

Within Reach: Publishing as a Graduate Student

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Publishing as a graduate student is not out of reach. In talking with graduate students in my program and in others across the country, I have found that some seem to think their research is not good enough or that it is too early in their careers for them to be publishing their work. These graduate students, I think, sell themselves short. There are plenty of avenues for graduate student research. Pursuing these avenues will not only help further our knowledge of human communication, but it will help individual graduate students build impressive resumes in preparation for the job hunting process. This paper is, more than anything else, an appeal to graduate students to see their research all the way to press rather than to view their efforts as only class papers. I base my claims and my advice on the success I have had so far in publishing my research and from the many conversations I have had with graduate students and faculty in the past few years. Opinions on graduate student research will differ, especially concerning how students should balance their time, how students should develop focused programs of research, and how students should value publications in so-called top-tier, lower-tier, and student journals. I hope, at the very least, this paper helps graduate students demystify the publication process and become more motivated to submit their research to worthy venues.

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The End as the Beginning

Apart from the obvious role of coursework to expose students to new bodies of literature and encourage critical thinking in that area, graduate coursework is supposed to help transition the student into a scholar. This shift from the student as a receiver of knowledge to a producer of knowledge is an important one. Because this shift is ongoing and each course should nudge students closer to becoming independent knowledge-producers, each term paper should not be viewed as the completion of a course but as the beginning of knowledge.

After the completion of each term, students should evaluate what they have written for each of their graduate seminars. This assessment should ask the following questions:

1. Does this paper say something new?
2. Is this paper situated within an existing body of theory and research?
3. Is this paper well written and organized?
4. So what?

This fourth question is perhaps the toughest one to answer, but it is probably the first question any reviewer will ask of a manuscript that lands on his/her desk. This fourth question could probably be restated as “is this relevant and important?” but if the paper takes a critical stance, this question must also ask “how does this paper help improve the lives of marginalized groups of people or improve our world?” Furthermore, if the paper is critical, there should be some sort of possibility for improvement, some agenda for progress.

If a paper holds the promise of solid answers to these questions, and it seems to hold some importance for our understanding of the communication process, it needs to go to the next level. This could mean being submitted as a conference paper as the first step to publication.

The Conference as Workshop

Conferences offer the chance for graduate students to get a feel for the profession, meet other scholars from around the world, present their research and receive feedback, and do some traveling and socializing in other cities. From talking with other graduate students, the conference presentation seems to be where the research process ends. While most graduate programs are united in their encouragement of graduate students to present their research at conferences—with some programs even paying for conference travel—the encouragement to revise conference papers into journal submissions seems to come from graduate students' individual advisors, if at all. Graduate students should see conference presentations as a means to an end—to get their research published. Unless a conference paper is severely battered by a respondent and the paper's argument is poked full of holes, the paper should eventually be submitted for publication. And this motivation should come from within the graduate student, not necessarily at the encouragement of an advisor or a whole department.

Publishing

With a quality manuscript in hand, it is time to send that paper to what one hopes will become its final destination. A journal may be the best spot for the manuscript, but it helps to keep an eye out for editors seeking chapters for their books, and do not snub a chance to re-package the manuscript as a column in a major newspaper or a feature article in a major magazine, if appropriate. So-called top-tier, peer-reviewed journals will earn authors the biggest gains toward tenure in the long run, but publishing is not just a resume-building

game; publishing research is about landing one's ideas into the larger discourse of the discipline. Knowledge can be built in a variety of ways, in a variety of venues, both popular and scholarly.

Let us take the peer-reviewed, scholarly journal as the target in this example. The journal's website (or, if the journal is behind the technological curve, the first or last few pages of the latest print issue) will have instructions for authors to submit their work. These instructions will include where to mail or email the manuscript, how it should be sent (i.e., number of copies, exclude any author identification, type of word processing file), preferred styles (i.e., APA, MLA, Chicago), and possibly other instructions specific to the journal. The journal-specific instructions can at times be very detailed, with style preferences for how to spell certain words, length of manuscript, discouragement of scholarly jargon, and other requests, depending on the journal's target audience and technical specifications. Whatever these instructions are, they should be followed closely. Reviewers will often look for easy ways to separate the wheat from the chaff, especially if the journal receives a lot of manuscripts, so minimizing the bending of the journal's rules will help in the long run. For instance, I sent a manuscript off to a journal that preferred Chicago style, and after three months of waiting for reviewers to return the manuscript, I was notified that it had been rejected. The only substantive negative comment from all of the reviewers was that I had used APA style in my paper. Instructions for authors do matter.

