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## TURNING YOUR DISSERTATION INTO A PUBLISHABLE JOURNAL ARTICLE

### **Abstract**

The dissertation and a peer reviewed journal article are rather different entities, and although there are similarities, each has their own requirements and audiences. This paper provides guidelines to assist a doctoral candidate to write up and publish journal articles based on their doctoral dissertation. The task of doing so requires thought and structured preparation to ensure that the draft article is in the appropriate format and is ready to be considered for publication in a peer reviewed journal. There are multiple benefits for publishing peer reviewed journal articles. Apart from making a scholarly contribution to the collective body of knowledge, it represents the possibility of making public and celebrating the voice of the research participants and/or service users, and so influencing practice and, potentially, effecting service provision. In addition, within a highly competitive job market, there may be potential employability advantages of having evidence of your work contributing to theory development or to practice in your chosen profession or specialism. A range of recommendations and suggestions are offered here to assist with the transition from an academic thesis to a journal ready, publishable paper. These relate to the preparation required in advance of writing the journal paper (an area which is often ignored), as well as issues relating to selecting an appropriate journal, decisions about which parts of the thesis may constitute the paper, and a variety of other issues associated with the writing up and the publication processes.

### **The importance of publishing**

To have been awarded a Doctorate or PhD degree, the author usually must have undertaken an original piece of empirical research. The work has already been 'quality stamped' as it will have been assessed by several academics and deemed to have been good enough to lead to the award of a Doctorate or PhD. This in itself does not guarantee it will be accepted as a peer-reviewed journal paper in the shape or format that it is; primarily because the thesis, its structure and content, are shaped by requirements which differ to those required by a journal. Put simply, the thesis is a means of assessing the candidate's research competencies and typically requires a comprehensive display of research methods knowledge including the ability to design, investigate, and present well supported empirical claims about a proposed phenomenon with a particular attention to the author as an apprentice or professional in training.

If this work is not published in a scholarly journal it will reach a limited audience. As such, it is highly unlikely to influence practice or thinking and it will remain largely unread except possibly by the examiners, research supervisors, other doctoral candidates, peers; or perhaps the occasional academic. In general, theses which remain in academic libraries are unlikely to be accessed by service providers, service users, or commissioners of services or funders. By publishing a journal paper, the writer is reaching out to wider and diverse audiences. These may include, but are not limited to, academics, researchers, service users, commissioners,

managers, colleagues, and other professionals. Undoubtedly undertaking research as part of the requirement for obtaining academic awards is important - its findings could, however, reach more people and so have wider benefits if published as a journal article. Although there are other means of disseminating findings such as conference presentations, this is a different mechanism and this paper will focus on peer-reviewed journal articles

For most graduates, publishing an academic article based on their research thesis should be automatically viewed as the next step. The reality is that this process can seem daunting and may bring up some apprehension – not least since it may seem time consuming and other work or life pressures can intervene. As your research supervisor may have emphasised to you already, through the journey of developing the thesis you have become something of an expert on the topic investigated and so through publishing the findings of your work, others will also become aware of this aspect of your professional profile. The publication of an academic paper also demonstrates a range of additional, transferable skills of the author including good time management, confidence in their ideas and knowledge base, and the ability to write coherently and succinctly to a set structure and audience (Williams, 2005).. Many more papers are submitted for publication than actually get published and therefore getting published is itself a mark of achievement.

### **Initial preparation and timing**

Time and timing are of the essence in several ways. Once a paper is submitted to a journal this is sent, with all identifying information about the author(s) removed, to at least two independent reviewers who are selected based on their professional affiliations and their knowledge and expertise about the topic under review. You can only submit a paper to one journal at a time. Sometimes, a paper will be rejected without review because of a poor fit between the article and the journal or because the journal has already published a lot on a particular topic). The reviewers' comments and the journal editor's decision about the paper tend to arrive within 1-12 months after submission of the article. It may come back with an invitation to resubmit subject to minor or major changes, or it may be rejected. Try not to take negative comments personally, even though it can feel like it. If it is rejected from one journal you can then submit to another journal. Invariably the vast majority of the comments are constructive and, if engaged with, will improve the quality of the paper.

It is recommended that the write up is started fairly soon after the viva examination or the award of the degree; in this way the subject matter is fresh and familiar, and the literature review section relatively up to date. Some doctoral candidates find starting a journal paper between the time of the hand-in of the thesis and their viva to be a good way of preparing for their viva itself as it focuses the mind on key aspects of the thesis, controversies, and its take-home messages. Experience shows that recently qualified graduates who postpone the write-up tend to find it difficult to go back to it after time has passed. They feel they have “lost touch” with its messages and they may need additional time re-familiarising themselves with it. Getting advice and support from your supervisor or senior colleagues who have published articles is therefore best undertaken at an early stage in the process.

