
Descriptions of Problems in Articles Sent to Academic Journals

AINUN ROZANA MOHD ZAID
Language Centre
University of Malaya

1. INTRODUCTION

An attempt to find out more on what seems to be suitable or acceptable papers or articles for publication in academic journals has found to be very informative and enriching. As academics, we are expected by our institutions to contribute ideas and work on researches. In order to share our new found knowledge and ideas with colleagues, we often do it by communicating through writing. To communicate here means to convey knowledge or information about a given subject (Gere, 1985).

Clarity in writing is vital since vagueness can distort the clear picture that writers want to paint. In this case, ambiguity can affect the intended ideas or knowledge to be understood. Information needed to convey must be accurate to avoid confusion and misunderstanding on the part of the reader. Bearing all this in mind, one always wonders what kind of written paper is considered as an acceptable paper for publication and what is not. Since standards are set by almost all publishers of articles, one is always uncertain as to the kind of standard one has to produce in his writing. Often the standard produced is not regarded acceptable by the publisher. As a result, one often avoids writing by giving excuses such as "I don't think I can write", and "My idea is not good enough". These could be heard coming from sceptical individuals. There are also others who have expressed their dissatisfactions over rejections of papers sent even after many revisions were made.

Words alone do not convey a writer's intentions (Kinsella, 1981). Everything he does with them also speaks. If he knows

how to create a special effect, he is a better writer for knowing the art. In order to gain confidence, however, and to become personally aware of what he can try in his own writing, every writer has to make firsthand discoveries about the effects of writing, no matter how obvious they are.

As pointed out by Irmischer (1969), "writing is more like acting on the stage than it is like working a physics problem. It is performance for an audience that involves the total person - his thoughts, his feelings, and the conscious techniques he uses to influence." A writer's purpose is therefore to inform, express, alert, share, arouse interests, report and many more which only the writer himself is the judge. Further Irmischer added, "that anyone ever writes solely for himself is highly questionable" Hence, we write for an audience and invite our audience to read what we have to say and share. Many tedious hours are spent working on the paper which is finally ready for the journal publishers to consider

On the publisher's desk, lay some files containing articles sent by writers. These writers hope to have their articles published by the journal. As informed by an editor of an academic journal, almost all papers or articles sent need some revisions before publication. Guidelines on the format required are normally stated but often writers ignore to observe them (See Appendix A for reference). As a result, the percentage of papers sent back to the writers is very high. It is usual to get replies such as, "We are sorry, but we are unable to publish your article unless a major editing is done on the paper" and, "The paper seems to be lacking in one aspect which I think may be of somewhat importance. Please resubmit" An editor's comments of an article to a journal received can be read as in this example.

I think this paper is unacceptable for publication in this journal in the present form. The presentation is clumsy and appears to be a rather incoherent extract from the doctoral dissertation submitted by the writer. A number of claims have been made, without any derivations or supporting arguments. The final remark section seems non-contextual. The final remarks made by the writer are irrelevant and a scientific journal like the XXX Journal of YYY is not the forum to vent his views.

Written comments like these can go on a long list. To some of us, rejection serves as a challenge or an encouragement to

improve on our article, but to others, the idea that the paper is not good enough is difficult to accept. The fate of the article will be in a dark empty drawer somewhere and forgotten. The question of what is acceptable and what is not haunts many inexperienced writers. The fear of the article being rejected by the publisher is always in every writer's mind. Time factor and constraints stipulated by the publishers can sometimes limit the writer's freedom in resubmitting their revised paper, if they ever do.

Writers are expected to familiarize themselves with the different guidelines set and drawn by the different academic journals. They are restricted by limitations drawn by editors and disciplines they choose to write. Style and language appropriacy may have an adverse effect on the readers' interests too. These constraints may appear to be obstacles to us at times but helpful at other times. Thus a format of an article for a science journal and a language journal may differ in its presentation and general guidelines set by the respective

Therefore, the main aim of this of the problems identified by some editors. This paper hopes to help alert and inform readers and future writers of the possible mistakes that they can avoid when writing to academic journals. Thus comments on the content of the sample articles or papers analysed are not discussed. Problems described in this paper are limited to samples by assessors or referees of the two journals.

