

# The Art of the Academic Article

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## Part I: Writing the Paper

### How does a paper become a submission?

It's mid-January, and you get the dreaded email: your professor's comments on your semester paper that you hastily put together in the last week of fall classes. You're surprised to find an "A+" from a notoriously difficult professor, and you read the encouraging words: "You should turn this into something publishable." You spend a few days relishing in the idea that something you wrote "could be published," and then the truth sets in: you have no idea how to turn a paper into an article.

### Restructuring your paper

As a general rule of thumb, you will have to restructure your term papers and maybe even your MA paper in order to turn it into a publishable piece. There are several ways to go about restructuring a paper. One way to do it is to find a published piece that you really like and model your paper after that. Or, you might look at a particular journal and see how its articles are formatted. Journals typically have a formula whereby they allocate a certain amount of space for each section of a paper. Follow that format as closely as possible. Some general objectives to keep in mind:

Who is your audience? What literature are you engaged in?

What is the intellectual conversation you are trying to engage in, extend, rebut and so on?

What is the relationship between theory and data in your paper?

Most importantly, make sure that your paper does what you set out to do in the introduction and literature review such that your empirical points are consistent with the claims you make at the beginning of your paper.

### One Way to Structure Your Paper

#### *Introduction*

- a. *Hook*
- b. ***Sociological Puzzle*** (Summary of ***Literature Review***)
- c. *Methods* (Summary of ***Methodology***)
- d. *Findings* (Summary of ***Analysis***)
- e. *Restatement of Significance by Resolving the Puzzle* (Summary of ***Theoretical Contribution***)

#### *Literature Review*

- f. *Explanation of Existing Resolutions to the **Puzzle***

- g. *Statement of their Inadequacy and Restatement of the Puzzle*

### **Theoretical Contribution**

- h. *Explanation of the Article's Theoretical Contribution*
- i. *Resolution of the Puzzle*

### **Methodology**

- j. *Explanation of Methods*
- k. *Justification of Methods and Case*

### **Analysis**

- l. *Evidence-driven Resolution of Puzzle*

### **Discussion/Conclusion**

- m. *Restatement of Puzzle*
- n. *Restatement of Contributions*
- o. *Limitations, Stated as Questions for Future Research*

### **Gathering Feedback**

Unfortunately, having one professor believe that your work has publishing potential is just the beginning of the long process from paper to publication, which can take months to years. The first step in turning a paper into a publication is to both elicit and take seriously feedback from colleagues and faculty whose opinion you value. Take advantage of any and all opportunities to share your work with faculty and/or other graduate students. These may take the form of established working groups within the sociology department as well as other institutes and centers on campus, but don't forget that you can also organize small, informal reading groups with a few of your graduate student colleagues. These small group settings often allow you to get more detailed and engaged feedback on your work, and they are often the source of very intellectually stimulating friendships that last long after graduate school.

You should present your paper at a conference for several reasons. First, it will give you a hard deadline to work with to write the first draft of what will become a publishable piece, which may double as your MA or a dissertation chapter. Second, you will be able to get feedback from people outside of your department who may be more well-read in your subject area. Third, it will provide you with opportunities to get published in edited volumes and special issue journals.

While attending certain conferences may sometimes seem like a professional chore, conferences are very useful for developing your ideas. In particular, you might want to look for call for papers (CFPs) from smaller conferences that provide more opportunity for constructive intellectual conversation. This may mean stepping outside of your disciplinary boundaries in order to present your work, which may turn out to be extremely beneficial to the development of your ideas. For example, the feminist philosophy conferences run by regional Society for Women in Philosophy (SWIP) chapters provide a full hour for presentation and commentary for each paper, which is much more generous than the 15 minutes of fame you're likely to enjoy at the annual ASA.

To learn about upcoming conferences and CFPs, consider joining some listservs of interest

to gender scholars:

Society for Women in Sociology <http://www.socwomen.org/page.php?ss=17>

The Women's Studies List [WMST-L@listserv.umd.edu](mailto:WMST-L@listserv.umd.edu)

The FEAST List [FEAST-L@listserv.jmu.edu](mailto:FEAST-L@listserv.jmu.edu)  
<http://www.afeast.org/Listserv%20Page/listserv.htm>

Society for Women in Philosophy [SWIP-L@listserv.uh.edu](mailto:SWIP-L@listserv.uh.edu)

Humanities and Social Sciences Online <http://www.h-net.org>

You should also join ASA early and be sure to register for sections related to what you research, such as Sex & Gender, Crime, Law and Deviance, and Sociology of Law. Sections are a forum for information-sharing and networking, so it is important to be connected.

