

Seven Steps to Writing Journal Articles

The purpose of writing for a journal is to share successful educational programs, research findings, scholarly opinions, educational resources, and issues of critical importance. However, most days, Extension professionals are teaching, conducting research, improving communities, and developing partnerships rather than honing writing skills.

However, there are a few ways to grow those skills in order to improve your scholarly writing. Successful writing for professional journals is a learned skill that takes practice. This factsheet will share seven general steps to help emerging authors begin grooming their academic writing skills.

Target a Specific Journal

Sometimes people write a paper and then look for a home for it. Authors can save time by deciding on a target journal first, then writing the article to suit that journal. Become familiar with the focus and content of the target journal and its typical readers. Everything in the article (content, focus, structure, and style) should be shaped for the target journal.

It is also helpful to look into the review time of the target journal to ensure the timeline of the journal fits with your schedule and writing goals. Most journals range from three to six months, or more, from submission to publication.

Do Your Research

Learn the journal's policy on submissions. Many journals only accept manuscripts that have not been previously published and are not under consideration by any other journals. The manuscript will have the copyright of the journal that publishes it.

Read several articles from the target journal. Look specifically at the headings in each category. How are they structured? Are there headings that all published

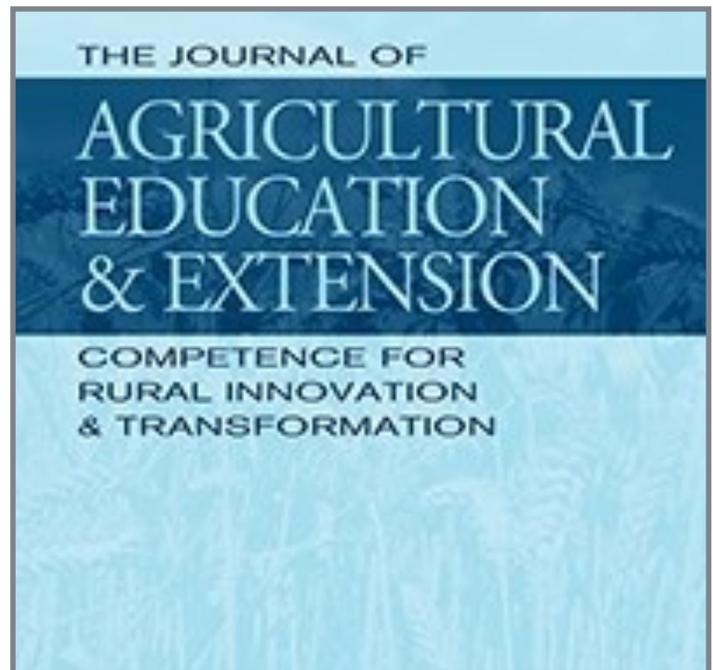


Figure 1. Example of a multidisciplinary, open access, peer reviewed journal.

articles have in common? Structure your article similarly.

Determine if the journal is printed or online-only.

Formatting for online reading is different than for print.

As many journals move to online publishing to reduce costs, be sure to have shorter paragraphs, more subheadings, and graphs that don't require scrolling away from headings.

Look at the first and last sentence of each paragraph or section to see the stage of argument or tone of the article. Do you see any particular common writing styles? The same goes for the title of the article. For example, if all titles are a few words, a colon, and a few more words, your article title should follow the same structure. The journal is looking for pieces that will flow and mesh with other articles and reinforce the journal reputation.

Look into the categories offered (such as *original research, review articles, short reports or letters, case studies, or methodologies*) and understand the differences. Tailor the direction, feeling, structure, and word count specifically to the target category. Ensuring the article fits the style and reputation of that category increases the odds of publication.

After identifying a target journal and category, pick out a few articles from the target category. Select one article to use as a model for structure, headings, etc. and one with references so you follow the formatting.

Journals want to see references from prior journal articles to show the article is building on a current and existing body of knowledge. Be sure to read the journal criteria. Some require that you reference a certain quantity of articles from that journal.

Reference Strategically

When selecting references to cite, be sure to use the original source. Cite articles that will help support your argument and establish content credibility. Do not select a reference that makes readers wonder how it fits with the article topic. Use a mix of well-known references and current references to build the case.

When thinking about what to write, review the journal and see what topics are already covered. The draft article should present a new idea or a different perspective on a topic, making the manuscript unique compared to other related articles. Make sure to include references to other published articles related to your work. By using existing work as a starting point, or “standing on the shoulders of giants,” writers can push the envelope further and share new information or ideas.

Set Specific Writing Goals

Writing goals help motivate you to follow a timeline and not push the task aside. Create writing goals that are smaller, achievable, and step-by-step so the process doesn't seem so daunting. “I'm going to have the article written and submitted by May” is too broad and can seem overwhelming. Whereas, “I'm going to find my resource/format articles by March 1” or “I'm going to have an abstract by April 1,” is a small step to keep your writing progressing. Make goals that feel achievable and specific in order to provide the satisfaction of “checking” something off the list.

Start Writing

Authors should write in a way that works best for them. Some authors prefer to start with an outline, while others write freely. A combination of both methods can be helpful. Having an outline with idea headings and subheadings from referenced articles can help keep free writing on the right track. Using a published article from the journal could help reduce the edits necessary to make your article follow the journal's typical article layout.

Maintain focus when writing. This is where an outline can be helpful. Articles that ramble off topic will likely not be accepted by a peer-reviewed journal. Examine current articles for style, such as inverted pyramid style where the main points are summarized in the opening paragraphs. Spend time on the conclusions of the article. Be sure the information is new and exciting to readers.



Edit, Edit, Edit

Journal reviewers only consider the article content for acceptance and do not address basic grammar edits. A poorly written article or one littered with grammatical errors will not be looked on favorably by reviewers and may not make it to the next stage of review. You want to give the impression that you are careful in your work. Take the time to make your article perfect.

To edit your own work, take a break between writing and editing. Stepping away from your article will increase the likelihood that you will catch parts that lack clarity or need correcting. It is important to correct those areas before submission. A reviewer should never have to figure out the main points of your article.

When you think your article clearly communicates the content and is error-free, ask a friend, colleague, or family member to read and edit it. They will have a new perspective and will be more likely to tell you if the article is understandable and portrays clear thoughts and intentions.

Simpler is better. Write in short concise sentences. If sentences end up being multi-line or littered with commas, semi-colons, or dashes, go back and simplify. Make it easy and pleasurable for readers to understand and learn from your article. Spend just as much time editing as writing.

Once the article is ready to submit, go back over the guidelines for the journal. Make sure to carefully follow the guidelines for submission, such as file type, font size, etc. A final review of the guidelines is especially etc. A final review of the guidelines is especially important just before submission to make sure all the information in the article is up to date.

Analyze Reviewer Feedback

When you receive reviewers' feedback, go through each recommendation and address questions carefully. Hopefully, your article will be accepted but if not, the reviewer suggestions are beneficial to improving writing skills for future submissions.

Be resilient! Many journals can be very competitive. Celebrate success! It is a great accomplishment!

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