25 Turning Term Papers into Articles: Paths to a Productive Peer-Review Process

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Introduction

While the normative question of whether graduate students should publish as a matter of scholarly formation remains open, an emerging consensus holds that publication approaches necessity for employability in the hypercompetitive post-Great Recession academic job market (Hatch & Skipper 2016, 172). Recognizing this, many graduate school advice books offer guidance on the structure of articles and an overview of the review process (e.g., Berdahl & Molloy 2018, 125ff; Calarco 2021, 193ff), complemented by article-length guides for students on how to publish (Rich 2013; Van Cott 2005). Students can also draw on books on scholarly writing intended for a multidisciplinary audience (Belcher 2020; Silvia 2017; 2019). A second type of guidance from the graduate student advice literature identifies what source material might lead to a future publication. Karen Kelsky, for example, suggests that a master's thesis and doctoral dissertation chapters may provide preliminary material for submission (201), while other advice books suggest the adaptation of graduate-level term papers (e.g., Peters 1997; Semenza 2005; Hay 2017). These two types of publication-related advice are important supports for graduate students' first forays into academic publishing, and an important first step in building graduate student confidence is recognizing that a term paper might become an academic article (Arsenault et al. 2021).

This chapter focuses on the gap between how to publish and what to publish, drawing attention to the unique challenges that graduate students face in adapting their term papers for submission as academic articles. While this transformation is possible, it presents unique challenges that an established scholar might not face when preparing a conference paper for submission as an article. The first section of the chapter discusses the difference in genre, which we can understand as the difference between argument-first writing and contribution-first writing. The second section explores what graduate students can do, including both strategies for contribution communication and pre-submission checks for what I call "term paper-to-article red flags." The conclusion discusses how term paper revision can help prepare early career researchers to strengthen their contribution-first writing practices.

Term Papers and Articles: What's the Difference?

Whether in the form of a professor or teaching assistant, the term paper has a guaranteed audience, contractually obligated to read the work for the purposes of assessment and evaluation. Conversely, the article has an earned or an interested *audience*. While a journal with a strong sense of community may have an automatic set of readers for all articles, and other idiosyncratic motivators do emerge from time

to time—a distinguished scholar's name may lure readers, and Google Scholar notifications may draw the attention of authors you have cited—the payoff for reading the work should be clear. It is not a matter of honing the argument and hoping an audience will arrive.

The guarantee of readership is closely related to the question of the term paper's contextual difference from the academic article. In the words of Eric Hayot, the "intellectual center" of a term paper "often lies somewhere in the set of questions and texts organized by the course's professor" (2014, 11). While this may be entirely acceptable—and even laudable—in the case of a term paper, this approach to writing neglects the earned audience that lies beyond the course enrollment. Indeed, "reviewers who encounter such essays as journal submissions recognize them immediately because the basic question they ask has an unspoken justification in the logic of the course for which the paper was originally written, about which the essays themselves cannot, of course, speak. (Hayot 2014, 11). The term paper, therefore, relies on the course it was written for in two specific ways that must be overcome in the transition from term paper to article—audience, and context.

Reliance on the course can be reduced by shifting the focal point of writing. By this, I mean to say that writing a term paper entails argument-first writing that externalizes the responsibility to connect with an audience and establish a context to the course itself. Conversely, writing an academic article entails contribution-first writing, wherein the author must earn the audience and articulate the context of the work. Foregrounding the contribution over the argument necessitates reflection on audience and context because the content and significance of the contribution can only become clearer once you have an audience in mind (whom are you writing for?) and a context for your intervention established (where does your contribution fit into the field of study?). The next section discusses different strategies for communicating your contribution.

Contribution Communication: Conceptual and Practical Strategies

Academic writing experts Wendy Belcher and Paul Silvia have slightly different approaches to how we can think about the contribution that we want our article to make. After reviewing these two approaches, I outline four practical strategies for putting these contributions to work.

