Mid-Western Educational Researcher

Volume 35 | Issue 1 Article 3

2023

Publishing in a Peer-Reviewed Journal

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In our first installment of a series of short articles, we focus on demystifying the publishing process. We first review terminology that is important for authors to understand yet is not clearly defined in easily accessible ways. Then, we describe the publishing process, beginning with preparing and submitting a manuscript, and ending with either publication or a recommendation to submit to another outlet. We provide a visual flowchart to illustrate the steps and multiple pathways in this process. Finally, we present the advice we collected from eight individuals involved in the publication process at MWER: the two current editors and one past editor, along with several associate editors and members of the MWER editorial board. We summarize descriptions of the indicators of submission quality they identified, which included cohesion (i.e., the fit between the various sections of the paper); a comprehensive, transparent, and well-developed methods section; and appropriate, recent literature in sync with the field, among others. We also categorize and describe their advice for those new to the publication process, such as ways to usefully process reviewer feedback and strategies to maximize journal fit.

A Broad Overview of the Publishing Process, with Advice

In our first issue, we thought that we would begin a series of mentoring corner articles related to the publishing process. This series of short articles is geared toward people who are new to this process – graduate students, newly minted assistant professors, and others in applied fields who would like to publish their research. People new to academia with mentors publishing their research may learn this information through working with them. However, for others, this can be part of the hidden curriculum of higher education, with most of the activity going on behind the scenes. And, for most it can be intimidating, filled with jargon, and high risk of failure or rejection. Therefore, in this first installment of our Mentoring Corner series, we attempt to shed light on the path a manuscript takes to become a published article, including explaining specific terminology related to manuscripts, reviews, and editorial decisions. We end with advice from our editorial team about how to navigate this path to publish in the Mid-Western Educational Researcher (MWER) journal.

Terminology

To start defining the terminology, we did quick Google searches and looked at the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2020), referred to from here on out as the APA Manual) has a chapter (Chapter 1: scholarly writing and publishing principles) that explains the different types of articles and ethical, legal, and professional standards. It also has a chapter

(Chapter 12) on the publication process. We highly encourage people who are new to this process to read both chapters. Highlighting the hidden curriculum aspect of the whole process, we could not easily locate definitions or explanations for most of these terms either in the APA Manual or through a Google search. Therefore, we give a caveat. These definitions are our own, which we have developed over years of dealing with the publishing process as authors, reviewers, and editors. Other researchers and editors of other journals might have slightly different definitions of these terms; hence, the nebulousness of this publishing and reviewing process.

The first major terms to understand are the 'simple' words *paper, manuscript, and article*. In our experience, *paper* is the broadest term and can refer to student work (e.g., class assignment, thesis, dissertation), conference presentation, unpublished manuscript, and published journal article. The word *manuscript* is most typically used to refer to a paper that is unpublished. A similar term is *draft*, which can also be used together: manuscript draft. Additional terms used to denote where in the publishing process the manuscript is located are: *in review*, a manuscript that has been submitted to a journal, and *in press,* a manuscript that has been accepted but not yet published. The word *article* is most frequently used to refer to a published paper. This can be used interchangeably with *journal article,* which is what the APA Manual does. This being said, the word article is also used very casually to refer to any research paper, unpublished or published. Although the APA Manual (2020) does not explicitly define these terms, we support our descriptions of these terms with the quote, "Authors, editors, reviewers, and publishers share responsibility for the ethical and efficient handling of a *manuscript*, beginning when the editor receives the manuscript and extending through the life of the published *article*" (p. 371, emphasis added).

Peer-reviewed and *refereed*. These are typically used interchangeably or in combination. These mean that a submitted manuscript is sent to reviewers who give the editor feedback about the quality of the manuscript. Most reputable journals, such as MWER, use peer review, and most American universities favor publications in peer-reviewed, refereed journals over non-peer-reviewed, non-refereed journals for hiring, tenure, and promotion processes.
Masked review. This is the non-ableist term (see below for the more traditional terms) to denote that the reviewers do not know who the author(s) of the manuscript is. It can also be double masked, with the reviewers being unknown to the authors also.

