

This means you need to help your students highlight not just their results but the benefit of their results to the scientific community, how these results differ from previous work and what their applications / implications are (see Chapter 8 in *English for Writing Research Papers*).

If the research is going to be published, then - in addition to the two points above - reviewers will be looking at:

- whether the title reflects the content
- the main experimental question asked i.e. the aim of the research
- the rationale behind the aim
- how the work of your student relates to other research in the field and what previous papers prompted your student's research
- the methods used to address the aim of the research as stated by your student in their Abstract and Introduction
- the results, what they mean, what they add to what is already known and what should be done next as a consequence
- the main strengths, i.e. how the research really contributes to what is already known
- any limitations and weaknesses
- whether what is written in the Abstract and Conclusions is consistent with and supported by information contained in the paper

Obviously, much of this has little to do specifically with the English language. The same would be required if students were writing in their own language. So you actually have a dual role: i) helping them to write in English ii) advising them on what content is expected (and you will find that often this is equally important to teaching them good English). To learn about the expected content for each section of the paper, see Chapters 13 to 19 in *English for Writing Research Papers*.

If you want to learn more about what criteria reviewers follow, simply type "reviewers guidelines" into Google.

2.9 How can I help my students write better English? When manuscripts are rejected for 'poor English' what exactly does 'poor' mean?

In his paper 'Language and publication in Cardiovascular Research articles', Robert Coates talks about the reasons why papers are and are not accepted for publication. He writes:

Only a few rambling sentences (often as long as a paragraph) would make a whole article sometimes incomprehensible, whereas a relatively large number of lexical 'errors' would have no effect on an otherwise well-written article.

Dr Coates found that “badly written articles” correlate with “a high rejection rate”.

Many factors could influence the rejection of an article. However, we found clear indications that carelessly written articles could often have either a direct or subliminal influence on whether a paper was accepted or rejected. On equal scientific merit, a badly written article will have less chance of being accepted. This is even if the editor involved in rejecting a paper does not necessarily identify language problems as a motive for rejection.

Coates' research refers to papers that were submitted for publication in Cardiovascular Research.. He also found that manuscripts that had the lowest acceptance rate also had the highest error rate in terms of English.

This does not mean that all papers with high error rates were rejected or that a low acceptance rate was determined exclusively by poor English. But he did find a definite correlation.

Other researchers have also investigated the types of language mistakes made in scientific papers and they are all in basic agreement. For example, Professor Felicia Brittman in her paper *The Most Common Habits from more than 200 English Papers written by Graduate Chinese Engineering Students* lists the following mistakes as the most serious and common as they ‘interrupt the flow of the paper making it difficult to understand’:

- very long sentences
- prefacing the main idea of a sentence by stating the purpose, location or reason first
- placing phrases which indicate time at the beginning of the sentence

- failing to place the subject at the beginning
- misuse of articles - *a / an / the*
- misuse of *which / that*

Notice that none of Brittman's findings relate to vocabulary and only two of the six points relate to grammar (to which I would add misuse of the *-ing* form and confusion between the present and past tenses particularly in the Results / Discussion section). The other four points relate to readability.

So, it is poor readability that is the main cause for manuscripts being rejected ... at least by native English speaking referees. Non-native referees tend to focus more on grammar but papers are rarely rejected for just a few grammar errors.

You will find that your students will tend to be conditioned by the English that they learned at school where grammar was given very high importance (see 2.10). Try to get them to focus more on readability.

2.10 Are there differences in the comments made by native and non-native reviewers? What do I need to tell my students in this regard?

Referees are generally not English language experts. They are interested much more in the scientific content than in the level of English. The comments that referees make on an author's English often depend on whether the referees are native speakers (NS) or non-native speakers (NNS).

NNS referees tend to recognize the elements of 'poor' English that for them stand out the clearest:

- spelling mistakes and typos
- simple grammar mistakes (e.g. missing *s* on plurals and third person)

Here is a typical example written by an NNS referee commenting on an NNS's English:

A big problem with this work is the English form: there are so many language errors that it actually seriously compromises one's ability to understand what is being presented. The paper needs an extensive revision by a native English speaker.

NS referees, on the other hand, tend to focus more on problems related to intelligibility and readability: verbosity, redundancy and rambling sentences. Many native English-speaking referees are sympathetic to their non-native colleagues. David Simons, author of the wonderful article *Gorillas In Our Midst* (see his wonderful video on YouTube), told me:

I typically don't comment on minor grammatical issues in my reviews unless the grammar makes the content hard to follow or understand. I can't imagine having to write all my scientific papers in a second language—it's hard enough to do in a native language—so I have a lot of sympathy for people who have that obstacle to publication.

Grammatical and lexical errors are unlikely to completely impair a referee's understanding of a paper but too many of them might cause referees to become irritated and lose interest. If a paper is filled with errors, this requires too much effort on the part of the referee. This may have a negative impact on his / her opinion not only of the paper but also of the author's credibility as a reliable researcher.

All referees object to spelling mistakes, particularly as this is something that authors can easily check themselves. A series of trivial and easily correctable mistakes may make some referees feel that your student is not very competent and reliable. Their opinion of your student's English may even throw doubts on how well they imagine the student carried out his / her research.

Judging errors is an extremely subjective exercise. Different referees may have very different ideas about what they would term as 'intolerable' or 'objectionable' errors. This may help to explain those occasions when a paper is rejected by one referee for 'very poor' English, whereas the other referees make no comment at all about the English level.

