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**THE “ART” OF WRITING SCIENTIFIC
PAPERS FOR CRIMINOLOGY JOURNALS:
THOUGHTS FROM A BROWN BAG SEMINAR
AT SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY**

Ashley Hewitt & Heather Noga, PhD Students

Simon Fraser University

A question that we, as graduate students, often have is: “how do we publish?” Publishing is important for those of us who wish to go on to a PhD, or for PhD students hoping to one day apply for an entry-level tenure-track position. In addition to supporting career progression, being able to communicate your research to others in a way that is both engaging and respected can be a significant challenge for the junior academic. Recently, a few prolific researchers in the School of Criminology at Simon Fraser University engaged in an open roundtable discussion about their journey through the world of academic publishing and how they found success along the way. We found this discourse to be helpful and inspiring and hope that the wider Western Society of Criminology community may find it to be beneficial as well.

How do articles start?

All three researchers emphasized how important it was to know the literature in your field of study. For example, your contribution should be filling a gap, but you will only know what gaps exist by becoming familiar with what has/ has not been done in your area. Papers may also begin by examining a research question that has been tested before but by putting a different twist on it (e.g., is there another theoretical lens through which we can look at this phenomenon, or an equally plausible explanation that has not been tested?). It is important to ask yourself, “how big is the contribution you are going to make to your field of study?”, or in other words, “so what?”. It is not only the identification and formulation of a proper research question that the researcher is tasked with, but to be able to justify its contribution to the wider literature. Lastly, never underestimate the importance of informal networking. Some of the most thought provoking and original ideas can come from that discussion you had at the pub.

How do you translate your data into your idea?

Once an idea has taken shape, the next question might be, “how am I able to use the data I already have to answer this research question?” These researchers noted that it is always good practice to go back to theory. Look at the main concepts underlying your theoretical framework, pay attention to the language used, and see what variables you have that may

measure these concepts. This can be somewhat of a subjective task; however, the general consensus was that if it seems like too much of a stretch, it may be best to put your idea on hold until you have access to the appropriate measures. Although, in some cases, it may lead to an interesting editorial or theoretical paper if the idea in and of itself provides an alternative world view. Writing a journal article was also equated to writing a story with a beginning, middle, and end, and most importantly, a twist! The twist can emerge from the “so what” aspect but may also provide areas for future research or alternative explanations for the phenomena you observed.

Ready for submission! What should you know about the review process?

First and foremost, hope for the best, but prepare for the worst. Rejection is commonplace and it is important not to take it personally. Publishing is a process and one should expect to receive either a ‘revise and resubmit’ or ‘rejection’ decision. First, if it is a ‘revise and resubmit’, many of the researchers discussed how it is good practice to address all of the comments made by the reviewers; even if you may not agree with them. If they do not substantially change the story you are trying to tell, it is a good idea to simply make the changes. Second, if your paper went out for review but the Editor’s decision was to reject your paper for publication, it may also still be a good idea to address the comments made by the reviewers prior to re-submitting it elsewhere. Why? Simply because there is a good chance that the same reviewer(s) will be invited to review your paper again, and you want to show that you made an attempt to address some of their concerns before it was re-submitted. It is a small world after all! On that note, one last thing to keep in mind before you resubmit a paper to another journal is whether the comments made by the reviewers would still apply given the type of journal that it is (e.g., specialty versus mainstream criminology journal). Knowing your audience is key. For instance, specialty journals may understand your contribution to the field or be familiar with the theoretical framework of your paper. A mainstream criminology journal may require stronger justification for your study or implications of relevance to a wider academic audience.

How do you choose an appropriate journal for your paper?

All agreed that the *implications* of your work should guide your choice of journal. Even if you are working on something very specific, but the implications are applicable to the whole field of criminology, it may be worth sending it to mainstream journals. Another helpful strategy may be to look at where the work you are citing has been published. Have

they been in mainstream criminology journals or more specialized journals? Lastly, a question was posed to the discussants regarding journal impact factors and if those should play a role in journal choice. The consensus was that you should not pay too much attention to impact factors as the value changes drastically depending on the field (e.g., impact factors of 1 or greater are considered good in the field of criminology, but in other disciplines, such as health, this may not be the case). What IS important, however, is the H-Index and whether the journal is a part of the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI). This means that readers are more likely to find, read, and hopefully then cite, your work.

“DOs” and “DON’Ts” for grad students

- DO write with confidence! Even though you may have just started your graduate studies a short time ago, by the time you have reviewed the literature and written a paper that is worthy of publication, you are considered to be an expert in your very specific area of research.
- DO think of your paper as a story to tell or a puzzle that needs to be solved. What makes for a good story? Some twists, some turns. For instance, posing a counter argument to explain the phenomenon in question or providing alternative explanations.
- DO work with a co-author who has your opposite working tendencies. For instance, if you work very fast it may be a good idea to write with someone who may take a bit more time to pay more attention to detail. Alternatively, if you have the tendency to sit on a paper for months, it may be a good idea to work with someone more impulsive to ensure that the paper gets out the door.
- DON’T get stuck in *analysis paralysis*! Sometimes we have a tendency to re-run analyses, whether it be quantitative or qualitative, to see if we can find something new, but at times it is best to simply be happy with what you have and start writing!
- DON’T get too bogged down in reading either. It may be tempting to say to yourself, “I need to keep reading to find out everything that has already been done in this area!” However, if you have read the most influential pieces and the most recent work in the area, this should be plenty to get you started. Start writing!

I hope that at least some of these thoughts have been as helpful to you as they were for us. Thank you.