The worst part of the process is waiting. Some journals will post their typical timetable on their websites or the editor may give a typical wait time when he or she responds back with a confirmation of receipt of the manuscript. No journal ever runs ahead of schedule, so if an editor says six to eight weeks, expect the manuscript back in seven or eight weeks. If this time frame passes without a word from the editor, it is not

considered rude to email the editor with a kind request to know the status of the manuscript.

When the reviews come back, the manuscript will either be accepted as-is, placed in the “revise and resubmit” category, or outright rejected. Full acceptance on the first try is not that common, and even if the manuscript is accepted at the beginning, there will almost always be an editing process before publication. A request from an editor to “revise and resubmit” is, essentially, an invitation to send the manuscript back in for review after some substantial revisions are made; in other words, the editor likes the manuscript, but it needs work. When outright rejection occurs, this does not necessarily mean the manuscript is dead. It may need a lot of revision, but it may just need to be sent to another journal. This is a decision the author should make in light of the reviewers’ comments.

Reviewers can be harsh at times, and the ability to remain anonymous to the author means that reviewers may be less tactful in their criticisms. More often than not, if three reviewers pour over a manuscript, one will love it, one will hate it, and one will mildly like or dislike it. Here are some typical categories for criticism and what they mean for the manuscript:

1. The comments are constructive and encouraging. This may mean that the manuscript has potential to get published at some point, or the reviewer is gentle in their criticisms, or both.
2. The comments attack the major theoretical or methodological approaches of the study. This is not good, in general, but if these major foundational problems can be fixed, the manuscript is not necessarily dead.
3. The comments attack mechanical issues. If a manuscript seems to have been rejected on spelling, grammar, citation style, or organizational grounds, the manuscript is in better shape than all the red ink might

indicate. Because some reviewers see it as their job to copy-edit manuscripts and because mechanical errors get under the skin of reviewers quickly, a manuscript can be rejected solely on these grounds, especially if other, better-written manuscripts are competing for the same space. The best preemptive measure for this is to proofread carefully, follow a style manual, and work to simplify sentence constructions.

4. “So what?” comments. Reviewers want to know how a manuscript will further knowledge, how it will change the world, and so on. If a manuscript is rejected because the reviewers do not think the paper really matters, this simply means that the manuscript needs to be made relevant to an audience and to the discipline. Papers that are playful explorations on a communication topic without working to further knowledge or better the world need revision, especially toward the conclusion of the paper.
5. “I would have done it this way” comments. There are unfortunately many reviewers who discount a manuscript simply because the claims made in the manuscript, and the theories and methods used to arrive at those claims, are not the same ones the reviewer would have used if he or she had written the same paper. Reviewers should critique how internally sound an argument is and its relevance to the discipline. When the “I would have done it this way” comments lead to a paper’s rejection, the manuscript may be quite healthy but the misfortune of being read by a reviewer who did not understand his or her job. After weighing the criticisms, sending the manuscript to another journal, or even resubmitting to the same journal, may be the best route.

Two Approaches

There are two general approaches to cultivating research into publication, and I would argue that

each approach has value at different stages in a graduate student's career. I call these two approaches the Shotgun Approach and the Rifle Approach, despite my dislike of guns.

The Shotgun Approach

This approach to cultivating research involves shopping as much of one's research projects to conferences and journals as one can. In other words, every substantial paper that is written for every class gets put into a publishing track. There are both advantages and disadvantages to this mentality. The good part is that nothing that is written will ever be published unless it is sent off to a journal. Thus, this approach is to seek a publication venue for every paper. This can mean sending papers off to less well-known or newer journals. The bad part is that if some of the papers do get published, they will be in journals perhaps no one has heard of, or they will be in journals that are not included in any major article databases. In essence, then, these articles pad resumes but do not have much impact on the discipline or on furthering knowledge. Small-time publications can have an impact on the discipline, but it is only if the journal grows large enough to have its archives picked up by a database, or if the author herself does some self-promotion and gets others to cite her.

