

## AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean

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### **Pressure to publish everywhere means rejection is now more frequent.**

Researchers in almost every country are under pressure to publish, and their work is evaluated more positively if it is in a journal with a high impact factor (IF). As a result, journals now receive more manuscripts than they can peer review carefully. So many journals now reject most manuscripts without reading them or sending them to peer reviewers.

The decision to reject a manuscript without peer review is often based on a rapid reading of the title and abstract, and a quick look at the length of the text and number of tables, figures and references. Some editors reject a manuscript if it does not accurately follow the rules in the Instructions for Authors or Guidelines for Manuscript Preparation. Problems with the scientific subject area, clarity of the writing or use of English can also lead to rejection of a manuscript without peer review.

To succeed in publication, it is important to choose the right journal for your manuscript. If you submit your manuscript to a journal that is interested in your research, the chances of acceptance are higher. But if you choose the journal only on the basis of its high IF, the chances are greater that the journal will reject your manuscript, often without reviewing it.

There is so much competition to publish in high-IF journals that editors can ignore most manuscripts and choose only the ones that report very high-quality research. Editors also prefer manuscripts that will not need much editorial work (revision, copyediting or editing the English) before they are ready to be published. As a result, any minor error (for example, abstract not correctly structured, abstract or main text over the word limit, errors in reference formats, too many tables and figures, spelling, punctuation or grammatical errors) can lead to rejection, even if the quality of the research is excellent.

Many staff editors and almost all peer reviewers work for free or for very low pay, (except at very big journals that operate as a for-profit business), so they try to complete their editorial work with a minimum of effort. It is much easier to reject a manuscript because of a small error than to read the whole manuscript carefully.

### **Impact factor and scientific quality**

The IF is an indirect indicator of a journal's quality but not a guarantee that everything published in the journal is of excellent quality. Most articles published in high-IF journals are not cited frequently. The specific criteria used to calculate the IF have not been clearly specified by Thompson-Reuters, and may be different for different journals. These issues undermine the validity of the IF as an indicator of editorial or scientific quality.

High-IF journals are under great pressure to handle huge numbers of manuscripts. Even the most famous journals with high IFs, such as *Science*, *Nature*, *Cell*, *NEJM* and *The Lancet*, have made mistakes and published articles that were later retracted because they contained unreliable data and conclusions based on incorrect methods or analyses. This has happened

because the quality of peer review is decreasing, and the frequency of unethical behavior by researchers is increasing. There are too many manuscripts and too many journals, but not enough good peer reviewers able to discover important errors or symptoms of unacceptable research practices. So even prestige and a high IF do not guarantee that the research is excellent.

### **Who are the readers who need to know your findings?**

Identifying the journals most likely to welcome your manuscript takes time, but the time spent comparing potential journals is less than the time wasted submitting the manuscript to journals that will reject it. The chances of acceptance are best if you match the research question, main findings and conclusions of your manuscript to the priorities of the journal. The reviewers will read your manuscript with interest and respect if it contains information that is useful for the readers, and if it satisfies the reviewers', editor's and readers' expectations for scientific quality, clear writing and correct English.

It is important to write or adapt your manuscript specifically for the chosen journal. This means you must choose the content and emphasis carefully, and follow the rules in the Instructions to Authors or Guidelines for Manuscript Preparation. Details about format and style may seem minor but they are important to create a good first impression.

The chances of acceptance are best if your article is interesting and important specifically for readers of the chosen journal. Which specialists need to know your results and conclusions so that they can improve the quality of patient care or make progress with research? Do they read and cite the journal you have chosen?

If your article is likely to be read and cited by the readers (remember that citations increase the IF), the editor is more likely to accept it. This means that in your covering letter or email it is important to explain, in one or two sentences, exactly why your manuscript is appropriate for the journal.

### **National, regional or international journal?**

Editors are often happy to consider a manuscript that contributes novel, original discoveries to a research topic that the journal has published articles about before. However, if the research simply repeats or confirms earlier results in a different sample or a different geographical setting, editors and readers of international journals will usually not be interested. The editor will usually reject the manuscript and recommend that you submit it to a regional or national journal.

If you want to publish in an international journal, your results and conclusions must be valid for and applicable (generalizable) to populations anywhere in the world. What priority do your findings have in other countries? Are your findings applicable in other settings and important for other populations? If local demographic, clinical or environmental characteristics limit the generalizability of your conclusions to other populations, your manuscript will be more successful (and more useful for readers) in a regional or national journal.

### **A strategy to choose the most appropriate journals**

**1.** Make a list of about 5 journals that you think might accept your manuscript.

**1.1.** Use the reference list in your manuscript to identify potential journals.

**1.2.** PubMed can help you make a list of possible journals. At PubMed <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/journals?itool=sidebar> , choose Journals in the “Search” window, and in the “for” window type in one or two key words. Then click on the Go button. For example, if you type “oncology” (without the quotation marks) in the “for” window, the results show you a list of all journals with “oncology” in their title. If you do the search with two terms, the list will be much shorter, or there may be no journals with both words in their title.

**1.3.** You can also use your key words to search PubMed for the last 4 or 5 years. Some of the articles in the list of hits may be published in potentially appropriate journals. Another advantage is that you may find recent articles that should be cited in your manuscript, and you may discover new journals that were not available before.

