

ACADEMIC PUBLISHING DEMYSTIFIED

By

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Abstract

This paper acknowledges that writing and publishing is or should be an integral part of the life of any academic. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to assist junior academics to get their manuscripts published in refereed journals. The paper attempts to demystify academic publishing by explaining the responsibilities of the editor, the peer review process and the decisions made by the editor on the manuscript. While the ideas proffered in this paper mainly relate to The DYKE: A journal of the Midlands State University, they can also apply to most journals.

Introduction.

Publishing in a refereed journal is or should be an integral part of any academic. A refereed journal is a scholarly publication in which experts in a given academic discipline review articles before they are accepted for publication. Journals are the principal fora for formal communication through which research and development in the field is made public and through which it is evaluated and authenticated by experts before and after publication (Viglietta, 1996). Academics should be guided by the academic adage “publish or perish!” that places a strong emphasis on published work.

There are three main reasons why academics should write and publish. First, it is a requirement in most institutions of higher learning that academics should contribute to the knowledge base of their disciplines through research and publications. Second, for academics to be promoted to higher ranks such as that of senior lecturer, associate professor or professor they should have demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt that they have made a contribution to the knowledge base of their academic disciplines through research and publications. Third, Ogunniyi (1998,a) asserts that academic writing is used as a barometer for measuring academic and professional competence. Indeed, research is the cornerstone of academic excellence. Academics should therefore, show their academic prowess and achieve international recognition by writing and publishing papers. However, some junior academics have a phobia for writing and publishing. One of the reasons for this phobia emanates from the observation that academic writing has been so mystified to the extent that some people think that it is a preserve of a few senior academics. Lack of persistence in the face of repeated failures to publish may also lead to this phobia (Remenyi & Money, 1996; Ogunniyi, 1998,b). It is therefore against this background that this article seeks to demystify academic

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publishing and guide junior academics on how to publish in a refereed journal. The ideas presented in this paper are mainly from the author’s experience as a researcher and as an Editor-in-Chief of the The DYKE: A journal of Midlands State University.

The role of the editor

The editor of a journal is central to academic publishing. The editor is usually a respected academic who has a track record of writing and publishing papers. The major responsibilities of an editor *inter alia* are to (i) protect the integrity and reputation of the journal by publishing good quality articles that contribute to the knowledge base of academic disciplines (ii) uphold the journal’s editorial policy and (iii) ensure production of a reader friendly journal.

The peer review process

An editor of a journal cannot be an expert in all disciplines or topics and hence he/she relies heavily on comments made by reviewers (also known as referees) who in most cases are senior academics and experts in their fields of specialisation. The process of peer reviewing involves subjecting an author’s work to the scrutiny of other experts in the same field. This practice helps to ensure that articles meet the required standards of that discipline and that reliable and valid knowledge is published. Peer reviewing also minimises the occurrences of factual errors.

The diagram below summarises the review process with particular reference to The DYKE: A journal of Midlands State University.

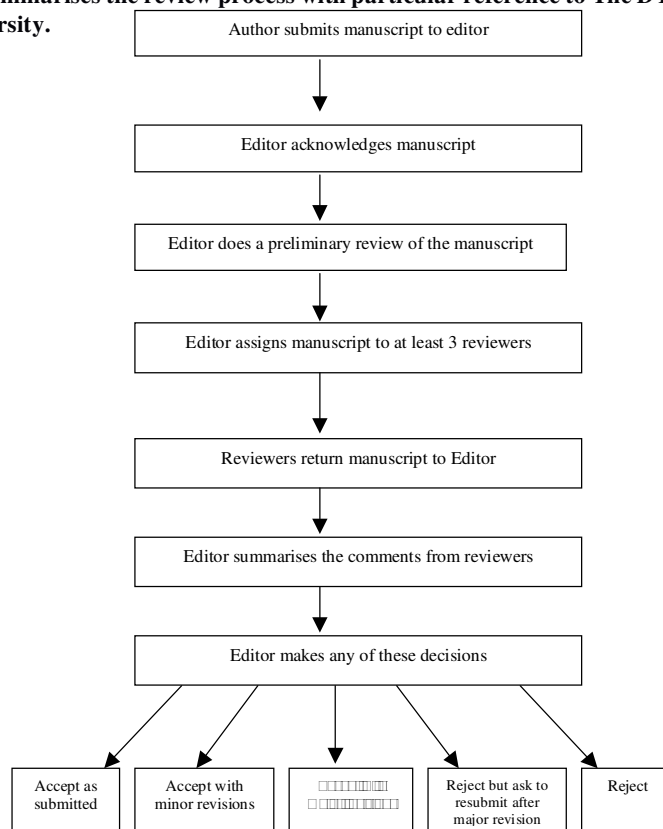


Fig 1: Review process of The DYKE: A journal of the Midlands State University.

