2 PICKING A JOURNAL (JOINING THE PARTY!)

You're thrilled to visit a dinner party that's been ongoing for several decades.[a] The folks at the table next to the window are loudly debating tennis, while those by the door are all wearing yellow pants. You count 37 tables, each with its own personality. Where do you sit?

You'll have a better time if you know which table is most receptive to your ideas. It's a lot easier to find the right table if you have a mentor who can make introductions, but sometimes, we are not so lucky. Worse yet, we might encounter active exclusion. Your joke about penguins and a ketchup bottle might elicit belly laughs at one table and condescending stares at another. Publishing is the same. Your research on childhood poverty might be seen as revolutionary by one audience but mundane by another. As with each dinner table, scholarly journals have different histories, traditions, and standing assumptions. Most research papers can be published if you understand your audience's values and their expectations. Writing is hard, but your odds of getting published rise dramatically if you can find the right journal.

How can we tell if your work will fit a journal? Here are some things to consider: discipline, generalist versus specialist, topic, values, methodology, prestige, quality, speed, pain, and cost.

DISCIPLINE

Some journals span multiple fields (e.g., *Science*), while other journals serve a specific discipline. Disciplinary journals expect that you write for their membership. Sociology journals want to see the relevance of your research for sociology, whereas nursing journals want to see the relevance for nursing.

You want to write for that discipline in mind. A common mistake occurs when you submit your article to a disciplinary journal, get rejected, and then submit the article to a different discipline. Writers get in trouble if they do not tweak their article to fit the new audience.

For example, suppose you studied how getting social support from friends improves a person's chance of surviving a heart attack. A sociology journal would expect you to emphasize the concept of social support and discuss how your research refines

[a] Kenneth Burke raised a similar analogy in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, University of California Press, 1974 (pp. 110-11).

sociological theories about social relationships. The part about surviving a heart attack is almost a secondary issue. By contrast, a nursing journal would emphasize how social support plays a role in nursing practice and improves a patient's chances of survival. If you wrote the article initially for sociologists, but then submit it to a nursing journal without any changes, you'll likely be criticized for being too long on theory and too short on implications for clinical care.

GENERALIST VERSUS SPECIALIST

A key consideration is the scope and aim of your research. Many disciplines have a "general readership" journal along with more specialized journals. For example, the *American Sociological Review* (*ASR*) serves the entire discipline of sociology. Articles published in ASR are presumed to be of interest to all sociologists, regardless of their subdiscipline. By contrast, other journals may focus on more specialized topics that might be of greater interest to a subset of the discipline (e.g., *Sociological Methodology*). If you submit to the general-readership journal, then your articles need to be accessible and appealing to a broad audience. Thus, your paper on social support and heart attacks should have some interest to a reader who specializes in other areas of research, such as the sociology of religion.

TOPIC

Some journals might span multiple disciplines but emphasize a particular topic. An example is the *Journal of Peace Research*, which, as its name implies, focuses on fostering peace and reducing conflict. Further, the "topic" might be a population (e.g., *Journal of Hispanic Behavioral Sciences*) or perspective (e.g., *International Journal of Critical Statistics*). For such journals, a key issue is whether your article illuminates some aspect of that topic, population, or perspective. For example, your study of social support and heart attacks might emphasize the experiences of African American participants if submitted to the *Journal of Black Studies*. If your paper is of a broad scope, then it's wise to find a journal that is also broad, but if your paper is quite narrow, then it may be more suitable for a more narrowly focused journal.

NORMS AND VALUES

All journals strive for scholarly excellence, but they differ in their norms (i.e., conventional practices) and core values (i.e., underlying conventions of what is deemed "good" and "proper"). Some journals have stylistic norms, such as whether it's OK to write in first person, use footnotes, or pose rhetorical questions in titles. Some journals have norms on including reflexivity statements, in which the writer discloses aspects of their

identity that may influence their research. Other journals have norms regarding how data are presented, how theory is used, and how limitations are written.