### **Reducing your thesis**

Your thesis is likely to have been between fifteen thousand and eighty thousand words in length and a typical journal article is up to five thousand words including references; so for publication, the thesis is going to have the word count cut considerably, however, a journal

article still has to stand alone and contain enough background information to enable the reader to understand the entire project. The author can, however, assume that the audience has *some* familiarity with the topic. The rationale of study (why it was necessary and important) has to be embedded and explained persuasively in relation to the literature. It must have an impact so the readers of the journal are sufficiently interested to carry on reading.

There are a number of ways of approaching the task of deciding how the thesis is going to be reduced. You may find that your article is too long or too complex if you just attempt a précis of your dissertation rather develop aspects of it. Return to consult the abstract and the final conclusions written for the thesis. Focus on distilling key findings, on what emerges as most significant to the participants, or what from your study can most usefully be translated to inform practice. Re-view your findings section through the lens of quality, value, and impact. You may focus on one or two themes or one or hypotheses that are salient, clinically significant, theoretically important, statistically significant, or fit well with the agenda of a particular journal; rather than try to capture them all. For example, a thesis may have tested multiple hypotheses or generated multiple themes (and often sub-themes) and each had been adequately supported by the data. However some may accentuate the originality of the project more; for instance, rather than confirming existing ideas they begin to destabilise it and so open up fresh, viable, future work and possibilities for re-thinking the phenomenon. Mixed methods theses might yield both a quantitative and a qualitative paper.

Look to tell one clear story. Other interpretative stories emerging from your thesis can be developed at a later stage, for another journal article. Recent graduates have recounted the psychological leap required when cutting down pages and pages of the thesis. Think of it as “letting go” for now rather than “cutting” as in dismissing your work. Consider these pages not as discarded but as possibly forming the basis of another paper. Placing sections of your thesis which are not going to be used in the draft into an additional file rather than pressing the delete button may feel like a different psychological process.

### **The Title**

The title selected for your paper will determine to some degree who reads it with the relevant search engines responding to key words. Ensure that the title accurately reflects the content of the paper and stimulates interest. Whilst a snappy or amusing title may seem a good idea, it may not benefit your work and may inadvertently restrict the readership. A clear title which mentions key variables and captures the heart of the phenomenon considered is essential. This may be the title of the thesis or it may a new title relating more directly to the thematic message that you have re-worked for the journal article. When the title is a good reflection of the re-worked paper, the rest follows into place; for example it will guide the streamlining of the literature review and methodology sections.

### **Where to publish?**

The author needs to decide which journal they wish to submit to before starting to rework the thesis and in doing so reflect on their aims and target audiences. The intention may be to reach a sub-group of professionals, or working with a particular client group or those working in a specific context. The author also needs to consider the academic impact rating (known as the impact factor or IF) or the “prestige” of the journal and whether the notion of publishing in a high impact factor journal matters to them. Some authors select a high impact journal and others decide to select a journal depending on the readership and the journal’s orientation. Most journals are awarded an annual impact rating based on an evaluation system relating to the

average number of times papers published within a journal are cited (Journal Citation reports). If an academic career is your future aspiration, this is likely to matter more than if you plan to work as an applied professional. If the former, you may wish to also check Citation Indexes such as the Web of Science or Scopus which are best accessed via academic libraries. There are also free Citation Indexes including CiteSeer and Google Scholar, although these tend to be generally less comprehensive. Or perhaps you are more concerned with ensuring that your research findings are known to your professional division or grouping. If so, you may wish to consider which database covers that journal; for example, is it important that users of PsycINFO, Science Direct, or another database can access your paper?

When selecting an appropriate journal to publish in it is necessary to ascertain whether the journal favours a particular epistemological or methodological approach or theoretical model. Some journals produce statistics showing how many articles are sent to them and how many are published. Likewise, if a journal is primarily for practitioners, they may not be interested in pages of statistical analysis, whilst if it is a more theoretical journal its readers may be less interested in pages about the practical implications of your research. These strategies will help towards finding a good fit (including objectives, format, and standards) and will lessen the chance of rejection which can feel disheartening and disempowering – Many journals are happy for a potential article author to email the journal editor with an abstract or a brief description of the proposed research paper and methodology, and request their opinion about the suitability for that journal in advance of submission. You will also know from your dissertation which journals are frequently cited within your particular area of expertise/ thesis topic. Different journals have distinct emphases and style requirements. If you do not adhere to these your article may be rejected purely on that basis. As well as giving the required headings, the journal website will stipulate the number of words allowed in an abstract and overall. With electronic submissions, the words are counted automatically, so that one extra word may prevent you from being able to submit your paper.