**2.** When you have a list of 4 or 5 possible journals, check each journal’s website. This takes time but if you discover the most appropriate journal, the result will be faster acceptance and publication. With practice you will be able to analyze different journals’ websites quickly.

**2.1.** Is the content of your manuscript appropriate for the journal?

- Read the Aims and Scope to identify the topics that the journal prefers. In particular, note whether the journal prefers basic (laboratory, in vitro or animal model) research or clinical research in humans.

- Read the Table of Contents of the 3 most recent issues to identify more specifically which topics this journal prefers.

**2.2.** Does the journal have experience with research from your geographical area and expertise in your research topic?

- Check the members of the Editorial Board to see what countries they are from and what their specialties are.

- Check the list of Reviewers to see what countries they are from and what their areas of expertise are. The list of reviewers is sometimes published in the December issue. (Some journals do not publish the list of Reviewers.)

- Check the first page of articles published in the 3 most recent issues. Are there any articles with coauthors or Corresponding Authors from your country?

**2.3.** Does the journal operate professionally and efficiently?

- Is there information on the journal’ website about their editorial processes or editorial statistics? In particular, check the frequency of publication, time to acceptance, time to rejection, and the time between acceptance and publication.

A shorter time from submittal to acceptance or rejection generally indicates greater efficiency and professionalism. In general, the delay between acceptance and publication is shorter at journals that are published more frequently (6 or 12 issues a year) than at journals that published 2, 3 or 4 issues a year.

If there are no statistics or articles (usually Editorials) about the journal’s performance, information can be obtained from the “Date submitted” and “Date accepted” that appear on first page of each article.

**2.4.** Are articles widely disseminated and easily available?

- How many databases is the journal indexed in? Is it indexed in PubMed and Web of Knowledge/Web of Science (Journal Citation Reports, Thompson-Reuters)? Is it indexed in the major regional bibliographic databases?

- Is the journal an open access journal? Articles in open access journals are free to anyone, and this increases their dissemination.
- Are authors allowed to self-archive the article on their own or their department's website and make it freely available on the Internet? This information is in the journal's copyright transfer agreement, publication agreement or conditions of publication.
- Are authors allowed to publish the article in their own language or another widely-used language after it has been published in English?

**3.** Is the journal approved by your academic authorities for professional and promotional purposes?

**4.** Does your reference list contain articles published in the journals you have chosen? Citations to articles published in the same journal within the previous 2 years increase the journal's IF, so editors are happy if your reference list contains recent, relevant articles from the same journal.

**5.** Rank the journals in order of preference.

Submit your manuscript to your first-choice journal. Please do not submit your manuscript simultaneously to 2 or more journals. You must wait for formal rejection from the previous journal before you submit the manuscript to another journal. If you do not receive a decision from the journal in a few months you can email the editor to ask about the manuscript.

**6.** To save time and effort it is a good idea to ask the editor in advance if the journal is willing to peer review your manuscript. Send the editor the title and abstract only, inside a short email with an explanation (50 words or less) of why you think the readers of the specific journal will be interested in your study. The editor will usually respond within a few days.

If the editor responds that the journal is not interested in the manuscript, you have saved a lot of time and effort for yourself (no need to adapt the manuscript to the Instructions to Authors or upload the files on the journal's system), and for the journal (no need to handle or review your manuscript), and can quickly ask another journal. If the editor agrees that your manuscript is potentially interesting, you have already made a good first impression, and this is a valuable advantage.

### **Rejection, revision, resubmittal**

Frequent reasons for rejection are because the manuscript was "outside the scope" of the journal or received "insufficient priority" for publication. In these cases the editor decided that the readers would not be interested in the article, but this decision does not necessarily mean that the research was inadequate or substandard. It only means that the journal you chose was probably not the right one.

If your manuscript is rejected, try another journal. If the reviewers or the editor of the previous journal provided constructive criticism, use it to improve the manuscript before you resubmit it.

Make the necessary changes in the manuscript to adapt it to the new journal's instructions for structure, format, word limit, figure and table limit, reference style, and US or UK spelling. Some editors are offended if they discover details that reflect a competing journal's instructions, and assume that the research is not good enough to be published if it was already rejected by another journal.

Reviewers and editors sometimes make mistakes and reject articles that readers of their journal would have liked and used. If this happens to you, it is usually better to try another journal than to appeal the editor's decision. Sometimes, however, the peer reviewers are not experts in your research topic, and sometimes they have biases not related to the scientific content of your manuscript.

If the rejection was based on peer reviews that contained serious errors, and if you are sure that the journal you chose is the best journal for your manuscript, you can email the editor and ask for a re-review by different reviewers. If you do this you must give the editor specific evidence that the reviewers were incompetent or biased. After a rejection, please do not resubmit the same manuscript to the same journal without receiving permission first from the editor. Some journals do not accept requests for re-review.

### **A good home and an appreciative audience for your research**

As with a home, the best journal is not necessarily the biggest, most expensive, most impressive or most beautiful one. The best place is the place where you will have many friends and neighbors (or readers and colleagues) to share information, to teach and to learn from each other. Compare journals to find the one with the readers who will be most interested in your research and who will use it, cite it and perhaps even become your colleagues or collaborators.

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