2. THE PROCESS

This project has been motivated by a visit to an editor of an academic journal who spoke on the long and tedious hours spent on editing papers or articles sent to the journal. In order to understand better, I decided to look at the papers sent and comments written on the papers. Besides that, I also focused on the corrections made by the assessors. Articles from two academic journals were used as samples, where one is a language journal and the other is a social sciences journal. A total number of eighteen articles from the language journal was used as samples and ten from the social sciences journal. I was also able to analyse about twenty-five letters with written comments by assessors or referees to writers highlighting the problems and

suggestions to improve the papers. These I found to be most helpful because the comments and suggestions made were from the authorities themselves.

The main focus was on the not so positive comments on the papers rather than the constructive ones. This is intentional as the study is to look at the problems "created" by writers. A look at the editorial process in journal publishing shared by one of the editors can be found in Appendix (B). Problems highlighted by the assessors have been divided into several sub-headings such as language, format, introduction and so forth. Specific examples of comments made by the assessors are not produced because the confidentiality of the papers analysed has to be observed. General descriptions about the writers, assessors and kinds of problems looked at are summarised in the next few paragraphs in this part of the paper

2.1 About the writers or contributors

Writers of these two journals are mostly academics trained in two disciplines English and Geography. These writers are mostly experienced practitioners in their own fields. They represent various institutions around the world and of different nationalities. All the papers were written in English Language, which is widely accepted as an international language. They have sent in their articles to two locally published academic journals to share ideas and report findings on researches done. They all hope to have their

2.2 About The assessors or referees

Assessors or referees are those people who have been assigned by the Chief Editors of the respective journals to read the papers or articles sent to the journals for publication. They are the committee members of the journals and trained in the disciplines related to the papers asked to assess. A paper may be read by two to three assessors or sometimes just one (due to time constraint). Assessors are expected to be objective, honest, clear and unbiased in giving their comments

writers. Suggestions, recommendations, and views made by them are meant for writers to improve and revise their papers.

2.3 Types of comments

The focus is mainly on the comments and corrections made by the assessors which have prompted the papers to be revised. The comments which are of interest are those that would guide and enable the writers to further improve their paper. Some comments may give an overall impression of the writing or specific suggestions on how writers could change or improve the paper. Most comments are made for the purpose of guiding the writers to produce a more acceptable paper. Revisions are usually made based on the recommendations, suggestions, corrections and comments made by the assessors. Most writers would send their revised paper for further consideration. Of course, three-quarter of these papers are later published after several revisions have been made. Since this paper intends to identify the problem areas that the writers should avoid in order to produce a good paper for publication, analysis of the problems identified by the assessors are examined to achieve the purpose.

3. FINDINGS

Most assessors focus their evaluations on the overall content of the paper which serves the whole purpose of the research. Normally, readers will first comment on the title of the paper and try to get an overview of what they will be reading. Some assessors stated that the titles given by some of the writers are too general, vague, inappropriate and therefore do not reflect the discussions made. Others think that the titles do not convey enough information for the reader to know the scope and coverage of the topic discussed in the paper. This is "attacked" first since it is stated very early in the paper and is important since titles can be picked up by a data retrieval system. Most assessors then looked at the language used and format of the paper and other finer points. Comments are generally not categorised in the above order because the main focus is what the writer has to share with the reader, which is content.

3.1 Language

The assessors for the language journal on the whole do not have to correct too many language errors. This is because most of the writers are quite proficient in the English Language. Only minor errors, which are mostly typographical errors, are

made in most of the language papers sent to the language journal. Assessors of the social sciences journal on the other hand, have expressed some difficulties in editing the papers read due to the number of language errors made in the papers. Some said that even after several revisions, errors can still be found and sometimes are glossed over by the writers. Some problems that have been identified by the assessors are misspelled words or the use of American spellings, wrong use of punctuations, colloquialism, awkward sentence structures and word per word translation from first language. The assessors usually correct the errors and rewrite the correct sentences or spellings.

3.2 Format

Most papers received by the editors of the two journals have reminded the writers to follow the format stated in their respective journals. Some commented on the length of the paper submitted which needs to be reduced to a length suitable for journal articles. The general format usually consists of title, introduction, methods and materials, results, discussion, conclusion and references. The format in writing for these two journals is more or less fixed. Other comments pertaining to the format presented are inappropriate headings and sub-headings, and no conclusion. Overall, the format of the paper does not pose a problem if the writer more or less observes the format required.

