

The *Other* Pipeline:

Ten Steps to Navigating Papers through Academic Journals

Cecilia Elena Rouse, Princeton University

You've successfully completed your doctorate and landed a plum academic job, and you even have a great paper you've just finished. Does this mean that you can now sit back and relax?

No! In many respects, your work has just begun. In academia, you get some credit for completing a first draft, but the true rewards come from publishing it. Unfortunately, the road to a “good publication” is not for the faint of heart, and most economists dread the process. Indeed, rejection is the name of the game. What separates the wheat from the chaff is how you cope with rejection—that is, what you do *next*.

Although it might not seem so, it is possible to navigate this process and retain one's sanity. I lay out some of my thoughts on the steps to publishing papers in academic (economics) journals. These insights reflect advice I've been given by my mentors, my experience of having papers both rejected and accepted, and from my role as an editor of the *Journal of Labor Economics*.

The Golden Rule and Its Corollary

Before laying out the “official” steps to publication success, I want to emphasize the Golden Rule of Academic Publishing: All papers potentially have a “home.” This means that even if your paper is rejected at the first, second, third, or even fourth journal, the fifth journal might be the one.¹ As of 2001, there were about 300 economics journals in the U.S. publishing more than 2,600 issues, and amounting to more than 350,000 printed pages annually. To find a suitable home for every paper means to just keep trying. Hence, Orley Ashenfelter's corollary to the Golden Rule: “All papers must be in the labor force—either ‘looking for work’ or already employed.” (If you had not already surmised, Ashenfelter is a labor economist.)

This corollary means that all papers should either be accepted (or published) or under consideration at a journal. One of the biggest mistakes

¹ If you do not believe me, see Joshua Gans and George Shepard, “How Are the Mighty Fallen: Rejected Classic Articles by Leading Economists,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 8 no. 1 (Winter 1994), pp. 165-179. This paper is at once hilarious and sobering.



that young academics make is to hold on to their papers, furiously polishing them and endlessly revising them, which only serves to keep them out of the labor force. Although it is certainly important to write a good paper, you must also take the bold step and submit it. Here's how to do that.

Step 1:

Write an excellent paper

The best papers in economics today highlight an important yet underappreciated or neglected area of economics; they revisit a well-known idea with new or better data; they make progress on a hard problem; or they contain some combination of the three. That said, while it is important to reach for blockbuster papers, don't overlook or undervalue those interesting contributions that are less than seminal. Many economists have built influential careers by writing good, solid, papers even though none have been published in the *American Economic Review*, the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, or *Econometrica*.

Step 2:

Get lots of feedback

Feedback from colleagues near and far is critical. Take (and create) many opportunities to present the paper. Let people know that you would be interested in presenting a paper in their seminar series; sign up for conferences and submit papers when possible. Ask colleagues or a mentor to read the paper. They

can help you pinpoint where the analysis, argument, and writing are lacking.² Part of the art and craft of negotiating this process is knowing when a paper is "polished enough." In general, you must write and rewrite a paper many times before the argument is well executed and presented. However, you never really know what the referees are going to like and dislike. Although you may think you are increasing your chances at a journal by making a particular revision, you may not be. That said, there is an important, informal, "30% Rule" to keep in mind: Journal editors typically will reject papers they believe would need to be improved by more than 30% to be acceptable. Thus, if you have a great idea, but the paper is poorly written, it may be rejected for this reason.

Step 3:

Select a journal

So now you have a paper written and you're ready to submit it to a journal. But which journal? This step can be tricky. In general, one starts at the "best" journal where the paper has a shot. If the paper is on an issue that is central to economics or is on a "hot" topic, consider a general interest journal. If the paper is on a topic that really would only be of interest to researchers in a particular field, consider a top field journal. Many people will start

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² Claudia Goldin's excellent essay "On Being Placement Director in a Buyers' Market," in the Spring/Summer 2003 *Newsletter of the Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession*, offers excellent suggestions for writing a good job market paper that apply to any academic paper.

› with a top general interest journal and then try a field journal if, or more likely *when*, the paper is rejected. The key is to start high, *so long as you have the time to go through the process at multiple journals.*

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Here's the complication: many journals have very long lag times from the date of the original submission to the initial response from the editor (not even counting the time it may take for the paper to be finally accepted for publication and in print). If you are untenured and you come up for review in a year, you may not want to wait the six months to a year for the initial response from an editor of a top journal, which will likely be a rejection. It may be wiser to start at a field journal. You should also pay attention to lag times for hot-topic papers that someone else might be covering already. It's not hard, for example, to get scooped in empirical microeconomics, given that data are readily available on many topics. There is a huge premium to being the "first" to write on a topic. In fact, the need to be among the first in an area only amplifies the importance of submitting the paper sooner rather than later. This may mean considering a lower-ranked journal from the outset just to get the paper out there.

Another helpful tool in deciding where to submit is to look at the rankings of journals.³ Also, read a few issues of a journal you have in mind to gain a sense of the potential audience and of the type of papers typically published. It's also worthwhile

³ For example, see Yolanda K. Kodrzycki and Pingkang Yu, "New Approaches to Ranking Economics Journals," *Berkeley Electronic Press: Contributions to Economic Analysis and Policy*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2006), article 24.

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to keep your eye on new journals. In their first years, new journals need to fill their issues, which makes it (slightly) easier to place a paper. The American Economic Association is starting new "field" journals, which may be potentially fruitful outlets. If you are on the tenure track, it is worth asking your chair or a trusted colleague which journals the department considers significant or good, as this can vary substantially.