### **Hardcopy or open access journals?**

There are open access journals, online journals, and print journals. On the positive side open access (OA) journals allow anyone with appropriate technology to access your paper - these articles are always free to the person accessing them. There can be a cost to making an article open access from the writer's point of view, but not for the reader. With online journals, some may be free (OA), others available via library subscriptions, others you may need to pay to access. Open access may increase the visibility of your work; the audience can include service users, and people without connections to academic libraries. Publication may happen much more quickly and it may be a more environmentally friendly option, as well as being easier to store. Some open access journals have high academic credentials and others less so. Some hold clear commercial objectives and will charge a fee from authors for publication of articles. These are sometimes referred to as fee-based open access; the fee may be paid by an institution or professional organisation and so these may be subsidised or indeed free to publish within. Some will publish anything they are sent – what is termed ‘vanity publishing’ – and may charge the author for the privilege. Whilst this may get your name in print, be mindful whether the journal is widely read, and how it is perceived by the relevant academic or professional communities.

On the negative side of the argument, some of these journals can have poor quality control procedures and may not enhance your reputation. Spoof or computer generated papers have also been accepted by both online and subscription journals in the past (Van Noorden, 2014).

In a similar spirit, a staff writer for the academic journal *Science* has tested the open access system by submitting a paper which they knew to have a number of faults; they found that approximately 60% of the open access journals accepted this paper. The research comparing hardcopy or open access journals is still in its relative infancy (e.g., Eysenback, 2006) and there appear to be rather conflicting results. Bjork *et al.*, (2012), for example, initially found that citation rates appeared to be 30% higher for subscription journals, but when other discipline-specific factors were considered, such as age of the journal, size of the publishing country, the differences were not significant. Mindful that not all potential readers have access to electronic media or journals some publishers offer a combination of open access and printed copy (technically, they may offer the author the opportunity to have their article available as Open Access within a journal that is not generally Open Access (OA) – in which case their OA article may appear in a print version of the title. It depends on whether the publisher permits the author to pay for OA, whether the author wishes to pay for this and whether that journal is also available in print. A hybrid model which combines print and open access has been used where publishers also offer authors the possibility of paying for Open Access (sometimes known as “sponsored Open Access”) This has the potential to discriminate against individuals or organisations who are not in a position to cover these costs. [www.sparceurope.org](http://www.sparceurope.org). It may be helpful to discuss which journal you are going to focus on with your research supervisor, an experienced colleague, or subject specialist librarian. You may also wish to consider copyright issues (who own the data/final paper). It is normal to sign the copyright of the paper over to the publisher.

### **Authorship**

Anyone publishing a paper needs to ensure that they follow their university and BPS or relevant guidelines in relation to second or third authorship of publications arising out of a master or doctoral thesis. The BPS statement on policy and authorship credit (2011) can be located at ([www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk)). Your university or programme guidelines can usually be located via your university’s website. It is quite common for a research supervisor to have second or third authorship of a paper arising out of a doctoral thesis although this would depend on their input to the research process. On occasions they may not wish to be named as an author for a variety of reasons and academic convention would mean that this should be respected. You may bring in a colleague or external advisor to assist you with the preparation of the journal paper and may wish to add their name to the journal paper.

### **Initial work**

It is suggested that you re-read in full your dissertation before starting the article. We would encourage you to use supportive peers and your research supervisor for constructive feedback and criticism. It can be difficult to see faults in your own dissertation as you have been so immersed in it. You may find it helpful to take some notes about any gaps which appear in your own dissertation. Is anything unclear or does not appear to follow logically, is the grammar correct, clear and easy to follow? You will need to carry out a literature search to familiarise yourself with the latest findings. The BPS currently provides access to Athens and electronic databases as part of your membership fee. In addition, many universities offer library access through their alumni branches and most have a repository of articles in pre-publication form which are accessible to everyone. Make sure that you have an accurate and complete record of the sources you review; you may believe you will remember where you saw an article, in our experience this is frequently not the case. This may save you a lot of time later when

you draw up a list of references. Programmes such as EndNote or Cite it Right can be very helpful for this task.

### **The Process of Writing**

Getting started is often what people find the most difficult. A blank page may appear too daunting as a start for the paper. Your methodology section is unlikely to require substantial revision so this may be a good place to start. You may then wish to draw up an outline plan of your article including headings and sub-headings and then select the section you are going to begin developing. Remember, the outline plan should follow the required format for articles in the journal that you have selected.