I used this shotgun approach in my first few years of graduate school, and I had some success. Mostly, though, I learned a great deal about the publishing process. I learned that it is incredibly slow; I learned where the line between "good" and "bad" manuscripts lies; and I learned how to make the most of reviewers' criticisms and not let them get me down. The Shotgun Approach worked for me over the past few years because I was able to attain some publications at an early stage in my career, albeit publications that are all over the board in their theoretical, methodological, and topical approaches. In churning my class papers into conference papers and then into journal articles, I was criticized by some professors who

hoped I would spend more time honing my very best writings into more substantial publications. Also, now that my interests have drifted into realms very different from what my publication record shows, I have to work a little harder to explain my metamorphosis to people—and I am certain I will look a bit scattered on paper when I apply for jobs. Still, though, I think it is a good thing to have experience publishing before completing a Ph.D., and the shotgun approach is one way to find this early success.

The Rifle Approach

As a graduate student evolves and his or her research interests begin to focus, the Rifle Approach becomes more desirable. With greater exposure to a base of literature and a growing sophistication in writing ability, the latter-years graduate student will hopefully be capable of producing better manuscripts that really have something important to say. It is at this point, then, that a highly selective targeting of journals is necessary, preferably the so-called top-tier journals with the most competitive acceptance rates and greatest readership in the discipline. Cultivating a single manuscript into a robust, important, interesting journal article is the kind of work that is expected of tenure-track junior faculty in order to be retained and earn tenure. Demonstrating this ability to shepherd quality research into print in targeted ways is valuable for a graduate student.

Graduate Student Journals

This journal is a peer-reviewed graduate student journal in the communication discipline. Graduate students edit, review, and publish in its digital pages. Graduate journals should not be discounted. While I know of no graduate journals that are considered in the so-called top tier, my previous experience publishing in this journal was rigorous and, I feel, quite an accomplishment. Since graduate students are immersed in the discipline (sometimes more current on the literature than faculty), more enthusiastic, and

more empathetic to other graduate students, reviewers painstakingly pour over manuscripts and provide constructive, well-informed criticisms for fellow graduate student authors. Furthermore, graduate student journals in many disciplines are beginning to be taken seriously; Rocky Mountain Communication Review was recently picked up by the EBSCO article database, joining the ranks of top-tier journals in its potential to impact the discipline. Graduate student journals, like this one, are valuable venues for showcasing student research and should be considered when deciding on a journal to which to send a manuscript.

Other Tips About the Publishing Process

Graduate students can learn about the process of academic publishing in other ways, too. Graduate journals, like this one, as well as many national and local conferences are eager to employ graduate students as manuscript reviewers. Having the experience of pouring over a handful of manuscripts and judging them on their importance, clarity, theoretical support, and methodological rigor is like pulling back the curtain on the Wizard of Oz. Learning to critique a paper for presentation at a conference or publication in a journal helps to further demystify the publishing process and provides a good approximation of the level of quality in papers that are submitted to academic venues. Simply volunteering one's reviewing services to a conference program planner or an editor of a graduate journal is all it takes to become a reviewer in most cases.

It helps to pay attention to conference themes, themes for special issues of journals, and calls for chapters for anthologies on a special topic. Tailoring research to fit the parameters of these kinds of special thematic projects will give a manuscript an edge over other papers.

Finally, it is important to stay up on the news of the discipline. Many academic associations have mass email lists, listservs, newsletters, and websites where calls for papers and announcements

of specialty symposia are posted and archived. Responding to these calls—even to calls for book reviews—is a good way to get published as a graduate student.

I hope I have provided encouragement for graduate students to see their research through to publication. Based on my experience, it is not a process to be feared. Having faith in one's writings and understanding the publication process is usually the biggest hurdle to publishing while still a graduate student.