Step 4: Submit the article

After you select a journal, read the submission guidelines, generally printed on the inside cover of each issue or found online. That said, it is generally not worth the time to format the paper according to the journal's guidelines (citation form, margins, and the like). The editor will send the paper to reviewers who will not know or care about the journal's specific formatting guidelines. It is also generally unnecessary to craft the perfect cover letter to the editor unless there is something unusual about your submission.

Typical submissions are sent to one or more reviewers. Most journals today use single-blind reviews—the



reviewer knows the identity of the author but the author does not know the identity of the reviewer. However, some journals also use “desk rejections,” where the article is rejected outright without review. This speeds up turnaround time for papers that an editor believes would never be acceptable. In that spirit, you should consider it a favor.

Step 5:

Brace for rejection and be patient

The top journals today receive well over 500 manuscripts a year and publish only 40–50 articles. The *American Economic Review* only accepts about 5% of the articles it receives, the *Journal of Political Economy* accepts about 8%, and the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* accepts about 6%. Even the *Journal of Labor Economics* accepts only about 5–10% of the 300 papers it receives each year. Thus, one can hardly expect papers to be accepted at any particular journal. And, if and when you receive a rejection, take comfort in knowing that you are not alone.

Authors should be prepared to wait 3–6 months (if not longer) to receive a first response from the journal.⁴ If the paper is not rejected, the response is typically a “revise and resubmit.” It is unlikely that a paper is accepted in the first round. In fact, the average paper undergoes two rounds of revisions before it is accepted. As a consequence, it can take more than two years for a paper to be accepted once it has been submitted.

⁴ If you do not hear back from the journal in six months, it is acceptable to politely inquire about its status. A gentle inquiry mostly serves to remind the editor about the paper, which may just have fallen through the cracks.

Step 6:

Consult a mentor to interpret the editor's decision

Once you have received the editor's response and the referees' reviews, ask a mentor or colleague—who is currently publishing—to help you interpret the decision. This outside counsel can be critical because a “revise and resubmit” may look like an outright rejection to you. Editors do not want to be in the position of potentially leading an author on, so they tend to sound more negative than they actually are about a paper. As a general rule, if the letter does not explicitly say “reject” or “I cannot invite you to revise and resubmit the paper,” you are free to resubmit.

Step 7:

Either move on (if the paper is rejected) or respond to every reviewer comment (if the paper is invited to be resubmitted)

If the paper is rejected at the first journal, Step 7 is generally to “move on.” The exception is if you strongly believe the paper has not been fairly reviewed. If so, you can politely appeal. Use this option only when you have very good grounds for doing so. A legitimate question at this stage is whether to respond to reviewers' comments before submitting elsewhere. Some would argue no, that reviewers are capricious, and it's better to just get the paper back into the “labor force” (the Golden Rule and its corollary). My general advice is that you should

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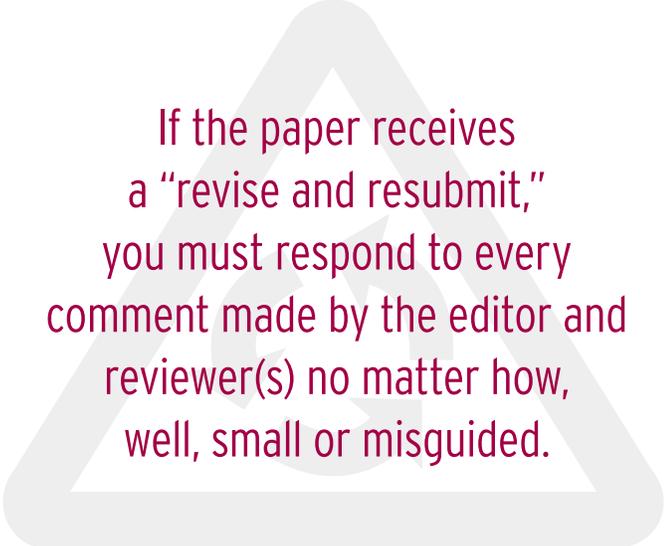
address the comments or concerns that really matter but not the small stuff. It is much more important to submit the paper to another journal quickly than to sit on it for another six months.

If the paper receives a “revise and resubmit,” you must respond to every comment made by the editor and reviewer(s) no matter how, well, small or misguided. This does not mean that you have to *agree* with every comment or suggestion, but if you do not, then you must at least explain why. And be polite! It is also very important to resubmit the paper as quickly as possible. Some journals have implicit (if not explicit) statutes of limitations for revisions, and the likelihood of getting this paper accepted is much higher than the likelihood for the next paper that has yet to be submitted—a bird in the hand... That said, papers are commonly rejected in the second round so it is no guarantee.

Step 8:

Repeat steps 3–7 until you get the paper accepted

In this next step, just keep repeating steps 3–7 until the paper is accepted. How will you know that the paper is accepted? The editor will write something to the effect that, “The paper is much improved and I am now prepared to accept it subject to a few minor edits.” This is an example of a conditional acceptance (note that it is *not* the final acceptance and you would do well to address the remaining issues quickly). Eventually you’ll get, “I am pleased to accept your interesting and important paper...” in which case the paper is accepted.



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Step 9:

Pay close attention to copyedits and page proofs

You might have thought that you were long finished with this particular piece of research and you have moved on, but wait, you still have to go through copyedits and review page proofs! Copyeditors can and do make mistakes so it pays to look the changes over closely. Similarly, mistakes are common on page proofs (or galleys) so read them carefully, too. And, of course, turn these around promptly.

Step 10:

Celebrate!

You can officially pat yourself on the back. You have successfully navigated a paper through the academic journal pipeline. Now, back to work! ■