Once you have solicited feedback, you have to figure out how to use it; do not accept feedback simply because it comes from a well-respected professor who doesn't study what your paper is on. However, **do not ignore feedback that comes up repeatedly**. If all of your readers think your writing is too obtuse, no matter how theoretically sophisticated you believe it to be, chances are that the perfect strangers eventually reviewing your submission will agree with your readers.

*One important note before moving on:* while soliciting feedback is important, don't forget to actually to send off your paper to a journal. It is easy to want to "perfect" a paper, but ultimately what really matters is how reviewers read your paper. You do not want to have too many cooks in the kitchen when it comes to your paper; excessive feedback can take it in too many different directions that may or may not be relevant to your ultimate contributions – and to the reviewers.

### **Almost there**

As some point during this process, you should feel confident enough in your argument to start thinking about which journal you want to submit to. In fact, you should start revising your paper with a specific journal in mind. It is *not* the case that articles that Gender & Society, Signs or Feminist Studies accept for publication simply fall from the brilliant brains of their authors; rather, they are written for a particular audience, with particular formatting and – yes – even particular citations.

The last point regarding citations is crucial but a bit controversial. At the very least, you should situate your work in a context familiar to both the editors and the audience of a given journal. Regardless of how you much *you* are convinced that knitting circles are the new paradigm for feminist empowerment, you will fail to convince your reviewers unless you situate your claims using language, findings and/or analysis that are familiar and meaningful to them. This means that you should research the journal you plan on submitting to; if you interrogate the concept of "gender roles," how have authors published in this journal typically dealt with this concept? Has anyone published an article making a similar argument to yours? Oftentimes, this will lead you to cite previous studies from the journal you are

submitting to, which is where the controversy arises. Many scholars consider this practice as academic nepotism that undermines the development of new, exciting ideas; while citing articles in your target journal simply for the sake of citing them is intellectually questionable, ignoring core previous works and, more generally, the intellectual predispositions of your journal can land you with a very quick rejection letter.

Once you do choose your journal, make sure that you read their guidelines carefully regarding submission requirements. Do not assume that your argument is so compelling that it will lead them to waive their word limit just for you. Also, use previous articles published in the journal to gather informal guidelines on formatting your article, discussing methods, introducing your theories, and so on. Modifying writing style to fit with a journal's tone is often a difficult task for first-time submitters, but it is an essential part of making sure your paper gets the best reading possible. Of course, don't make your writing formulaic, but make sure that your style and formatting is such that it will force reviewers to spend more time on *what* you are saying as opposed to *how* you are saying it.

But how do you actually choose a journal? That leads us to the submission process.

## Part II: Submitting the Paper

### Choosing a Journal

The first step to submitting involves choosing the journal you'll submit to. For starters, you might look at the references you've already gathered, especially the ones that led you to write your paper in the first place, for clues as to hospitable publishing venues. In addition, you should consider what type of journal you want to publish in. Do you want a general journal, or a specialist gender journal? If the latter, how much does the prestige of the journal matter to you (*Signs*, *Feminist Studies* and *Gender & Society* are usually considered the top three journals for gender sociologists)? How much does turnaround time matter to you? If you are concerned about journal prestige, you may want to look at journal rankings by impact score (this is one ranking for gender journals <http://www.scimagojr.com/journalrank.php?category=3318>). Note that impact factors are the average number of citations a journal receives in a given period (i.e., 5-year impact factor, 2-year impact factor) and thus serves as a proxy for visibility. Google has also gotten into the business of measuring academic impact, but beware: many of these 'citations' are not peer-reviewed or just plain erroneous. And regardless, all of these ranking systems are hotly contested by scholars, so it is up to you to decide what to make of them.

Related to journal prestige is the question of open-access journals, online-only journals, and new journals: if you want to play it safe, avoid these journals. But be aware that while you are spinning your wheels in *ASR Re&R* purgatory, you might be missing a chance to make a big impact on the field: West & Zimmerman's "Doing Gender" article was published when *Gender & Society* was a fledgling journal. The article was rejected several places before being accepted and has now been cited over 7,000 times.

Ultimately, what's most important is that your journal finds a "home," otherwise you will be banging your head against the wall for months if not years to come. Don't be unrealistic – but don't be realistic, either (just like an academic to write that!). A variety of factors can shape where a paper ultimately fits:

- Topic
- Methodology
- Methods
- Theoretical Contribution
- Theoretical Area
- Length
- The journal's reputation regarding its review process (more on that below)
- Your own willingness to revise

Next, editors matter. As most journals rotate through different departments, editors have a great deal of influence in shaping how the journal is run – impacting everything from response times to sociological focus. Be aware of this as you are choosing your journal.

Last but not least, when you are sending an article out, never have just one journal in mind. Nope – we're not encouraging you to break major disciplinary norms and blacklist yourself by sending your article to multiple journals. *But*, you should already have a plan in place on where you will send your article when (if?) it gets rejected so that you can hit the ground

running when your article is returned.

