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Re-envisioning Academic Publication: From "Publish or Perish" to "Publish and Flourish"

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Abstract

Employing a conversational form, this article presents the views of three editors from established mainstream journals. They first discuss the rise of predatory publishing, then highlight the dangers of publishing in predatory journals, identifying some "red flags" that authors can look out for to avoid such journals. They then offer hints on how prospective authors can increase their chances of acceptance in mainstream journals and how they can get started in research and publishing.

The purpose of this dialogue is to invite a re-envisioning of the current "publish or perish" perspective, which appears to be prevalent in most academic circles. Such negative framing is unhelpful and discouraging, especially to early-career academics who may be unfamiliar with the practices and processes involved. What is needed is a re-envisioning of academic publication from "publish or perish" to "publish and flourish".

Keywords

Academic publishing, mainstream journals, predatory journals, publishing ethics, early-career researchers, how to get published

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Introduction to Academic Publishing

As journal editors, researchers and teacher educators, we are very concerned about the rise of predatory publishers and have recently organized a series of webinars to raise awareness about the issue of why and how to avoid them, and what early-career academics can do to increase their chances of getting published in a mainstream journal.

The Rise of Predatory Publishers

As Paltridge (2020) notes, the ease of digital publication has led to the rise of predatory journals. Also labelled as "junk journals", "fake journals", and "bogus journals", such journals are primarily profit-driven and engage in activities such as spamming potential authors with invitations to submit articles, accepting articles without subjecting them to rigorous peer review, and charging a fee for publication (Renandya, 2014a, 2014b). Hyland (2016) explains that the massively lucrative nature of academic publishing has spawned the growth of a “parallel trade of unsavoury ‘predatory’ publishers that charge high fees to authors and waive quality control” (151). Unfortunately, despite repeated warnings of the danger of publishing in predatory journals, some early-career academics continue to fall prey to these journals.

MY: Let’s start by looking at why some academics publish in predatory journals.

If we look at the reasons, we may find that some make a genuine mistake, due perhaps to lack of awareness of these unsavoury practices or their limited publication experience, while others publish their work with the full knowledge that they are publishing in a fake journal. The latter group may include doctoral students who need to publish in a journal as part of their graduation requirements or early-career academics who need to publish for contract renewal or promotion. Since publishing in a mainstream journal can take a much longer period of time, and it is much more difficult to get an article accepted, predatory journals, which usually promise a quick turnaround time and a guarantee of publication, offer an attractive option. Unfortunately, young academics who either fall prey to such journals or choose this expedient path may not be aware of the reputational damage and professional consequences of their decision. If we think about the former group, that is, those who genuinely fall prey to predatory publishers, what are some ways we can help them distinguish predatory from mainstream publishers?

Differences Between Predatory Publishers and Mainstream Publishers

WR: To answer this question, first, we need to define what a mainstream journal is. Mainstream journals refer to those that are indexed in highly-regarded databases such as World of Science (WoS) or SCOPUS (Chavvaro et al., 2017). Such journals are often the preferred or even mandatory publication venues for academics because of institutional requirements for performance appraisal and promotion (Paltridge, 2020).

The digitization of most aspects of the academic publishing process has made it easier for predatory publishers to present a legitimate front. As Paltridge (2020) notes, most journals use a digital platform to manage the entire publication process, from submission

Table 1. Possible differences between predatory and mainstream journals.