The review process can be divided into three phases *viz* the preliminary review, the review process and making decisions about the manuscript.

The preliminary review phase

When an author submits a manuscript to be considered for publication in a journal, the editor should acknowledge the receipt of the manuscript, preferably within a week of receiving the manuscript. Authors should follow the guidelines of the particular journal on how to submit manuscripts. Failure to adhere to the guidelines may result in a delay of the review process or the rejection of the manuscript altogether. Some junior researchers engage themselves in writing a paper before they decide which journal will be suitable for publishing their papers. This is like putting the cart before the horse. It is advisable for authors to first target a particular journal and then prepare their manuscript in accordance with the editorial policy and house style of that journal. The guidelines for submission are normally found in the latest issue of the journal or authors can get them directly from the editor. Authors are strongly advised to subject their papers to scrutiny by fellow colleagues or “academic friends” before submitting them to a journal. I have found this practice to be very useful in enhancing the quality of the paper and this increases the chances of the paper being accepted for publication in a reputable journal.

After receiving the manuscript, the editor reads through the manuscript to ascertain if it is in line with the journal’s editorial policy in terms of focus and house style. If the manuscript’s focus is not in line with editorial policy of the journal, it may be rejected at that stage. If the manuscript is in line with the editorial policy of the journal, the editor then assigns the manuscript to at least three reviewers for reviewing.

The peer review process

Most refereed journals, including The DYKE, practice what is known as blind review of manuscripts where the identity of the author is unknown to the reviewer and vice versa. The blind review process is meant to reduce bias and consequently ensure that the necessary standards in the discipline are maintained. To that effect, reviewers are not normally selected from the author’s close colleagues or friends.

The review process can last from a few weeks to years depending on the nature of the manuscript. Authors should, therefore, exercise some patience with the review process because editors normally rely on voluntary and part-time reviewers who at times cannot be rushed to review the manuscripts because they will be having other commitments. However, the editor tries by all means possible to encourage reviewers to return reviewed manuscripts within reasonable time. Authors can also help to speed up the review process by ensuring that their papers are well focused and reader friendly. Reviewers usually use a checklist in evaluating a manuscript. Evaluation forms used to review manuscripts submitted to The DYKE are presented in Appendices 1 and 2. The

evaluation form in Appendix 1 is used when reviewing manuscripts that involve field research while the evaluation form in Appendix 2 is used when reviewing manuscripts that involve “desk” research. When all the reviewers have returned their comments, the editor summarises the strengths and weaknesses of the manuscript and makes a decision about the manuscript.

Decisions about the manuscript

This phase involves the editor making a decision about the manuscript. The Editor-in-Chief of The DYKE makes any of the following decisions:

- (i) *Accept the manuscript as submitted.* This is a rare decision because no matter how good a manuscript is, reviewers will always find something to add, subtract or suggest to the manuscript. One of the editors of a journal, Armstrong (1997:2) had this to say about the rareness of this decision, “I cannot recall a single instance in which a journal accepted a paper upon its first submission, without making any suggestions for change”.
- (ii) *Accept with minor revisions.* This decision applies to manuscripts that require minor modifications, especially those of a technical nature such as grammar, spellings, referencing etc.
- (iii) *Accept with major revisions.* In this case, the author may be required to refocus the study or to reorganize their findings or conclusions. The author will be required to resubmit the manuscript after incorporating all the suggestions made by the reviewers. If for some reason the author does not agree with some of the reviewers’ comments, then he/she should convince the editor why the suggestions cannot be incorporated. However, authors should take the reviewers’ comments seriously as the comments are meant to develop both the author and the subject discipline.
- (iv) *Reject but ask to resubmit after major revisions.* This decision is made when there are some conceptual gaps and inconsistencies in the paper. Technically, the paper will have been found not suitable for publishing in that journal. However, the author can revise it in accordance with the suggestions made by the reviewers and resubmit it for a further review but the paper will have to undergo a full review process as if it was a first submission.
- (v) *Reject.* This is an outright rejection of the paper. This decision is normally arrived at when the manuscript falls way below the expectations of the concerned academic discipline in terms of conceptualisation. However, authors should note that the rejection of a paper by one journal does not necessarily mean the end of its life. The modified paper can still be submitted to another journal for consideration.

Conclusion

The paper has attempted to highlight issues pertaining to writing and publishing in referred journals. It should be noted that publishing in an academic journal is not a preserve of a few senior academics and neither is it based on other extraneous variables other than the quality of the paper. The blind review process ensures that any academic can publish papers in a refereed journal provided he/she writes a high quality paper.

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