Wendy Belcher (2019) suggests that authors consider their work in terms of significance, which speaks to the reason that a reader might read the article. Belcher offers ten types of claims to significance, visualized in *Figure 25.1* (Belcher 2019, 192-196). Paul Silvia offers similar guidance, suggesting that the structure of the introduction is crucial to establishing the purpose of an article. He offers four rhetorical models, describing the corresponding structure that each argument's introduction would take: "which one is right?," "here's how this works," "things that seem similar are different (or vice versa)," and "here's something new" (Silvia 2017, 86-95). Common to both Belcher and Silvia is a recognition that for the article to stand, its justification must be internal to the work and clearly expressed to the reader.

Figure 25.1: Belcher's Ten Types of Claims to Significance
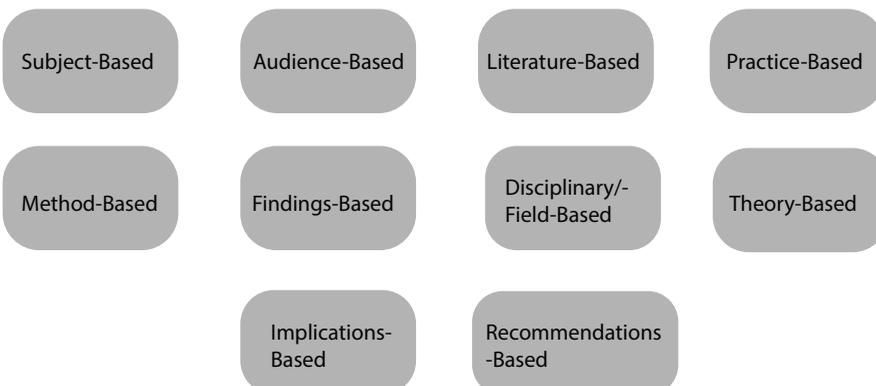
Journal selection is an important consideration in the submission process because it assists in targeting the primary audience. While students' interactions with journals in syllabi or comprehensive reading lists may communicate certain details about the prestige of one venue or another (Murphy & Wigginton 2020), assigned readings typically draw attention to the article as a self-contained text rather than situating the article within a broader conversation taking place within a specialist journal. An important realization along the path from student to scholar is that journals have unique features, foci, and familiar debates; recognizing the unique profile of journals—whether generalist journals seeking to cover all mainstream debates in a field or specialist venues that specific research communities call home—can set a submission process up for success.

There are four practical strategies to consider for putting an article's contribution in context of a given journal, summarized in *Table 25.1*. First, a journal can be selected for empirical fit, whether in terms of topical or regional empirics. A second strategy for journal selection can be through methodological or theoretical fit, where one or more elements of the research design provide the context for submitting to a particular journal. Third, some of the audience-earning and context-establishing requirements can be outsourced by joining a special issue of a journal. Finally, the fourth strategy is perhaps the simplest to begin and most difficult to complete: submitting to the journal that most frequently appears in the paper's bibliography. While this would indicate a likely venue, it requires the highest degree of effort to specify the contribution, which can only be identified on a case-by-case basis. While this piece of received wisdom is useful for the veteran scholar, I would suggest clearer guidance of the three earlier strategies for journal selection in the case of a first attempt at a paper-turned-article.

Table 25.1: Strategies to Consider for Putting an Article's Contribution in Context of a Given Journal

Strategy	Description	Example
Empirical Fit	• Select based on field of study or region discussed • Article contributes to scholars working on similar empirical area	A study on Canadian elections might be submitted to the *Canadian Journal of Political Science*
Methodological/ Theoretical Fit	• Select based on methodology or theoretical framework employed • Article contributes new empirical material to scholars using similar theories or methods	A project theoretically informed by critical security studies might be submitted to *Security Dialogue*
Special Issue	• Joins other articles on a shared topic or theme and articles share the audience-earning • Can be difficult for junior scholars to join, but open calls are posted to social media, listservs, and publisher websites	An article on the materiality of drone surveillance could take part in a special issue on research methods in surveillance studies
Reference List Frequency	• Select based on most frequent appearance on the article's reference list • No immediate path to contribution definition	An article frequently citing works from *Conflict & Cooperation* could identify its key audience in that readership

Term Paper-to-Article Red Flags

There is an additional stage of self-assessment that can help set the stage for the submission of a term paper-turned-article, which involves checking the manuscript for three common red flags. While each of these three issues can happen with works beginning as academic articles, they are particularly common in the case of term papers because of the assumed context and argument-first writing modality of the term paper genre. For each red flag, I offer an explanation of where the issue comes from, a guiding question to check your manuscript for this phenomenon, and finally, a way to rejoin the path to publication.