Many journals also have implicit values that are subtly communicated. These can appear when a journal publishes exclusively on domestic issues, ignoring research from other countries. It can appear when writers prioritize human welfare over that of animals, when they fail to cite a certain class of scholars (e.g., women), or when qualitative research is dismissed in favor of quantitative research.

You want to understand these conventions so that you are more aligned with your audiences. This will make it easier for them to read your work and, hopefully, find the work interesting. Alternatively, this information can help you deviate from these conventions purposefully rather than by accident. For example, you can add qualifying statements such as, "In our field, we typically focus on human health, but it is just as important to focus on the health of swine for the following reasons."

METHODOLOGY

Some journals focus on developing and assessing research techniques (e.g., *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*). Substantive topics are usually not the focus in these journals, except as a way to illustrate a methodological approach. Going back to our example, your study on social support and heart attacks might focus on a new psychometric technique if submitted to *Psychometrika*.

Other journals are not about developing methods but still expect submissions to use a certain type of methodology. An example is the *Journal of Experimental Psychology,* which as the name states, publishes experiments. Your research will probably be rejected if it uses a cross-sectional design instead of an experimental one. Other journals may not have methodological requirements formally written but nonetheless have implicit expectations. Pay attention to the methodology you used when deciding on a journal.

PRESTIGE

Mentors often advise you to publish in the most prestigious outlet possible. Prestigious journals, sometimes called "leading" or "flagship" journals, provide the biggest spotlight for your research. It's like an artist performing at Carnegie Hall. Your research gets a lot more exposure and a bigger chance of being influential than if it were published in a "smaller" journal. It can be intimidating to submit to the leading journal, but you should consider doing so. Early in my career, I wasn't sure about whether to send an article to my field's leading journal. A mentor demurred, worried about my sample. Although I respected his opinion, I decided to try anyway. Good news, it was published! That publication was instrumental in helping me land a job. Aim high!

How do you determine a journal's prestige? First, ask your mentors about their opinions. They will typically agree on which journals are in the top five, even if they disagree about which is the absolute best.

Second, you can check a journal's rankings with databases that statistically analyze the influence of a journal and its articles. The metrics include things such as a journal's impact factor,[b] which is a crude number that some people use to gauge the influence of a journal. Consult with your librarian about how to use Journal Citation Reports, Web of Science, and similar tools. Take these metrics with big caveats, however. They're like college rankings:

everyone says the rankings are flawed, even while we use them. Further, these databases may not include new journals or the journals of some disciplines.

Although I said to aim high, know that the leading journal may not be the best outlet for your work. Your article might be more appreciated and more highly cited in a smaller specialized journal, where people know to go find research on that topic. Also, your work just might not be appropriate for the leading journal due to content, methodological limitations, or other reasons. If this is the case, you can save yourself some time by submitting to a more appropriate journal. The main point is to not automatically avoid certain journals but to think carefully about how your article fits with the journal's mission and readership.

QUALITY

Quality refers to the excellence of the scholarship published in that journal. High quality is often correlated with prestige, but there are many high-quality journals that may not be the most prestigious. At the most basic level, high-quality journals provide rigorous peer review. This could be a review of any element of the research, from an assessment as to the importance of the research question, to the research design, analysis, interpretation of the data, and conclusions. Some journals even review the programming code and in some cases, even ask outside experts to try to replicate the results. Although it may feel intimidating, you want to publish your work in the highest quality journal that you can. It will only help you become a better scholar.

SPEED

You generally want to publish in a journal that provides a faster review than a slower one. This is particularly true when you are just starting your career, with a clock ticking to finish your dissertation, land your first job, and/or to receive tenure. Nobody

[b] The impact factor is a score that reflects how often the "average" article is cited within a journal during a given time frame. It is often used to compare across journals; a journal with a higher impact factor is often considered more influential than a journal with a lower score.