3.2.1 Introduction

Overall, the introduction of the paper must be brief and concise with relevant information included. It should include some background information leading to the work and reference to previous published works would have to be cited. The aims and reasons for taking on the research should be part of the Introduction. Some assessors have made comments that writers have not introduced clear discussions pertaining to the topics suggested. There are many occasions where writers have failed to support their statements with examples and evidence. Problems mentioned are not discussed thoroughly. Statements of ideas are not supported by substantial discussions. Works produced by others are mentioned in the literature review, but are not credited in the reference. Most of the rejected papers have failed to discuss the problems clearly, and therefore have convinced the assessors to believe that the problems are not worth venturing.

Some other problems which are highlighted by the assessors pertain to the failure to define certain terms and phrases. As a result, assessors are not able to follow the discussions well. Other problems are inconsistency in the use of phraseology, and use of abbreviations, and failure to print foreign terms in italics. A few writers are very fond of using acronyms and assume that the readers are familiar with them. Comments about the problems mentioned above are made to allow the readers to follow the writers' are reminded to always clarify, elaborate, define and explain any would-be unfamiliar terms or concepts to the readers. In their opinion, writers are not to assume that readers are mind-readers and familiar with the terms being used.

Where writers need to indicate amount of expenses incurred, US dollar equivalence is recommended. Measurements are to be in Metric Units which are widely acceptable. The recommended use of US dollar and metric units are said to be representatives of the different international readers.

3.2.2. Headings and Sub-headings

A few assessors are not very happy with the use of too many short sub-headings in the papers. In their opinion, these sub-headings could have been discussed together under fewer sub-headings, to avoid too many brief discussions. On the other hand, there are also writers who have discussed too many different and unrelated points under the same headings. As pointed out by Turabian (1972), it is difficult to generalize about the format of research papers not only because practice varies somewhat from field to field, but also because even within the field, variable factors determine style to some extent. In this case, no generalization can be made.

3.2.3 Stating Facts and Opinion

The main comment made by most of the assessors is the writers' failure to provide sufficient support or evidence in their discussions. Some have analyses that contradict the points made earlier. In other words, the claim made is baseless. The writers have led the assessors to an assumption that the statement made is merely an opinion. Also the lack of support being cited from works of experts in the respective fields weaken the points raised.

Another popular comment is the lack of discussion and explanation on points that are stated or made by the writers.

Prevalence of general remarks and insufficient depth in the writers' discussions are very common in most papers being rejected. More reliable and substantial data or evidence is required to convince the readers of the validity of the writer's claims. Points mentioned are not discussed sufficiently and introduction to new points are too abrupt. New concepts that are introduced need further clarification. Follow-up discussions on the earlier points are needed to give a clearer picture of what is being discussed.

Most subheading tend to be sketchy and do not seem to contribute any meaningful interpretation or analysis of the real situations. Many important points are glossed over and there was no attempt to discuss the findings. The readers or assessors also made comments that the ideas discussed are old ideas. Overall, all assessors are of the opinion that it is essential to provide data and evidence from published sources to support any general statements which appear in the papers.

3.2.4 Samples/Data

One of the main reasons why some papers are rejected or returned by editors is the problem with samples used. Some of the samples are too small and no rationale has been given for sample selections. The reliability of those samples are therefore questionable. In some instances, incomplete demographic information is provided. Since samples are often not large enough, no proper representation and generalization can be made. To a few assessors, the papers do not serve the purpose intended.

3.2.5 Results

In presenting the outcomes of their researches, which normally can be found in scientific researches, writers have used the help of tables, graphs, maps, diagrams and photographs. These examples are called non-linear texts and are used to summarize the results made. The use of visuals help to show some comparisons or distributions of population on maps. Photographs are used in some of the papers to show different types of structure discussed where words alone cannot describe. To give a clear sense or

true picture to a description, visual aids in general are found to be helpful

On the other hand, too many graphs, diagrams or tables can distract the readers' concentration, especially when captions for tables are incomplete. The writers, according to some assessors, have failed to give specific references to the areas that are indicated on the maps. Sometimes the purpose of the maps and tables are not clearly stated. Too often the diagrams and maps need to be redesigned or simplified, and their size reduced. The difficulty in reading the papers is further aggravated when the discussions pertaining to the maps, graphs, or tables are not found. Sometimes the writers confused the assessors with the use of wrong equations and formulae. As a result, the assessors are unable to understand how the result is derived by the writers.