Considerations	Predatory journals	Mainstream journals
Editorial and review board	A long list of editorial board members, most of whom are obscure scholars. Well-known scholars are often listed, but often without their consent or knowledge.	A list of well-known scholars in their areas of specialization.
Review process	Minimal or no review process, but a claim that the process is rigorous.	Stringent, blind review process by knowledgeable reviewers.
Turnaround time from submission to final decision	Fast turnaround time, typically within a couple of weeks or even a few days.	On average, 2 to 3 months or longer depending on the journal.
Rejection rate	Nearly all submissions are accepted. The key criterion is whether or not the author is willing to pay the publication fee.	Only a small percentage of submissions get accepted and published in the journal. The rejection rate can be as high as 95%.
Scope	The topics covered in the journal tend to be very wide, even crossing disciplines, e.g. including science, engineering, education, linguistics and so on.	The journal has a clear mission and vision, and the scope is generally more focused on particular disciplines or areas of study.
Payment	Most, if not all, charge fees, which can range from US$300 to US$500 or higher.	The majority do not charge any fees. If fees are charged, they are usually nominal and intended to cover the cost of publication.
Solicitation	Invitations are sent to authors who may have attended a conference or published in another journal to contribute an article. The invitation email is usually in the format of a template with the name of the author and conference paper/article reproduced.	Invitations are rare. Invited authors usually receive a personal request from one of the editors or through a mutual professional contact.

to final publication. By sending invitation emails that seemingly originate from an institutional email address or utilizing online manuscript submission systems, a predatory journal may offer an appearance of legitimacy that could easily seduce doctoral students or early-career academics desperate to publish.

However, there are some characteristics that we can look out for to determine the legitimacy of the journal. We have compiled a summary of some "red flags" that authors should look out for (See Table 1). Information about the editorial and review board, review process, turnaround time, rejection rate, scope, payment terms, and solicitation may offer an indication of the journal's academic standing and legitimacy.

MY: Certainly, it is useful for contributors to look out for these "red flags." However, identifying a credible journal is only part of the challenge as there are many reputable mainstream publications that authors can choose to submit their article to.

The decision about which journal to submit a manuscript to is crucial, yet little is known about how authors make this decision. As Hyland (2016: 198) states, "It is not always clear to novice researchers that they may have to invest almost as much energy into researching the journals in their field as they will to writing the paper itself." Considerations such as the prestige of a journal, rejection rates, turnaround time, and word length are often at the forefront in the decision-making process. While the esteem of the journal might be the primary concern for established authors, for novice researchers, it is not always the case that the higher the journal is ranked, the better it is as a venue for their submissions. Choosing a journal with the right fit is very important.

ST: It is very true that getting the fit right is very important. One of the most common reasons for rejection is that there is a poor fit between a submitted manuscript and the mission, vision, and scope of the journal. What this means is that the topic of the manuscript falls outside these areas. For example, if an author has just completed his or her PhD thesis that involves an in-depth analysis of classroom discourse using a highly complex theoretical construct and sends a manuscript based on the thesis to a practice-oriented journal (e.g. the *ELT Journal*), it will receive an immediate rejection. This does not mean that the manuscript is of a low quality or poorly written, but it is because the particular journal publishes more practical and classroom-oriented research papers that have more direct and relevant pedagogical implications.

MY: Besides the wrong fit, another common reason for rejection is that a manuscript does not follow the journal's guidelines. This may seem trivial but each particular journal has its preferred writing guidelines in areas such as length, format, referencing style, and research ethics requirements. Failure to adhere to these guidelines can result in an immediate rejection, which means that the manuscript will be returned without undergoing the usual review process by the journal's reviewers. Authors are, therefore, strongly encouraged to visit the journal's website to familiarize themselves with its vision, mission, scope, and also submission requirements.

WR: Indeed, visiting the journal's website is very important and this is the kind of information that authors should look for when visiting the journals' websites:

1. **Authors should read the stated mission, vision, and scope of the journal:** They need to find out if the journal publishes research-focused or practice-oriented papers. Careful reading of this information would help them become more familiar with the type of papers that get published in the journal. The information provided here would also give them an idea about the rejection rate of the journal.
2. **Authors should look at the author guidelines:** This section provides a long list of information about how to write a manuscript. Relevant information includes the expected length of the manuscript, number of words in the title, referencing style, in-text citations, where to put tables and appendices, how to anonymize works cited in the manuscript, the policy about the use of inclusive language, and

submission categories (e.g. full-length research article, short review article, or short communication), just to mention a few. Many journals even provide sample articles or free sample issues so that authors can look at models to guide them when they write.