### **First draft**

As mentioned earlier, be prepared to have to exclude or shorten sections already written for your thesis. Before beginning work on the first draft you would have selected the likely journal for submission. Your initial outline of the paper will probably have to be modified after you begin the writing. The first draft aims to bring together the article into a coherent whole – its subtitles (even if too many at this stage) offer scaffolding and a possible delineation of the narrative you intend to convey. For a piece of empirical research, the following sections are the usual format for writing:

- i. Abstract. This, as you would know from your thesis, represents the executive summary of what was done, why and how, and to what ends. When re-working your abstract, it may be useful to have at hand a couple of abstracts from the selected journal as a guide to writing your own. There is a tendency to try to include far too much information in the abstract. Most journals have a word limit for the abstract; it is worth checking this at this stage.
- ii. Keywords. Usually you are asked to offer between 5-10 words that capture the essence of the paper (e.g., topic; conceptual approach; methodology; applications). Select these carefully as search engines may use these to identify (or not) your article.
- iii. Introduction/literature review. A funnel approach to this section can be a useful heuristic: What do we know about the phenomenon under discussion? What don't we know? Why is it important to know this? What is your paper proposing to do towards this end? (e.g. bridging a gap in the literature; clarifying a previous idea; illustrating an approach, testing a hypothesis and illustrating its contribution to theory or practice development). You have already reviewed the literature and should be familiar with the general narrative you wish to convey. Towards the end of 'funnel' section you set up the argument of the paper. That is, you consolidate and focus the rationale for the study. Guide the reader on what to expect from your paper. Remember to check to see if any relevant new research has been published since the submission of your thesis and include this appropriately.
- iv. Method and methodologies. This section is an account of the approach, methods and procedures that generated the findings and the claims you can later make about these. It tends to include a general description of the participants, measurements/instruments used, treatment conditions if applicable etc. The section should be sufficiently detailed to allow replication and/or transferability of knowledge by others. Try and keep it short, simple and logically ordered; avoid being repetitive.

- v. **Results/Findings.** Here you offer a set of answers to the research questions or hypotheses proposed. You outline what your method produced in the way of data and the results of its analysis. It does not include evaluation of the results in the light of more general questions and methodological issues; this is reserved for the discussion. Be tentative in your explanations and mindful of the limitations of your study. Do not make grandiose or over-generalised claims based on your results. The section may begin with some caveats relating to an interpretation of your findings (e.g. size and representativeness of your sample; sophistication of methodological design and of data analysis). Remember to always pay particular attention to journal style regarding tables, figures, abbreviations, etc. The basics of a good results section should be clear and concise and contain only the appropriate information.
- vi. **Discussion.** Here you drop the results/findings/claims back into the relevant literature and engage with the conceptual ripples that this generates. You return to the aims and rationale of the study. This section does not reiterate the results but discusses your proposed interpretation about them. Discussions need to relate to issues mentioned in the introduction /literature review. Design flaws and alternative interpretations should also be mentioned. Cautiously discuss the implications of your findings. Avoid the temptation to develop claims which might be viewed as overly optimistic. Your discussion will also need to include what might be done next and any future research ideas. In short, the introduction section sets the stage and the final section draws things together. The middle section might be a series of points/ arguments but this depends on the nature of the material. When in doubt, discuss it with your supervisor / co-author, and look for appropriate models in journals.

### **Revision of the first draft**

Expect revisions of the first draft, most papers require this before they are ready for submission. Seek and welcome critical comments; engage with their content and the possibilities they open up, even if you later decide to reject further modifications. Comments are likely to reflect the fact that there may be insufficient emphasis on certain points or that parts of your article need to be expressed more clearly. As always, ensure that your article fits the style of the journal you are writing for.

### **The final version**

All journals now require electronic submission, this is done via the journal's website and the main author needs to follow the requirements precisely. The words will be counted as you submit the paper and will include references, any extracts or numerical data, diagrams and anything which forms part of the paper including titles and any sub-titles. All journals will expect you to have taken your research proposal through the relevant ethics committee and may require evidence of this.

Manuscripts usually have to conform to the following requirements in this order:

- i. Title page, including authors, their professional affiliation and email address/es.
- ii. Abstract (normally 150-200 words).
- iii. Keywords, (usually 5-10). These key words may be used by people searching for articles, so it is important to consider which most accurately describe your research.

