Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Rules of Writing and Publishing in the Field of Higher Education Research: Are There Any?

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Abstract:

In this paper, we ask if there are *rules* for article writing and publishing in the field of higher education research. To explore this question, we treat academic writing and publishing as *social practices* (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). To examine what journal editors consider "good articles", we analysed responses from 38 higher education scholars and/or journal editors, who elaborated what kind of mistakes early-career researchers make when writing journal articles. Our preliminary thematic content analysis shows that the advice given by established scholars is incredibly versatile: In total, we assigned 21 different codes to 337 pieces of advice, which include issues "within text" (e. g. clear language) as well as "beyond text" (e. g. journal choice). We argue that the rules of academic article writing and journal publishing ought to be made clearer, more transparent, and more tangible to those early-career higher education researchers who submit their papers to higher education research journals.

Paper:

Academic writing is a frustrating endeavour (Sword et al. 2018). Yet, to succeed in academia one cannot escape academic writing, as it is the process that leads to publishing, and publications lead to promotions and research grants (Larivière et al., 2015). To be able to publish, however, one first needs to learn to navigate the *creative industry* (Gibson & Klocker, 2004) of academic publishing. However, courses related to writing and publishing are not typically taught extensively during doctoral studies but academic writing is rather learned by trial and error, from supervisors and peers, or through occasional workshops or symposia. Thus, tips on how to write an excellent journal article are often tacit knowledge, passing on from one scholar to another—or not (Nokkala et al., 2021).

To complicate matters further, Sword (2009) showed in the context of higher education research that what scholars *say* is "good writing" and what is *actually published* in top-ranked higher education research journals are two completely different things. Therefore, in this paper, we want to ask whether there are rules for article writing and publishing in the field of higher education research, or are the "rules" more what can be called "guidelines"; simple pieces of advice which early-career (or any) scholars can either follow or ignore? To explore this question, we treat academic writing and publishing as *social practices*, which consist of several *social actions* (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). Each relevant social action involved in both academic writing and publishing, in turn, has several different gatekeepers from the perspective of early-career researchers doing their doctorate or starting their careers as postdoctoral researchers.

To examine what the relevant social actors—established higher education scholars as journal editors and peer reviewers—consider "good articles", we analysed responses from 38 higher education scholars and/or journal editors based all around the world. The respondents elaborated what kind of mistakes early-career researchers make when writing journal articles and provided general pieces of advice regarding academic writing and publishing. Our research questions are as follows:

1. What kind of advice do senior higher education scholars provide for early-career researchers regarding academic writing and publishing?
2. Is there agreement or disagreement within the advice?

Originally, we contacted 64 higher education scholars by email. We received answers from 38. Together, the responses are 75,000 words. The first stage of analysis was to read through all responses thoroughly to familiarise ourselves with the content. The second and the third stage comprised of thematic, inductive content analysis (Blackstone, 2012) where we created initial codes for each piece of advice. In the third stage, we looked through the codes and their correspondence with the response items and revised the codes accordingly, after which we went through the data for the final time by using the revised codes. In total, we assigned 20 different codes to the responses. Additionally, there was a "miscellaneous" group, which consisted of 7 items that we could not place in any of the other groups and did not form a group of their own (2 or more items).

The codes, or *topics*, could be divided into two: The first group was regarding articles themselves ("within text"): scope/content/focus of the paper; language; data and methods; argumentation; audience; literature; paper sections; flow and organisation; theoretical framework; journal guidelines; value; research questions and; limitations of one's work. They were mentioned 220 times in total. The second group consisted of topics that were not directly related to textual issues ("beyond text"): journal choice; reading; personal characteristics; getting feedback; wider research agenda; editing as a process; collaboration and networking; researchers' comments. These were mentioned 117 times, which amounted to 337 pieces of advice in total.

Although most pieces of advice were mentioned by several different scholars, there was also a great deal of conflicting advice. The finalised analysis and results will be presented at the conference. However, based on our preliminary analysis, there are some questions we already want to ask: What could be done to make the "rules of publishing" clearer to early-career researchers, as they currently seem to be heavily related to individual preferences and are often in conflict with responses by other scholars? How does the lack of transparency affect what is being published? Are there "rules of publishing" the same for everyone? What happens to those rebellious scholars who want to try something new in terms of writing but are encountered with a journal editor who is not open to new, creative ways of scholarly writing?

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