3. **Authors should pay attention to the submission guidelines:** This section provides information about how manuscripts are to be submitted. Some journals accept email submission of a manuscript but most mainstream journals (e.g. *RELC Journal, System, TESOL Journal*) require online submission via a journal management system such as ScholarOne or Editorial Manager. These are web-based journal submission platforms that track the status of submissions, i.e. under review, rejected, accepted with major or minor revisions, first revision, second revision, and accepted.

As well as investing time in researching and writing about the topic, authors need to familiarize themselves with journals "to ensure that their paper reaches the right audience in the right way" (Hyland, 2020: 198). By doing this, they can at least increase their chances of getting past the first hurdle in the review process. Let's now talk about some important aspects of the review process that writers need to be aware of.

Understanding the Review Process

MY: The review process varies for different journals, but a key indicator of quality is peer review. Recognized as the "cornerstone of accreditation" in academic publishing (Hyland, 2020: 161), peer review is acknowledged to make a positive impact on the quality of publication (Ware, 2011). The peer review process described by Elsevier (see https://www.elsevier.com/reviewers/what-is-peer-review) and shown in Figure 1 is typical of the process adopted by most mainstream academic journals. A common practice among many Q1 (quartile 1) journals in the field of language and linguistics is that of "double blind review," where a manuscript is reviewed by at least two reviewers who do not know the identity of the author ("blind"). This practice is perceived to offer greater objectivity and fairness.

As shown in the diagram, the review process used by mainstream journals is extremely rigorous, accounting for the turnaround time in decision-making compared to that of bogus journals. First, submissions are typically screened by an administrative assistant whose task is to check that the submission meets the journal and author guidelines. Submissions that are too long, not properly anonymized, or fail to meet the referencing and formatting guidelines may be returned to the author. Also, if the manuscript registers a very high similarity score on automated plagiarism checking software, it tends to be immediately "unsubmitted," and authors will usually be told what the problem is.

Manuscripts that meet this initial stage of screening will then go to the desk of an editor, who will assess their overall fit and general academic quality. An editor may do a "desk reject" at this point. This initial decision is normally made within a week. If the manuscript is assessed to be of interest to the journal, the editor will assign it to several peer reviewers. Depending on the journal's policy, the manuscript may be subject to single-, double-, or even triple-blind peer review.

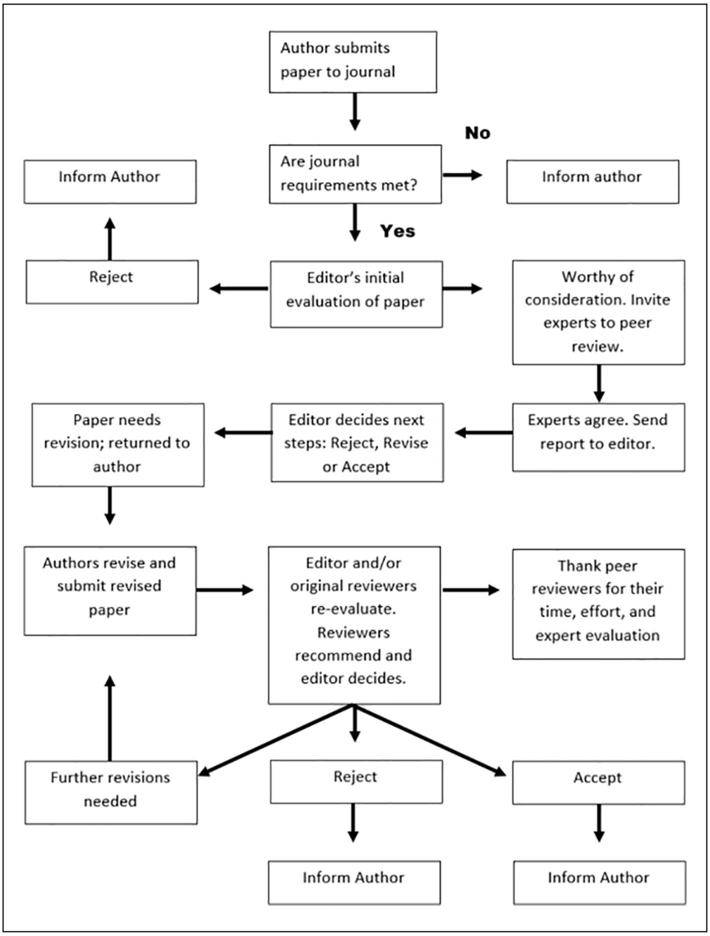

Figure 1. Elsevier's Peer Review Process (https://www.elsevier.com/reviewers/what-is-peer-review).