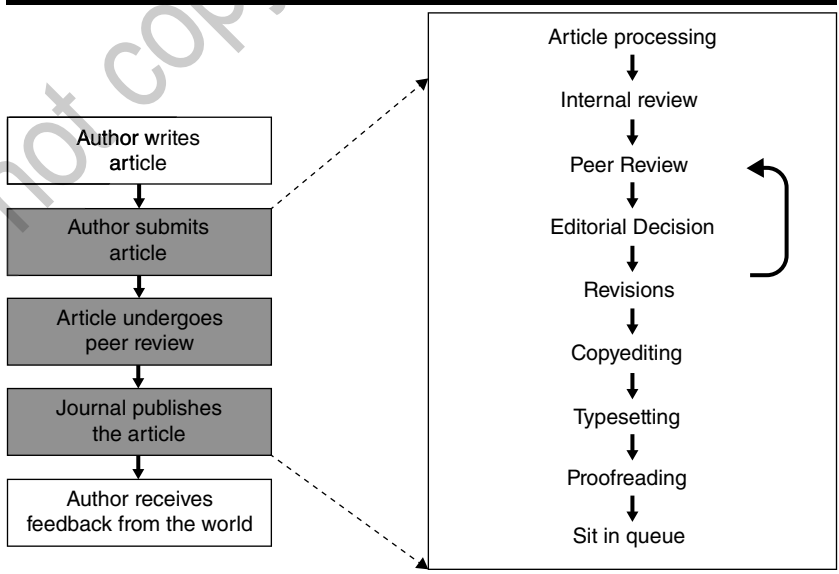
wants to have their article stagnate at a journal for years. Of course, what is "fast" depends on the discipline. In public health, for example, most journal offices take 1 to 2 months to review an article and arrive at a decision. Any journal that takes 6 months would be considered very slow in that field. However, in other fields, 6 months would be considered fast.

How do you determine a journal's speed? Some journals publish these statistics in the section titled "About the Journal." Most journals do not, but you can ask your senior colleagues about a journal's reputation for speedy or slow reviews.

THINGS AFFECTING SPEED OF A JOURNAL

Multiple bottlenecks affect speed (Figure 2.1). You submit the article, which gets processed by the staff and editor. Next it goes out for peer review, and then it awaits an editorial decision. If the article is given a "revise and resubmit," you will need time to address the critiques and edit the document. You then resubmit it to the journal. The editor then might send the article for another round of reviews. This cycle of critique and revision might occur a few times. If the article is accepted, then the article goes through copyediting (editing for typos, style, etc.), typesetting (putting it into the pretty publication format), and proofreading (checking the typeset copy to make sure no errors were introduced in typesetting). Finally, because many journals can only publish a limited number of articles per issue, your article might "sit in queue" before it is finally assigned to appear in the journal. Each step can take weeks, months, or even years. Some journals get so backlogged that they stop taking new submissions.

FIGURE 2.1 ■ Article Processing



Authors often want to know about the time it takes from initial submission to when it gets published in final format. This information can sometimes be calculated subtracting an article's date of submission (sometimes found in a footnote) from the date of appearance in the journal. However, the time to final publication is often less informative because it includes time that authors take in making revisions; some authors take years to respond to review, hence, inflating the time to final publication.

The most relevant information is the time from initial submission to the first editorial decision (i.e., whether to accept, reject, or ask for a revise and resubmit). Knowing about the first editorial decision tells you how quickly the journal processes your work.

Some journals publish articles that have been accepted as "first looks" (or similar terminology) on their websites. This allows them to get the articles into circulation before the "final" copies. You can often list these first looks as "accepted" articles on your CV and circulate them to other scholars. Just be careful to check that this copy is free of errors (which can occur during typesetting or copyediting).

