The Submission Process

Chris Mull, April 2014

Your paper is complete, and all the authors have given you the approval to submit, but don't head off to the pub to celebrate just yet; there are a few more steps to increase your chances of getting reviewed, accepted, and published.

Formatting

Nothing will get a paper rejected faster than submitting something that is not formatted for the particular journal you have chosen. You don't want it to look like you submitted your paper to another journal first, got rejected and just resubmitted it somewhere else without reformatting! Most journals provide detailed 'instructions for authors' where they specify requirements for article length (sometimes abstract specific), citations, bibliographies, and figure formatting etc. It's your job as the author to make sure that your manuscript meets all these requirements. The editors and referees jobs are all about reviewing your science, not your formatting. If you are in doubt, check recent papers to see how they are formatted. Also be sure to add page and line numbers to your paper to make it easy for referees to note where they have questions or changes need to be made.

Cover Letter

When you log in to start the submission process, the first thing to upload is the Cover Letter (which you completely forgot about amidst all the figure and reference formatting). But don't worry; this probably happens more often than you'd think. The first instinct is to just put something together and get the submission done, but this is the wrong way to think about cover letters. Just like when applying for a job, the manuscript cover letter is basically the ad for your paper, and you should put considerable thought into developing a good one. It is not enough to simply say "Dear X, please find the manuscript attached…", paste the abstract, and "Sincerely, Y". The cover letter is the first thing an editor will read, and will be the first (and maybe only) thing they use to judge whether your paper is within the scope of their journal. You want to frame your paper in the context of the literature that has been published, and emphasize why yours is a valuable contribution.

Even if a journal does not ask for a cover letter, you should always send one. Some journals have specific requirements for language (submitted to that particular journal only, authors agree with the content, disclosure agreements, suggested reviewers, etc.). If there are specific requirements regarding disclosures make sure these are specifically addressed in the letter.

The bulk of the cover letter should be distilling the main findings of your paper into a paragraph so that the editor can quickly assess the scope, framing, and merits of your study. A good exercise can be to develop your 'elevator pitch' or message box about your paper. If you only had a quick conversation with a potential adviser or boss, how would you describe your paper and findings to them succinctly? You aren't simply repeating your abstract rather you want to hit a few main points: (1) briefly explain what you did, (2) why this study is important and/or timely, (3) what it contributes to the existing body of knowledge, and (4) how it fits within the scope of the journal. You can practice this with your adviser and labmates and get their feedback. Be sure to avoid overselling your study (e.g. "…our findings will change the world!"), as false claims can reduce the editorial board's confidence. You know your science and why it is worthy of publication so be sure to communicate that.

It is becoming increasingly common for journals to ask for the specific contributions of each author. Discuss this with everyone to make sure proper credit is given for designing the experiment and conceiving ideas, collection of samples, analysis of samples and/or data, writing the manuscript, and funding. Many journals have specific criteria for each category so be sure to check these.

Have all of the authors read and comment on the letter, if possible, and always be sure to thank the editors for their time and consideration.There are numerous resources and examples of writing good cover letters for journals, here are a few examples:

http://www.springer.com/authors/journal+authors/journal+authors+academy?SGWID=0-1726414-12-837827-0

http://www.biosciencewriters.com/Writing-Cover-Letters-for-Scientific-Manuscripts.aspx

http://www.esajournals.org/doi/full/10.1890/1540-9295-8.3.161

Nominating referees

While not all journals ask for them, it is common practice to list the names and contact details of three to five potential referees and append these to your cover letter. You need to think about who you would like to review your paper, typically experts in your field whose papers you have read or whom you have seen present at a conference. If you are unsure ask your adviser their opinion of referees, and make sure they can contribute a valuable critique of your study. If you are recommending a reviewer who has published in your field, check to see if you have cited them correctly. There are rare cases where you know a person you do not want to review your paper. In this case consult your adviser about contacting the editor to make them aware of any conflicts of interest. Problems have arisen in the past, and it is best to be upfront with the journal about this, but make sure you have a clear case as to why this person should

not be consulted. Keep in mind that the editors may or may not use your suggestions, and may seek additional expertise beyond your recommended referees.