Peer reviewers are typically asked to complete the review within a specific amount of time, usually 30 days. After the reviews are sent back to the assigning editor, information in the reviews are used to reach a decision about whether to reject the manuscript outright, ask for major or minor revisions, or accept the manuscript in its current form. Typically, a manuscript goes through several rounds of revision before being accepted for publication. Once it is accepted for publication, it then goes into the production process, which may include typesetting, copyediting, and final proofreading by the author before being published, online first and later in a print issue.

While the process may seem straightforward, in practice, journal editors often have difficulty getting peer reviewers. Peer reviewers are typically fellow researchers and writers who are identified by the editor to have the necessary background and expertise to evaluate the quality of the manuscript and to make a recommendation about its suitability for publication. Increasingly, however, the burgeoning number of journals has led to more peer reviewers being needed and, in some cases, editors relying on reviewers who are less qualified or even getting students to do peer reviews (Hyland, 2016). What else should authors know about the peer review process?

ST: Having a good understanding of the peer review process can help authors to navigate the process more successfully. For example, to avoid having a manuscript "unsubmitted" within days of submission, an author needs to adhere strictly to the journal's guidelines. There is little point in submitting a manuscript that exceeds the stipulated word count or is incorrectly formatted on the off-chance that it will get through the initial stages of submission. In addition, an author who is aware of the role of the reviewers (or, better still, has had the experience of being a reviewer) will realize that when reviewers ask for revisions, the author should try to address the reviewers' concerns or, at the very least, explain politely and clearly why they may not agree with the reviewers' point of view, hence justifying the decision not to make the requested revision. When submitting a revision, it is also very helpful for the author to include an explanation note to each reviewer (without revealing the author's identity) listing the reviewer's comments and explaining how the reviewer's concerns have been addressed, as this will make it easier for the reviewer to check and approve the revision. Finally, authors need to be appreciative of the fact that most peer reviewers are busy academics themselves with heavy teaching and research obligations. Most volunteer their time and services as peer reviewers without receiving any payment or even recognition, so it is necessary for authors to be patient, especially if they hope to receive a useful and detailed review.

It is important for early-career researchers to understand that although the peer review process may seem daunting, the researchers are, in fact, the greatest beneficiaries of the peer review process as it offers them valuable feedback to improve the quality of their submissions and initiates them into the processes and practices associated with academic publishing.

MY: Choosing an appropriate journal, following its requirements and understanding the peer review process can help early-career researchers to increase the chances of getting their manuscripts accepted to mainstream journals. However, even before reaching that stage, all authors – novice and experienced alike – must grapple with the demands of research and writing amidst many other more pressing responsibilities, such as teaching and administration. What further advice can we offer to help novice researchers to get started in publishing?

Getting Started in Academic Publishing

WR: Some useful advice includes these points:

1. **Aim low:** Early-career researchers should find good journals with lower rejection rates. Once they have had successful experiences with these journals, they can then send their manuscripts to higher profile, higher impact journals. Moorhouse (2020, personal communication) shares his experiences of how he got started in publishing: "I really learned (and I'm continuing to learn) to write by starting small and writing short articles, experiencing the reviewer process, and getting the sense of success when the articles are published."