PAIN

If writing wasn't enough of a struggle, some journals are a pain in the neck. They do things that make you think twice before submitting. These could include annoying things such as buggy submission websites and sloppy editorial practices.

Here's a true story. I once sent a paper to Journal X and received an acknowledgment of receipt within a few days. So far so good. However, 3 months pass with no further word, so I message the office. The staff person says, "Oops, sorry, we never sent this out for review. Let me contact the editor." Mistakes happen, so I tell them no big deal. I await the review and forget about the paper. Four months later, I remember and contact the journal office. The person on the phone looked at my file and says, "Um, I'm not sure." I asked to speak with the editor, who sheepishly admitted that they did not yet send the paper out for review. That was 7 months in limbo! The editor says that they'll find a review ASAP. A week later, I get a cursory review and a rejection. I don't mind being rejected—that's part of the process. But, failing to send an article out for review twice is really bad on the journal's part.

Other journals are a real headache in the copyediting or proofreading stages. Some copy editors cannot restrain themselves, insisting on muffling your voice in favor of theirs. Check with your colleagues to see which journals are trifling.

COST

Journals differ a lot regarding fees. Some journals charge nothing, whereas others charge a processing fee that is levied regardless of whether your article is reviewed. Others have no processing fees but instead charge authors after accepting their article

for publication. Many journals charge for colored figures, extra pages, and open access (i.e., making the article available to people who do not have subscriptions to the journal). These fees can range from $25 to over $3,500 as of the time this book was published.

The expenses might be difficult to pay, but there are some options. You can ask the journal if they waive fees for students, for persons with financial hardship, or for those residing in low-income countries. You could also ask your coauthors, mentor, department, and library to see if they can pay such fees. There might be some grants that you can apply for that pay publication charges.

Some fees are reasonable. Journals have a lot of expenses, including paying for the staff who help shepherd the paper through peer review, copy editors, typesetters, accountants, and all of the other things related to publishing. You may be surprised to learn that many journals actually lose money and are subsidized by their professional association.

More and more journals are becoming open access, which means that readers do not have to pay to get a copy of the article. Traditionally, most journals require readers to pay, either in the form of a subscription to the journal or via a one-time payment for an article. Academics can usually get around these payments through their libraries, which pay institutional fees so that all library members have access. Yet, many lay persons don't have such access.

Open access journals reverse the finances by making the authors pay rather than the reader. Thus, the articles are free to the entire world. Open access is a great way to democratize information.

However, some journals have capitalized on open access as a way to make money off authors by requiring publishing fees. Some of the fees are levied, not only to provide open access but also to accelerate the time to publishing. However, be wary. Some of these journals are shortening the publishing time because they little to no peer review. The insufficient peer review is an extremely serious issue. Peer review helps to spot flaws in the research so that problems can be fixed or at least explicitly acknowledged. The lack of peer review on papers may lead to publications with erroneous conclusions, which then could be taken as "truth" by unwitting readers. This could then lead to weird recommendations, some of which might literally kill people.

Some journals have crossed the line of good scholarship and are considered "predatory journals," defined by an international consortium as

> entities that prioritize self-interest at the expense of scholarship and are characterized by false or misleading information, deviation from best editorial and publication practices, a lack of transparency, and/or the use of aggressive and indiscriminate solicitation practices.[1]

These journals have been accused of numerous problems. In a horrifying story, one researcher created a résumé for a fictitious Dr. Szust.[2] Dr. Szust had no academic publications and no experience as a peer reviewer. The books on her CV were fabricated,

as was the publishing house. Dr. Szust's CV and a cover letter was sent to 360 journals to apply for the position of editor. None of the traditional journals accepted her application, but 40 predatory journals (as identified by Bael's list) and eight open access journals welcomed her as editor. A dozen of these journals also accepted Dr. Szust's editorship on the proviso that she pay a fee to assume this role!