In choosing a journal, make sure to research its online footprint. In addition to reviewing the journal's own website, you might also consider checking out what is available on the two sociology rumor mills – [socjobrumors.com](http://socjobrumors.com) and [socjobs.proboards.com](http://socjobs.proboards.com). **Warning:** You can't "unsee" what you see at these sites, and they may cause you far more grief than it's worth, especially early on in graduate school.

Finally, you can consider checking with faculty members who have served on that journal's editorial board or who have published at that journal. Usually, you can look at a faculty member's CV to find out who has experience at your journal of interest.

### **Sending an Initial Inquiry**

Information on publication rates, turnaround time and reviewer feedback is not secret knowledge reserved for the sociological elite. If you want to know information about a journal's review procedures that is not available already online, all you have to do is ask. After providing a very brief description of your article to check in about fit, you might also ask about the typical reviewer protocol and turnaround time. You might find out that in addition to the lengthy eight-month turnaround, your chosen journal is unlikely to publish an article on your topic, period.

### **Sending your Submission – and Waiting**

You've gathered all the feedback you could from colleagues and faculty, and you've presented your work at conferences. You've identified the typical objections to your argument and acknowledged them, if not resolved them. You've found an ideal publishing venue for your submission, and you've researched the journal thoroughly. You've also checked to make sure that your submission conforms to all of the nitty-gritty details required by the journal, including style, formatting, and citations. Oh, and you are absolutely *sick* of thinking about the paper? Yes, it is time to send it off.

But you aren't done writing. In addition to the specific requirements of your journal (e.g., cover sheets, abstracts and so on), you must write a cover letter to the journal's editor(s). In this letter, you should ever-so-briefly describe your work and its relevance to the target journal. If your paper has already won prizes or received some other sort of acclaim, you can mention that. In addition, you can also use this cover letter to suggest reviewers, if you do not have an opportunity to do so otherwise. **However, not all journals will be open to such suggestions – so you should talk to your advisor about doing this.** You can also use this space to list people who would be *non-preferred reviewers* if there is some conflict of interest. **Again, talk to your advisor about what constitutes a conflict of interest and how to best address this in a professional manner in your cover letter.**

Finally, you should list out the people who played a role in revising your paper as part of the acknowledgements in your cover sheet – this is a huge help for editors looking to avoid asking reviewers with a conflict of interest.

**And the answer is...**

Depending on the decision and the journal, you've waited a week, a month, or six months. You open your email and, Voila! There is the decision that – you believe, in your current state of grad student frenzy – may make or break your career.

It is highly unlikely that your submission will be accepted (But if it is, congrats! Go celebrate!); the most likely possibilities are rejection and revise and resubmit (R&R).

### *Rejection*

Rejection letters can be hard to swallow. Reviewers may operate under the assumption that you won't know their identities (although they may certainly have deduced your identity), which means that they are under no social obligation to choose their words carefully when rejecting your article. The amount of feedback you receive will depend on the process your submission underwent before it was rejected. If it was rejected in-house, one of the head editors read your paper and decided it was not appropriate for further review. Oftentimes, this results in a quick turnaround time but limited feedback.

Depending on the feedback, you may even be left wondering whether the editor read your paper at all (again, this is why it is a good idea to inquire about the fit of your paper beforehand). If your paper was approved for outside review, your rejection letter probably has much more detailed feedback on specific problems with your paper.

While it may be difficult to accept a rejection on a paper you've spent months if not years preparing, accept you must, and then move on. Do not trash the paper unless the reviewers bring up issues that you cannot resolve (for example, the need for data that you simply do not have). Instead, give yourself a certain amount of time to process the reviewer comments, and then revise, revise, and eventually resubmit. Don't forget: if your paper is rejected and submitted elsewhere, there's a good chance some of your original reviewers will be looking at your resubmission, so address the original reviews wisely. Academia: it's a small world.

Finally, don't be too hard on yourself; about a fifth of articles published have been rejected at least once.

### *Revise and Resubmit (R&R)*

If the stars are properly aligned, you will receive a letter with two coveted letters – R&R. Celebrate for a few days, because after that, you have your work cut out for you. You must address each and every point raised by the reviewers, no matter how misplaced, radical, or nonsensical it is. Some of these points may have you drastically reframing your paper, while others may simply ask that you watch your comma placement. Make sure you diligently address all of their concerns, and enlist a friend to make sure you have done so. When you resubmit your paper, you should include a point-by-point response to every comment given to you by reviewers, including reference (page number and paragraph) to the specific portions of the paper you have changed to address the reviewers' concerns.