2. **Go for generalist journals first:** These are journals that publish a wider range of topics involving applied linguistics or TESOL. The *ELT Journal*, for example, accepts submissions on practically any topic related to second or foreign language teaching. Once early-career researchers have developed a certain level of expertise in a topic area, they can consider sending their manuscripts to a niche journal that publishes a specific topic area within ELT. Examples of such journals are *Journal of Writing Response* and *Journal of Pragmatics*. Other things being equal, niche journals have more stringent acceptance criteria because the reviewers tend to have highly specialized knowledge and expect submissions to meet their standards.
3. **Go for a journal that is the best fit for the manuscript**: If the manuscript is pedagogical, then the author should find a practice-oriented journal (e.g. *RELC Journal* or *English Teaching Forum*); if it is an academic paper, the author should consider a more research-oriented journal (e.g. *Language Learning* or *System).*
4. **Avoid publishing in predatory journals**: Some of the most obvious characteristics of these journals have been discussed earlier. Early-career researchers who are unsure about the credibility of a journal could ask their colleagues or their professional community for more advice.
5. **Consider publishing in special issues:** Special issues attract a smaller number of submissions, which may increase the acceptance rate of manuscripts.
6. **Consider publishing in newer journals:** Such journals tend to be more lenient in their review process compared to the more established ones. As newer journals receive fewer submissions, a manuscript tends to compete with a smaller number of submissions.
7. **Consider writing shorter papers:** Shorter papers are less challenging to write and publish. Mainstream journals, such as the *RELC Journal*, accept shorter article types, e.g. review articles (3000 words), Innovations in Practice reports (3000 words), and book or technology reviews (1000 words). The highly prestigious *Journal of Second Language Writing* accepts submissions of Short Communications (3500–4500 words) and contributions to its Forum section (2500–3500 words).
8. **Be aware of important ethical issues regarding researching and publishing:** Early-career researchers should ensure they conduct research responsibly and ethically and write their papers without intentional or accidental plagiarism (Renck Jalongo and Saracho, 2016). They should also avoid submitting their manuscripts to two or more journals simultaneously. If the journals become aware of this practice, they will withdraw the published articles or immediately reject the manuscripts.
9. **Consider co-authoring with a more experienced author:** Yeo and Lewis (2019) found that besides the pragmatic and academic benefits that can be derived from co-authoring, the most important of which is arguably having an extrinsic source of motivation to complete the task, co-authors also derive significant affective gains such as opportunities to mentor and be mentored.
10. **Be mentally ready for rejections:** While rejection is an unpleasant experience, authors need to take it in their stride and learn from it. Good journals usually give objective and detailed comments for rejection. Authors can use these as a basis

for improving on the quality of their submissions. Tips such as having a "cooling off" period (Goh, 2020) between receiving the decision and reading the comments are practical and may protect authors from the emotional and psychological stress of rejection.

Conclusion

MY: While many doctoral students and early-career researchers regard publishing with a certain amount of dread, likely imprinted upon them by the "publish or perish" aphorism, it is perhaps healthier to re-envision their perceptions with these three perspectives, which were shared with us by a novice and an established author at two recent webinars.

Firstly, instead of viewing rejection as something to be avoided at all cost, which may even prevent novice authors from starting to write and taking the risk of submitting an article to a journal, as an early-career scholar noted: "Rejection is like a good friend" (Mongkolhutti, 2020). Hyland (2016: 164) notes that "most papers eventually find a home in a journal somewhere" and describes peer review as a "mechanism for deciding where a paper is published rather than whether it is published." Therefore, the reviewers' comments in a rejection can be used to improve the manuscript so that it can be resubmitted and eventually accepted elsewhere.

Secondly, it may be useful to view publishing as "a part of the game, not the end of the game." Mongkolhutti (2020) appropriately suggests that in order to be successful, early-career researchers need to know the rules of the game, play by these rules, and practise the skills of researching and writing regularly without giving up.

Finally, while the saying "publish or perish" has become synonymous with the pressure of academic life, it is not healthy for researchers in our field and the academic arena in general to perpetuate this attitude. Early-career academics, in particular, should be entering the field with positivity and optimism. Instead of "publish or perish," individuals, institutions, journals, and publishers should work together to promote an attitude of "publish and flourish" (Goh, 2020).

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