3.2.6 Discussion

A few assessors of the papers made a comment that some papers submitted are found inappropriate for publication in academic journals. Some of the reasons given point to the fact that the writers tend to be too emotional or get very personal with the issue and the papers are directed towards specific individuals. A few commented that some writers are actually expressing their anger towards a particular publisher for leaving out much of what they wanted to say. A few of the papers analysed by assessors are found to be addressing the wrong audience. Some papers appear to be clumsy and provide incoherent extracts. Many assessors made constructive comments that the style used be changed to make the paper more comprehensible.

3.2.7 Conclusion

A few assessors agreed that some writers have written their conclusions that do not match with descriptions stated in earlier paragraphs. Validity on conclusions is questioned by a few assessors. The conclusion sounds "faulty" as the writers have not explained what has led them to come to the conclusion. Some conclusions are found to be irrelevant to the purpose of the researches. The central issues and contributing factors need to be supported by cogent arguments that are based on facts and findings. A few writers use an isolated event or a single event to support their conclusion. What is needed according

to the assessors is to produce arguments with more substantial analysis.

3.2.8 Reference

Most of the assessors commented that writers have failed to provide complete bibliographical details and no reference has been given at all for work cited. A lot of times, opinions of authorities are not quoted and if they are provided, the authors' names are spelt wrongly. Similar occurrence happens to the page numbers where consistency is not always emphasized. This is evident when page numbers are quoted differently in the paper and in the bibliography heading.

Another problem is the failure to list out the sources consulted properly or in an acceptable format. When listing the references, the surname of the author should always precede the first and middle name. A few assessors made suggestions to the writers on the format to be used. Some writers are found listing the bibliographical information in their own "creative" style which is not found to be acceptable to the journal publishers. As pointed out by some of the editors, accuracy is important since the bibliographical information can help readers make further reference. In other words, accurate and complete bibliographical details are needed to credit the works of other authors or writers mentioned in the paper.

4. CONCLUSION

Overall this brief analysis of comments and problems of the two journals have been quite an enriching and informative study. The discussion above is based on a personal observation from information gathered from the two journals. The analysis is limited to the two journals and could further be generalized by using more samples of different disciplines. Some possible constraints which might be anticipated in gathering more data for this study are getting more sample papers, willingness on the part of the editors, confidentiality of the papers and so forth.

Getting enough copies of articles submitted by writers with corrections and comments made on the original manuscript may pose a problem. This is because most of these papers may have been returned to the writers for further revisions. Another

possibility is that the papers may have been thrown away once they are ready for publication. A generalisation of a specific problem needs to have enough evidence.

In the process of collecting the data wanted, researchers should be ready to hear many excuses by editors when asking for sample copies of the papers. Some are not willing to provide sample copies with reasons that they are not "clean copies" and revisions are necessary. Others may use confidentiality as an excuse to not provide sample copies. In this case, we have to respect the editors for protecting the writer's right but at the same time will have less samples to analyse.

Some assessors do not give enough comments and make very general comments which do not provide the researcher much information about the paper. The researcher is then left with some vague comments and bad handwriting that is difficult to decipher. To add to the problem, the researcher must be familiar with the use of abbreviations by the assessors as some may have created their own. Some assessors also make corrections or indications by using certain symbols which only the reader of that discipline may understand.

In some of the papers analysed, I observed that some assessors are not so objective in giving their opinions or comments. These assessors at times are very critical when reacting to the writer's statement or opinion. Some even get very personal in their assessment of the paper. At other times, you may find vast discrepancies between the opinions of the two assessors, where one is more constructive in making comments and the other is not. Two readers of the same paper may have different interest areas and may not be agreeable with the comments given. It is not always easy to get two or three readers who would agree on all the points made.

In conclusion, I would say that despite all the constraints mentioned earlier, the problems highlighted by the readers or assessors of the papers analysed have been much help to the writers in improving their papers. The problems highlighted can also be used as guidelines for future writers who are planning to share their new found knowledge and ideas with their colleagues and interested parties. A summary of proposed Dos and Don'ts by the editors of the two journals in Table 1 (Appendix C) is hoped to further help the writers.