1. Over-Anchoring

Because many syllabi are designed to build from the beginning of the term to the end, courses often cover the early or 'big picture' works in a field that has little to do with developments in narrow corners of the present. While that kind of approach may be useful when contextualizing a novel research program for a generalist audience, over-anchoring is particularly egregious when intervening into an established debate in the pages of a specialist journal. There, a critique of certain aspects of older texts may well appear as preaching to the choir (at best) or an irresponsible allocation of page budget (at worst).

When revising the paper, over-anchoring can be identified by asking: "What context is necessary to situate my contribution for the journal's audience?" Reviewing articles on similar topics published in priority target journals is one strategy to determine what is appropriate for your intervention. Do these articles return to the foundations of the field, cite key works of general relevance, or proceed directly to the immediately engaged literature? Taking cues from works that have recently passed muster at the journal will offer direct and relevant guidance for your manuscript.

2. Overplaying the Hand

As the advice goes, the tendency of courses to assign the 'most important texts' on a topic can overexaggerate the contribution of a truly average article. In the words of Howard Becker, the actual threshold is not to say something earth-shattering but something "at least minimally new" (2007, 141). A key step in the path from paper to publishable is found in the recognition that a term paper might one day be an article (e.g., Arsenault et al. 2021), but this must also include a realistic assessment of the incremental contribution made by the vast majority of articles. Indeed, Becker warns against setting "ourselves up for failure by aiming at the impossible" (2007, 140), and instead suggests that we should aim – confidently and humbly – to make this kind of a contribution. Inflating the contribution that a paper offers risks raising the suspicions of reviewers and editors alike who may interpret the overplayed hand as a sign of arrogance rather than a desire to contribute.

The key question to check for the overplayed hand is: "Have I exaggerated the implications or novelty of my claims?" By replacing overstated claims with confident contouring of the contribution, recognizing the specific intervention while humbly admitting limitations, and graciously identifying prior efforts upon which the work builds, the paper becomes more publishable. And along that journey of publication and reception, the editors, reviewers, and readers will not see the work as under-delivering, but as accurately setting expectations for the impact of the work.

3. Overlooking the Literature

A course syllabus may well present a diverse set of readings encompassing important perspectives on the topic about which you write, but that does not mean that your specific topic of interest has been exhaustively covered. Revisiting the literature after the course is important because, assuming you have chosen a journal that is a good "fit," the editor may well invite recent authors on that subject to review your submission. As a matter of substance, engaging with recent work on your topic can help clarify your specific contribution in the context of the field's latest developments; as a matter of pragmatism and practicality, snubbing a potential reviewer is not in your interest!

A deceivingly simple question for this pitfall is "have I reviewed the literature?," but two qualifiers

may help provide greater guidance—"have I reviewed the literature for my specific audience and in my desired journal?" The literature review may well seem like an unnecessary activity after a full semester of reading on the topic. However, this secondary and intentional review is an integral part of shifting from argument to contribution, because it ensures that the proper context for the discussion is established. If existing works are your landmarks in your argument's terrain, then specific and frequent references will help chart your clearest course.

Conclusion

The path to publication can be a difficult one at the best of times, and the unique pitfalls facing students seeking to publish term papers introduce new challenges that exceed the standard academic writing advice. It is my hope that this chapter's explanation of contribution-first writing, review of different strategies for contribution communication, and self-assessments for term paper red flags can help prepare early career researchers for a productive peer review experience. A recurring theme throughout this chapter has been the importance of the audience from contribution-first writing to journal selection, and keeping the audience in mind through the process of translating a term paper to an academic article can help prepare the author for a productive peer-review process.

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