To facilitate the revision process, many authors write out a list of major points for revision, order them into a "To Do" list, and then create a schedule for revision. As you go through your points, you can color-code your list to match the changes you make to the paper. When you turn to write your point-by-point response, you'll not only have an outline of your major

revisions but also an easy way to identify where, exactly, you made the requested changes.

Depending on your journal and the kind of R&R you received, the revised manuscript may be reviewed solely by the editor; by the original reviewers; by a mix of original and new reviewers; or by an entirely new slate of reviewers. The next round of reviews may take the same amount of time as the first round, or less.

### *Reject and Resubmit (R&R)*

It's rare, but it happens: the Reject & Resubmit. This usually means one of two things: the reviewers wanted the paper tanked, but the editor – perhaps realizing that the author is inexperienced with the review process – sees a potential gem. To split the difference, the paper gets a reject and resubmit. Other times, this is the result of a desk reject based on formatting; if a paper is written as a term paper, rather than an academic article, the editor might reject it out-of-hand but explain that a revised version – i.e., revised in accordance with the formatting requirements of the journal – will be acceptable for further review.

One last caveat: some journals phrase all of their Revise & Resubmits as Reject & Resubmits. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* is one of these journals: “Therefore, I am rejecting this manuscript, and inviting you to resubmit a revised manuscript within six months for further consideration by JCE—please note that I believe that a major amount of work is necessary to improve this manuscript for our publication standards. Should you accept this invitation, I hope to send the paper back to the same set of reviewers that just reviewed your manuscript, plus one additional reviewer.”

Despite the ominous language, this is a Revise & Resubmit (and entered that way in ScholarOne Manuscript Central). Because of this confusion, feel free to write to the journal editor to clarify what, exactly, the decision means. **For that matter, feel free to write to the editor any time you are confused as to what is requested of you.**

### *Conditional Accept*

Equally rare, but it also happens: the Conditional Accept on first submission. If this happens, rejoice – but also be sure to think through the reviewers' comments diligently, as you are “passing go”, which means your argument will not go through that last round of vetting before it is published. As you know from being a serious reader of sociology, there's no perfect article – and despite getting a conditional accept right off the bat, neither will your article be perfect. That means you should take extra care to ensure that you've done all you can to tighten the argument before resubmitting for final submission.

### **Round Two, Round Three...Round N?**

Unless you have incredibly thin skin (in which case, get out of academia), you sooner or later will find it in yourself to send in your R&R or submit your rejected but revised manuscript to another journal. Do not hesitate to radically revise or even rewrite your paper if that is what the reviewers call for – and you agree. On the other hand, do not feel pressured to take the advice of a reviewer if you truly believe that it is inappropriate (although, in the case of an R&R, you'll need to explain this to the editor in your response). However, you should

nevertheless **address their concern** (which is **not the same** as **taking the advice** of a reviewer!) so that future readers do not voice the same complaint.

This back-and-forth process of revising and reviewing can go on for quite a while; few can complete the process from pencil to press in less than a year, although this may be changing as journals accelerate their review process thanks to the streamlining portal Manuscript Central.

As you move through the review process, try to remember: believe it or not, the review process *can actually make a paper better*. You wouldn't think so with how fashionable it has become to trash the peer-review system, but reviewers catch oversights – big and small – and ultimately can improve a manuscript. The quality of the review process is shaped by several factors – which reviewers are chosen by the editors, how reviewers engage the paper, how editors weigh the reviews in returning the paper to the author, and how the author responds to the reviews. As you become more experienced with the publishing process, you'll find that journals offer very different kinds of reviews, for better or for worse!

### **The After-life of an Article**

Your article is out – woo-hoo! Ah, but you are not done! You should let your advisors know, as well as anyone who had a hand in shaping the article. Hopefully, you will have listed these names already in your acknowledgement section. In addition, you may want to send your paper to any established scholars whose work clearly influenced you in the paper. If you have work-oriented social media accounts, consider sharing your paper through those channels. Finally, you'll want to scan ASA sections for paper awards that fit with your paper's contribution. Note, however: some student paper awards will not accept published papers, so have these on your radar *before* your paper goes through the review process.

In the last few years, academic outlets have increasingly looked for opportunities to publicize peer-reviewed research in more mainstream channels. Some journals, such as *Gender & Society*, now operate blogs that run alongside the journal; other blogs, such as *Society Pages*, feature sociological research. You should seek out these opportunities, for example, to *publicize* your peer-reviewed articles, but be careful not to view them as publishing opportunities. They are not peer-reviewed and will not count for much on your CV. (Also, they must be clearly notated as popular press writing on your CV; *never* list blogs as 'peer-reviewed' publications.) Finally, journals have become more proactive about issuing press releases; you can also ask your university to publicize your article. If you are very proactive, you can also consider writing op-eds—but that's another topic altogether!