Be careful of these journals. They can be tricky to distinguish from legitimate ones, in part because their titles can mimic existing journals. For example, Dinis-Oliveria mentions that the suspicious *Journal of Forensic Science and Research* is strikingly similar to the established journal, *Forensic Sciences Research*.[3] Be wary of journals that send you unsolicited invitations to publish (often with grammatical mistakes and unprofessional tones), that are very new, and have fairly high publishing fees. They may offer discounts (20% off your next publication!) and opportunities to lead a special issue. A major flag is if their communications come across as pushy or aggressive.

Not only is publishing in these journals expensive, but they may cost you a job or promotion. Some academic departments do not consider these journals to be legitimate and ignore them on your CV. Worse yet, they might even hold publishing in these journals against you. Think twice before you submit.

There are a few lists that try to distinguish legitimate from questionable journals. For example, take a look at the University Grants Commission: Consortium for Academic Research and Ethics (https://ugccare.unipune.ac.in/apps1/home/index). If you are unsure about a journal, you might ask a librarian, senior scholar, or member of your university's tenure and promotion committee.

To be clear, there are many excellent open access journals that have a rigorous peer review process. And, many funding agencies and some universities are mandating that research findings be made freely available to the public. This is a noble goal that's good for society and good for scholarship. Just be careful about the journals that you are selecting.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

It's critical to learn about a journal's culture. Whenever possible, I recommend that you have a journal in mind before you start writing your paper. You'll want to know if you have to wear yellow pants or brush up on tennis before going to the party. As we will see in the chapters to come, anticipating the journal will help you decide what to emphasize in your research, how much detail (or not) to include about theory and methods, and what to say with regard to implications of your research. It may even shape which citations and examples you use. And of course, journals differ a lot with regard to style, formatting, and page limits. Writing with a journal in mind will help you a lot in crafting the paper.

Although most people want to publish in the "top" journal, it may not be the best outlet for your paper. The best journal to submit to might be the one that you read and cite most often. Assess whether your article is a good fit for that journal. To help

you understand "fit" a bit better, Chapter 15 includes short essays from editors talking about their specific journals.

EXERCISES

I know you're excited to write your article, but before you do, let's find out where you might send it. Exercises 2.1 to 2.3 are designed to help you get a better feel for the journals in your area. Please do not throw away the materials you gather for Exercises 2.1 to 2.3. You will need some of them for later chapters of this book. After doing those exercises, we'll talk about a few other issues related to selecting a journal.

Exercise 2.1: Survey the Horizon

This exercise is designed to give you an overview of some journals that might publish your research.

1. Select seven or more journals that you read and cite regularly, and where you would like to publish. Include some journals that have articles written by your mentors.

2. Complete the matrix presented below (Table 2.1). You can find some of these data from the journal's website (or find a print copy), typically in a section called "Instructions for Authors."

    a. The **journal name** is self-evident.
    b. **Types of articles** include empirical studies, reviews, commentaries, case studies, briefs, and so forth.
    c. **Word/page limit** is usually specified, although some journals give you as much space you need. Be sure to note if this page/word limit includes the words in the abstract, bibliography, footnotes, and tables.
    d. **Number of tables and figures** is often but not always specified.
    e. **Titles of five recent articles.** Find the latest complete issue. Note that the most recent issue may not be complete, so go back if you need to. Avoid special issues. Pick the most recent "regular" issue of that journal and then list the titles of five or more articles. Avoid letters to the editors, book reviews, and commentaries; focus on research articles.
    f. **Someone I know publish here?** Note the names of your mentors, friends, or others in your department who have published in this journal.

3. Take 5 minutes to answer these questions. Don't dwell on them too much.

    a. Did any of the journals surprise you, such as by publishing articles that you didn't think they would publish or by being focused on a particular topic?
    b. Think of the article that you'd like to publish, then look at each journal. Put a star next to the journal if you think it may be a good place to submit your paper.