Sometimes referees will give no specific reasons for rejecting a paper due its poor English but they will say something like: *This referee recommends that the authors have their paper revised by a qualified native English speaker*. This may happen for two reasons:

1. the referee (whether a NS or a NNS) feels that the quality of the English is low but is unable to pinpoint exactly what it is. In this case, the cause of the problem is generally an overall lack of readability.
2. the referee is a NNS and is not sure of the level of English and wants to protect himself / herself just in case there are errors. This is a face-saving device adopted by NNS referees in relation to the editor.

2.11 So what do referees say when commenting about the English?

Here is a selection of typical comments made by reviewers. What these comments highlight is that although the English of the authors is problematic, the root of the problem is that they haven't expressed themselves clearly (and probably this would have also been the case had they written in their own language).

1. It was not at all clear from reading this paper what its precise aims and objectives were and how they fitted into the study. It is a pity as there is potentially some very interesting data here but it is poorly used.
2. Overall, this paper contains some very interesting data. However, some sections of the paper are not well written - primarily with respect to the findings, which need to be presented more clearly and concisely with better constructed sentences to ensure ease of reading.
3. The sections need to be introduced to the reader more fully so that they can quickly identify what each is one is about and how it relates to the overall story.
4. I can tell that the idea is there, but the writing is not clear and strong enough to convey the information to a more general audience.
5. This sentence has nothing to do with the rest of the paragraph. The first sentence is the most important of a paragraph: do not waste it on pointless discussion. I had a hard time understanding what this paragraph is really about and it needs major re-organization.
6. You need to tell me why all of these other studies are relevant. Bring them into context with your findings - do not just report what they found.
7. I failed to work out what the subject was and what verb related to it, nor could I identify what adjective or what adverb modified what noun or verb. One should be able at least to identify the various components of a sentence and how they relate to each other even if one does not understand the precise meaning of each component.
8. The authors have not concluded anything but just given a poor summary of what they have done. Their Conclusions read like someone who would rather be back in the lab rather than someone who wants readers to understand how their investigation may have added to the knowledge base in our field.

2.12 So do I really need to know what editors and reviewers expect from a paper?

To teach Business English, it is not essential to understand how business and commerce works. To teach academic English, on the other hand, you need to have a good handle on what readers of your students' work will be expecting.

English for Writing Research Papers will go a long way to helping you understand such expectations, and before you embark on teaching academic writing skills, you should read that book carefully, particularly Chapters 13-19 which explain how to write the various sections of a research paper. At the end of each chapter is a summary in the form of a series of questions. These questions act as a checklist of everything that should be included in a certain section of a paper.

You thus not only need to have the skills to teach English, but you also need to have a good understanding of what content is expected. This is not something you will learn overnight, but rather over several years. This subsection is intended to give you a sneak preview into the kinds of skills you will need.

Look at the Abstract below which comes from a paper that is about evaluating a project on shepherds in the Gaza Strip. Can you spot what the problem is? See 13.30 *English for Writing Research Papers* to get some ideas. Note: this is the complete abstract, not an extract from it.

Through the presentation of a case study, the article offers a reflection on the evaluation of projects of humanitarian aid in post-conflict contexts. By analysing the scenario in which the evaluation has developed, the article seeks to highlight the value of participatory evaluation in contexts and for projects of humanitarian aid. Finally, the authors seek to understand even in a more general logic what lessons can be learned from the case study presented and what are the possible outcomes that can be generated.

To be able to do a really good job, you need to be able to judge the quality of their writing not only from an English point of view but from a content point of view. This means knowing what editors, reviewers and readers expect - in this case, what they expect from an Abstract. From reading the Abstract above, the reader has no idea of:

- where the case study took place
- why the author chose that place
- who was involved (i.e. shepherds)
- what the results were

- what the authors learned from the study that they can pass on to the research community
- where else in the world the results / experience could be applied

The best way to develop such assessment skills is by reading as many top quality papers as you can. Google and Reuters have lists of the most cited papers which should hopefully be well written and thus good models. Even better if you can combine your reading with actually editing papers yourself.

The Guardian newspaper in the UK offers an annual award to researchers at universities whose projects have been outstanding. To apply for this award, the researchers have to send the Guardian a description of their project. The Guardian say they *want to see examples of work that goes beyond the mundane - something that demonstrates imagination, careful research, courage and stamina. And we want evidence to show that your project changed the lives of those who were affected by it.*

Past experience has shown the Guardian that many applicants for the award are simply not able to describe their project in a clear convincing way. The Guardian thus provides some simple writing tips:

- Keep your language conversational and specific. Avoid abstract nouns and unsubstantiated claims - “we mounted the best campaign of its kind in a challenging environment” is simply a waste of the wordcount. What did you actually do?
- Back up your claims with statistics wherever possible.
- Show us what change looks like - if, for example, you think your project made a difference to the lives of students, tell us what they were doing before and what they are doing now.
- Get a colleague to read through your application. Do they understand what this project is about and why it’s important?
- Avoid cliches, jargon and academic language.
- Don’t give us unnecessary context about how the sector has changed over the past 10 years – you are talking to experts who already know this!

The above tips are fantastic advice for your students on:

- how to write a research project
- key elements to include (and avoid) in the Introduction and Conclusions of a research paper
- key points to cover (and avoid) in a presentation

English for Academic Research: A Guide for Teachers

Wallwork, A.

2016, XX, 234 p. 11 illus. in color., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-32685-6