Supplementary Material

Make use of it! With the increase in the number of manuscripts submitted, there has been a trend (at least in some journals) towards shorter manuscripts (e.g., 3500 words is not uncommon in some high-impact journals). Thus, making use of Supplementary Materials (or Appendices) that will be published online only is very common. Do not be afraid of using this option. Some journals may distinguish between "Appendix" and "Supplementary Information" or "Supplementary Materials", and have detailed explanations of what is considered one or the other. If they exist, read those directions carefully.

Things that can go into Appendices:

R or Matlab code (some reviewers will ask for it, but be proactive and add it in the initial submission). Code used to run a simple GLM or GLMM, or used for data manipulation is not necessary to include, but adding complex or novel code such as that for a Bayesian analysis, or if you have developed an individual-based model is essential. Code annotation is critical for clear reproducible results.

Extra Figures or Tables (some journals have a limit on these as well); commonly, this is the place for lengthy model-selection tables, lists of species or data used in the paper, detailed results of comprehensive analyses (for example when running simulations with many variants and scenarios you can report the most interesting findings in text, and leave everything else for Appendices) etc.

Videos and animations. Some journals also provide the options of short video abstracts to accompany papers. If you are interested in doing this, you will need to check their guidelines, and work on getting your message across in a short succinct manner like in your cover letter.

Just keep in mind that the main paper still needs to stand on it's own. The vast majority of readers will never read the supplementary material (and some reviewers might skip it too!). Also reviewers (and eventual readers) may get annoyed if they have to refer to the supplement for too much of the important parts of the study.

Figures

Most journals prefer specific file types (e.g. TIFF, EPS, or PDF) and almost none will accept JPEG. File sizes, compression, and type are specified to make figures crisp and clear for publication, and to make them easy to adjust for typesetting. Check the journals requirements for files. Most journals will have you upload the figure files separately, and at this time they will be

tested for compression and formatting. Making sure everything is correct beforehand can save you hours of work and stress while uploading files. Photoshop is great for adjusting files and saving different file types, though there are plenty of free software packages that are great at this (e.g. Inkscape). Often file configuration can be amended post-review and often changes will be requested, however it is good practice to plan ahead and not rely on the opportunity to reformat later.

Uploading

When everything is prepared you are ready to upload your files. When you are finally ready be sure to set aside some time (at least 2 hours, but can't hurt to plan for more) to complete the process. You will first have to create an account and login to the system. Many journals will require much of the information provided in the cover letter to be entered manually (e.g. author contributions, conflicts of interest, etc.) and this can take some time. Once this is done you will have the opportunity to upload and name your files. It helps if you have everything you will upload (cover letter, manuscript, figures) all in one folder to avoid rummaging around. Cover letters and manuscripts typically upload smoothly, but figure files can take sometime depending on server speed and how well you followed directions when making files. If your figures bounce back on the first try don't freak out, just quickly check the formatting and compression guidelines and resubmit them. Once everything in uploaded the journal will create a PDF of your entire submission for you to approve. Check this carefully, especially figure resolution, to make sure that referees can easily navigate the paper and provide feedback. If everything looks good you are now ready to save and submit!

Useful Submission checklist

http://www.springer.com/authors/journal+authors/journal+authors+academy?SGWID=0-1726414-12-837827-0

Before submitting your manuscript, thoroughly check its quality one more time. Evaluate it critically—could anything be done better?
Be sure that:

- The manuscript follows the Instructions for Authors
- All files are in the correct file format and of the appropriate resolution or size
- The spelling and grammar are correct
- You have contact information for all authors
- You have completed online registration for the submission process for your target journal
- You have written a persuasive cover letter

Handout prepared for the BISC Grad Caucus publishing workshop, 2014.