TABLE 2.1 ■ Journal Matrix

Journal Name	Types of Articles	Word/Page Limit	Number of Tables & Figures	Titles of Five Recent Articles	Name of Someone I Know Who Has Published Here?	Publishing Fees?	Other Notes
Journal of Stuff	*Empirical*	*20 pages double-spaced, including abstract*	Four tables or figures max	"Age differences in collecting stuff." "Temporal changes in household stuff in Korea, 1980 to 2019."	Dr. Macy	Peer-reviewed No fees if you are a member of the Society of Stuff; $25 processing fee otherwise	Most of the articles use longitudinal data

Exercise 2.2: Toes in the Water

The goal of this exercise is to help you to become more familiar with some promising journals. Choose four journals from the matrix that you created in Exercise 2.1. Ideally, these are all journals that you put a star next to, but if you had fewer than three stars, pick journals where your mentors have published.

1. For each of the four journals, find the table of contents for the most recent issue. Next, get the list of names of editors and editorial board members. Finally, get the mission statement of the journal.
2. Read the titles of these tables of contents closely.
   a. Highlight in yellow any articles that seem similar to yours with regard to topic.
   b. Put a star next to any articles that are interesting.
3. Look at the editors and editorial board members. Circle any familiar names.
4. Read the mission statements carefully. How do they compare? Do they all emphasize the same things? Is the journal part of an organization (e.g., the journal *American Psychologist* is the official journal of the American Psychological Association)?

Choose two of these journals for the next exercise. You'll want to pick two journals that seem to use similar methods to your research and emphasize similar topics. If you recognize names of authors or editorial board members, all the better.

Exercise 2.3: Diving Deeper

The goal of this exercise is to begin to help you understand a journal's culture a bit more deeply. Take the two journals from the prior exercise. Get a copy of every single article from the two most recent issues of both journals. Ignore letters to the editor, book reviews, and commentaries.

1. Take all of the articles from Journal 1 and skim their abstracts. If the articles do not have abstracts, skip to Step 3.
2. Spend 5 minutes answering these questions about your initial reactions. You can answer with bullet points.
   a. How different are the articles from one another?
   b. Are the topics all over the place or very focused?
   c. Did any patterns or themes stand out, such as use of large datasets or involvement of community members in the research?
3. Now read the articles from Journal 1 carefully. Your goal is to understand the norms and values of the authors and the journal. What do they care about? Do they take a high priority on data quality,

community participation, or reflexivity? Are they concerned about implications for policy and practice? Do they value theory?

Understanding these norms and values is a difficult task. It will take a lot of practice and a lot of reading. Don't fret if you're struggling—you're right where you should be. Consider this stack of articles to be just a teaser. It will get easier once you read more than one journal.

4. Repeat this exercise for the articles from Journal 2.
5. Now, consider the two journals as a whole. Which journal feels more aligned with your own values and interests? Which journal might be a better fit for your research paper?

If neither journal seems good, then pick another journal from your matrix and repeat Exercise 2.3 until you find a suitable one.

Exercise 2.4: Pick a Journal

In the prior three exercises, you did preliminary research on some journals and have arrived at a short list of journals that might be a good fit with your research. Now it is time to get some opinions.

Approach your mentor (or a senior colleague in your department) and ask,

> *I am writing a paper on [topic] and thinking of submitting it to Journal 1 or Journal 2. Do you think those journals are a good fit? If not, where do you suggest I send it? In your experience, how long do these journals take for review, and is there anything else I should know about them before submitting my paper?*

It might be tempting to skip Exercises 2.1 to 2.3, and simply ask your mentors, but I advise against it. You'll want to be informed before getting their opinions. You'll be better able to ask follow-up and clarification questions. Also, your mentors might be misinformed (e.g., they might not know that Journal 1 publishes review articles or that the journal has a new editorial board and policy), so it's good to do your homework in advance. More importantly, those exercises will be very helpful later in the writing process. You will write with the culture of that journal in mind.

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