- iv. The main body
- v. Brief acknowledgements if appropriate (to source or research grants, technical and other assistance, not to partners, friends, etc).
- vi. References (always follow the required style and do not abbreviate even if printed articles contain abbreviations).
- vii. Tables or diagrams, most journals require each table to be numbered and given a clear title marked and to be submitted separately.
- viii. In some cases you will be asked to also provide a “running head title” which is normally a short version of the main title.

Most journals will ask you to state any conflict of interests. A conflict of interest means, for example, whether you have received any monies, assistance, or support from an individual, agency, organisation, or group who might have an interest in a particular result, or similar potential conflicts of interest. This is not generally applicable at doctoral level, but the questions must be considered and answered.

Once the paper has been submitted, you can expect to hear from the journal editor with some feedback and a decision on whether the journal will publish the paper or not. You will usually receive an email from the editor of the journal with a decision and with the written comments of at least two anonymous referees who have evaluated the paper. The reviewers will usually send detailed comments about any changes required as well as some general feedback about the paper. The answer you receive is not unlike the possible outcomes from a doctoral viva. You may find the paper is accepted in its current form (this is unusual but does happen), minor amendments may be required, or the journal editor may ask for substantial changes and for it to be submitted as a new article. It may also be rejected. If so, you will receive details of why this was the decision reached; the suggested changes can often be used as the basis to improve the paper. If the paper is accepted for publication you will receive the galley proofs from the production editor in due course, which mark any additional information required, missing information (for example missing references) or with some journals this may include suggested changes to terminology or to clarify the meaning of particular sentences. If the paper is accepted you will have to sign a copyright form and return the proofs with the corrections within the time frame given to you. Depending on the journal the period between acceptance and actual publication varies significantly. Some journals put the accepted papers on their website long before they appear in print. Once the paper is published you may wish to draw it to the attention of relevant colleagues or interested parties.

### **The role of social media in disseminating your research**

Another useful way to disseminate your research findings is the social media – which needs to be treated as an important medium for any researcher seeking to have their work known. Self archiving either in an academic institution repository, usually the university at which you studied, or a general repository such as Research Gate can also enhance the accessibility and profile of your research. Moreover, through this you can generate discussions around your paper and cross reference with similar works. Before uploading a copy of your published or pre-proof paper you need to ensure adherence with the journal’s copyright stance.

Blogs are also particularly good avenues for raising awareness of research, more so if this is linked to a Twitter account. Blogs are low cost to create and many e-platforms such as

Wordpress and Blogger offer a free service for doing so; and involve little if any maintenance. Blogs can help build up knowledge of your research which can, in turn, increase citations and encourage wider debate about key issues raised by your paper. Research reported by the World Bank (2015), for example, shows that with regard to papers (about economics in this case) blogging about a paper can substantially increase abstract views and downloads. As funding bodies are increasingly concerned with seeing evidence of public engagement, by communicating your work via blogs (hence presenting interesting findings in nontechnical, accessible language) you can help demonstrate your interest and skills in delivering relevant research to the general public.

Other social media platforms such as Twitter are also valuable as they enable interactions with others interested in the topic. Connecting a blog to a Twitter account is a relatively straightforward process. Tweets are limited to 140 characters in length, which confines what can be said, but they are nonetheless a fast and effective way of communicating with a very large audience and can be easily redistributed as others, in turn re-share it within their own networks. It takes time to build up an audience on any social media platform, so time would need to be invested in building links and engaging with other users. It can be useful to identify networks and researchers who have been successful at integrating social media into their strategies for learning about and sharing research findings.

## Web Resources

APA style guide {[www.apastyle.org](http://www.apastyle.org)}

BPS Web address {[www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk)}

Cite this for me – an automatic bibliography generator {[www.citethiforme.co](http://www.citethiforme.co)}

Harvard referencing generator –a free tool that formats reference using the Harvard referencing format {[www.harvardgenerator.com](http://www.harvardgenerator.com)}

Hybrid – journals <http://sparceurope.org/hybrid-journals>.

JCR Impact Factor. Journal Citation Reports {<http://thomsonreuters.com/journal-citation-reports/>}

List of Psychology Journals {[www.psycline.org/](http://www.psycline.org/)} lists approximately 2000 psychology and social science journal sites. Individual publishing companies also have their own sites which list the journals they publish and searching [Ebscohost.com/academic/psychology-behavioural-sciences-collection](http://Ebscohost.com/academic/psychology-behavioural-sciences-collection) may also be helpful

<https://blogs.worldbank.org/impactevaluations/files/impactevaluations/dispatchsection2.pdf> accessed February 2015

Research Gate [www.researchgate.net](http://www.researchgate.net)

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