Writing for Publication

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The goal of postgraduate research is to add to human knowledge. A vital, and perhaps final, step in your research should therefore be the publication of what you have learned. The conventions for writing papers vary across disciplines, but we set out a step-by-step process below that you can use, regardless of your subject, to develop your paper.

Why Publish?

By publishing your work you are communicating new knowledge. Writing and packaging the results into a paper requires reflection. Consequently, publishing can clarify your thinking on your research. The feedback you receive from reviewers will help improve your writing. Finally, if your paper is accepted then it will be actively promoted by the publisher.

Path to Publication

I have divided the steps to publication into the following:

1.   Conduct Research

2.   Identify a Venue

3.   Establish your Main Message

3.   Draft an Abstract

4.   Develop an Outline

5.   Writing

6.   Submit your Paper

7.   After Submission

1. Conduct Research

Of course you will have to conduct some research in order to publish a paper, but it helps to start thinking as early as possible about how you will report your results in a paper. A "publon" is a slightly humorous concept which means the smallest possible publishable piece of work. This is a nod to the competitive aspect of academic publication and ratings systems, whereby authors try to maximise their ratio of publications to research. It can however be useful to think about your research in blocks of papers. It takes practice to be able to divide your research cleanly along clear lines, but writing papers will help you learn how to do this and will have a reciprocal effect on how you conduct your research.

2. Identify a Venue

Identify as early as possible a few places where you would like to publish. Ask your supervisor, other postgraduates or post-doctoral researchers for recommendations. Aim high, but think about venues that

are relevant to your work. A journal paper may have a high rating (impact factor) but a conference paper might be read by more people and allow you meet other people in your area. Pick at least two suitable places to publish. Visit the website, look at the guidelines to authors on style and formatting and most importantly read at least one issue of the journal.

3. Establish your Main Message

Before you start writing your paper, you need to first clarify the idea behind your paper. A good way to do this is to write a message sentence - a statement that summarises what the key message of your paper is. This is similar to the contribution of the paper. A useful way to clarify your paper's contribution is to complete sentences like the following:

"The contribution of this paper is....."

4. Draft an Abstract

Once you've a clear idea in your head, you can start work on a draft of your abstract. Some people like to leave the abstract to the end. You'll certainly have to return to your abstract and adjust it throughout the writing process, but writing an abstract at the outset can be a useful way of clarifying what your paper will be about. I find it useful to complete a short paragraph for each of the following: (1) Situation – describes the broad background in which research takes place, (2) Problem – sets out the specific research problem the paper will focus on, (3) Question – what was done to address some aspect of the problem and (4) Result – what was the outcome from the research and practical and theoretical implications (*SPQR*).

Once you've a draft abstract, it is absolutely worth writing an email to the editor of your target publication asking if they would be interested in your proposed paper. Include your main message in the body of the email and include the abstract at the bottom. Receiving a positive reply

can provide added motivation to get going on your paper but it also means that you can focus with more confidence on one venue's guidelines and style.

5. Develop an Outline

Before you get down to writing sentences and paragraphs, it is worth developing a detailed outline. This allows you to tie down the structure and flow of your argumentation. In essence, working on your outline helps separate the planning and communicating stages of writing into two phases. Like your abstract, you can return regularly to modify your outline - re-order sections, add more detail. Think of your outline as a table of contents for a book. Each time you work on it, try to add more detail. Your first outline might only include the main sections of the paper. Eventually, you should have an outline that goes down to a paragraph by paragraph level.

This approach allows you to focus entirely on the logical flow and cohesion of your paper, meaning your do not need to be worry grammar, tone, style and so on until much later. It also ensures that your supervisor gives you feedback on the ideas in your paper and does not get distracted correcting grammatical or spelling mistakes.

6. Writing

Once you've a detailed structure, you can then use this to focus on expressing your points in clear well-written prose. In order to avoid procrastination often associated with writing, pick a very specific section or a paragraph from your outline and focus on writing this. Pull any points you want to make into paragraphs, important building blocks of your paper. Try to get a first draft together as soon as possible. At this stage, do not worry too much about precision but get words onto the page. It is far easier to work with text than a blank page.

Your paper and your writing will inevitably be improved by writing drafts. You should aim to complete at least three before submitting your paper.

7. Submit

Once you have a final draft ready, put the paper down for a few days. Perhaps ask a friend or family member to proofread the paper. Then return and spend time adding the final touches. Your paper, if accepted, will be a permanent record of your work, unchangeable. It is worth carefully proofreading your paper for grammatical, spelling and factual errors. Make sure your referencing is correct and the tone and flow of your paper is clear. Once you're happy, submit the paper and enjoy a well-deserved reward.

8. After Submission

It may take several months before you hear back from the reviewers. If you're asked for a revision, then this is a great sign. It means the reviewers believe your work is of interest and can be improved to a sufficient quality with a little work. If your paper is rejected, then carefully read the feedback from reviewers and establish if it is valid and how you might address it. Try to re-work your paper as soon as possible and submit it to one of the other journals or conferences you identified earlier.

Recommended Tools for Writing

1. I find **pen and paper** work best for developing my outline and writing initial paragraphs. It's worth trying to get away from the office to a coffee shop for an hour or so with just a nice pencil and a notepad.

2. I use **FocusWriter**, a free full screen word processor, for distraction free writing for my early drafts. http://gottcode.org/focuswriter/ (Mac / Pc / Linux)

3. Endnote makes the managing and publishing of your references straightforward. As a TCD student, you can download a free copy here: http://www.tcd.ie/Library/support/endnote/download.php