Table 1: Proposed Dos And Don'ts For Writers

Sections	Dos	Dont's
1. Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - check spelling and typing errors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - awkward sentences - wrong punctuations - colloquialism - direct translation from first language
2. Format	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - observe proposed guidelines - appropriate headings and sub-headings - include conclusion section 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - own creativity
3. Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - brief and relevant - background information - aims and reasons - support statements - credit works of others - define terms - italicize foreign terms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - vagueness - abbreviation
4. Headings and Sub-headings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - relevant and related ideas only 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - numerous short sub-headings irrelevant points
5. Stating Facts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - sufficient support and evidence - sufficient depth - support from published sources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - contradicting and illogical analyses - shallow discussion and explanation - general remarks - old ideas
6. Samples/Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - rationale for sample used - complete demographic information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - sample that is too small
7. Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - complete captions - proper specification of areas in reference - clear purpose of maps and tables use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - too many graphs, diagrams and tables - wrong use of equations and formulae
8. Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - correlation in the description - relevant to topic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - isolated events or single event as support
9. Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - know audience - provide coherent extracts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - clumsy - wrong style - too emotional and personal - vent anger to specific individuals
10. Reference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - complete bibliography information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - wrong reference - wrong format

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10. An extract from an editor's comment contributed by Professor Voon of the Geography Department, Universiti Malaya.

APPENDIX A

NOTES TO CONTRIBUTORS

The Malaysian journal of Tropical Geography is an international journal and welcomes original research on the human and physical geography and the environment of tropical and sub-tropical areas.

Typescript

Papers must be unpublished and are not being considered elsewhere, and should be in double-spaced typescript on one side of the paper and in strict conformity with the format of the journal. Two copies should be submitted to the Chief Editor, Department of Geography, University of Malaya, 59100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Manuscripts in computer diskettes prepared in WordStar or Word Perfect are welcome.

Title Page

A separate title should bear the title of the paper, and the name, position, professional affiliation and full address of the author. For ease of citing, the author's family name should be in capitals and personal name in upper and lower cases.

Headings

FIRST LEVEL HEADINGS are flush left on a separate line, in capitals and bold. The first text line is flush left. Second level headings are in italics, flush left on a separate line, the first word and proper nouns are capitalized. Third level headings are similar to second level headings but the text follows on the same line.

Tables

Tables are numbered consecutively in Arabic numerals and typed on separate sheets with concise titles. All measurements must be given in metric units.

Figures

Maps, graphs and other illustrations are referred to as **Figures**,

and numbered consecutively in Arabic numerals. Captions should be typed on separate sheets.

Figures must meet standards of cartographic or graphic design and draughtmanship and prepared in a form suitable for publication or reduction either in single column width (75mm) or double column (150 mm) and to a depth of 200 mm.

Acronyms

The use of acronyms should be restricted to the minimum. An acronym appearing in the text for the first time should be spelt out in full followed by the acronym in brackets.

Footnotes

Insert superscript number in the text and referred to in numerical order for each page. Footnotes are inserted at the bottom of the appropriate page. Explanatory notes are to be used sparingly or incorporated in the text wherever possible.

References

References to published works should be indicated at appropriate places in the text according to the format: (author year). References cited in the text should be listed alphabetically at the end of the paper under the heading **REFERENCES**. Works listed in the **REFERENCES** but are not cited in the text should be deleted.

The list of **REFERENCES** (in double spacing for all lines) should be prepared to conform to the format below:

- Paper HO Robert 1970. Land ownership and economic prospects of Malayan peasants. *Modern Asian Studies* 4 (1):83-93
- Book GOVERNMENT OF MALAYSIA 1986. Fifth Malaysia Plan 1986-1990, Kuala Lumpur. Asian and Pacific Development Centre: 265-285
- Thesis. EYLES R. J. 1968. A Morphometric Analysis of West Malaysia. Unpublished Ph. D thesis, Kuala Lumpur. Department of Geography, University of Malaya.

Problems in Journal Articles

Other publications. Publications such as occasional or conference papers and reports should be accompanied by complete bibliographic details.

Bibliographic details of books should always include the place of publication and the publisher

Abbreviations for titles of periodicals must conform to those sanctioned by the latest edition of the World List of Scientific Periodicals. Acronyms of national or less well-known international agencies appearing in the list of REFERENCES should be spelt out in full followed by the acronyms in brackets.

The Editorial Board is not responsible for the opinions and statements of contributors to The Malaysian Journal of Tropical Geography.

Authors will each receive twenty free reprints. Additional reprints may be ordered in advance

APPENDIX B