Blind review. The reviewers do not know who the author(s) is. It can also be a double blind review, with the reviewers being unknown to the authors also. Although many people and journals still use these terms, many use the more accurate and non-discriminatory word masked.
Special Issue. This is an issue devoted to a specific topic, with guest editors who are experts on this topic. Unlike other issues, there is typically a call for proposals with deadlines. A "call" details the topic of the special issue and outlines relevant guidelines for potential authors. If the proposal is accepted, the authors then submit a manuscript that typically goes through the review process similar to a non-special issue manuscript.

Keywords. The most important terms used in the paper. At the manuscript stage, these help the editor assign the manuscript to reviewers with the most appropriate expertise. At the article

stage, these are used as search engine tools so that audience members can find papers relevant to them.

Cover letter. For a first submission, this is a short document that briefly explains that the author has done all the requirements for the journal they are submitting their manuscript. This should be aligned with the individual journal's requirements, typically found in the information to authors section on their website. For a resubmission, this could mention that it is a resubmission and "thank the editors and reviewers for their feedback" (APA, 2020, p. 380).

Response to reviewers (APA, 2020, p. 380). For resubmitted manuscripts, this document details how the author(s) addressed each reviewers' comments. If the author has revised the manuscript, it should also include where the revision can be found (e.g., page, line #). If the author(s) has chosen not to revise the manuscript, they should justify why they haven't.

Journey from Manuscript to Published Article

In this section, we briefly explain the journey a paper goes on from a manuscript to a published article, especially related to MWER journal (as a sidenote, the Schoolhouse Rock song *I'm just a Bill* keeps running through one editor's mind as we write this). We use a common process, so many other journals should have similar steps.

The first part of the journey is the responsibility of the author. While writing the draft, the author should write coherently, use APA style, and do due diligence so that the manuscript fits the journal's scope and content focus, type of articles, and requirements. It is highly recommended that the author has a colleague proof-read the draft (APA, 2020). The author should also write a cover letter that specifically states the manuscript type (e.g., Feature, Commentary) and other specific information requested on the Information for Authors tab on the MWER website. If you are interested in more specifics on this aspect of the journey, please read future issues for more detailed information. Once the draft is ready, the author submits the manuscript and cover letter, pats themselves on the back for finishing the draft, and then waits. Here is a flow chart that illustrates what happens after the author(s) click submit; next, we will walk you through this process:

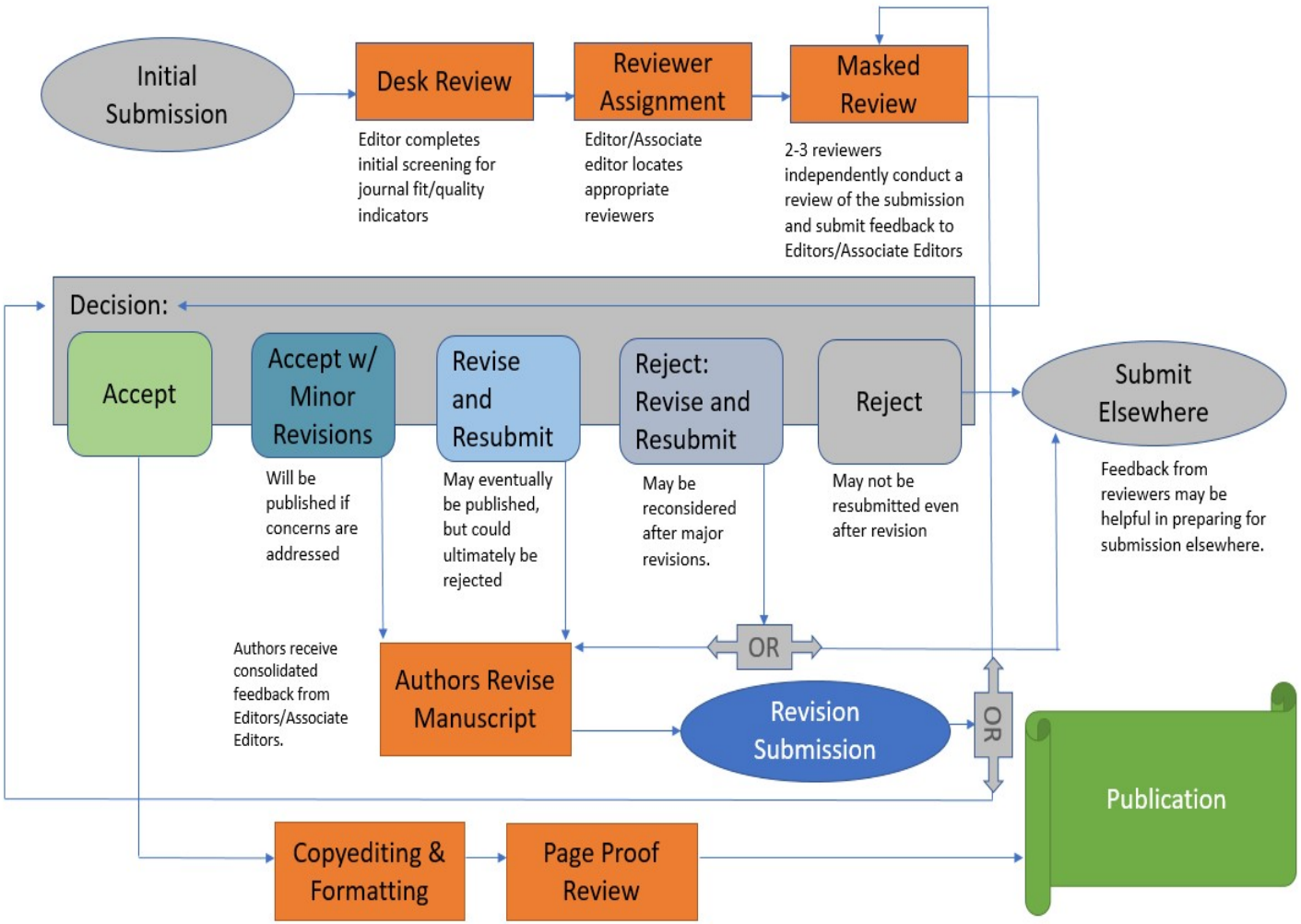

Figure 1
The Peer-Review Process

Note: this flow chart is specific to MWER (e.g., in terms of the decision categories) but is consistent with or similar to that of many other journals across fields

The second part of the journey (See Figure 1) is the responsibility of the journal editor(s). Once they receive the submission, they do a *desk review*, which is an initial screening to check that the manuscript fits within the journal content and has basic quality indicators. Some quality indicators are up to date references, no missing elements (e.g., lack of participant section for empirical research), formatting, and APA style. From this initial screening, there are three different paths a manuscript can take. First, it can be rejected at this point when there is a fatal flaw, such as it does not fit with the scope and content focus of the journal or is a full dissertation. Second, it can be returned to the author with a request for changes before going further. This can happen if the formatting is problematic (quadruple spacing between paragraphs), the author isn't masked, or some quality indicators are missing but can be added. Third, it can be moved forward to its journey to reviewers. This step in the process can last approximately two weeks.

The third part of the journey is the responsibility of the reviewers. At MWER, we use a *double masked review*. Typically, 2 to 3 reviewers independently read and assess the quality of the manuscript and submit feedback to the editors. Please see below for more information about the feedback. Also, if you are interested in more specifics on this aspect of the journey, please read future issues for more detailed information. This step typically takes between 1-2 months.
The fourth part of the journey is back to the editors. Once they receive feedback from the reviewers, they must make a decision about the feasibility of publishing the manuscript. As editors of MWER, we have 5 categories of decisions:

Reject. Like a rejection at the desk review step, the editor, based on the reviewers' comments and their own reading of the manuscript, has decided that there is a fatal flaw in the manuscript. This means that a reworking of the manuscript would be so substantial that it would basically be a completely different paper. In many cases, there are multiple and major flaws in the writing or data analysis, not in the methodology or data collection. In these cases, the authors could take the advice of the editors and reviewers, rework the paper, then submit it to another journal. Regardless of when in this journey the rejection occurs, the authors cannot resubmit the manuscript to the same journal again.

Reject: Revise and Resubmit. Although this is a rejection, the editors, based on the reviewers' comments and their own reading of the manuscript, have decided that the flaws are not fatal, and therefore the authors can resubmit a revised manuscript if they so choose. This designation signifies that the revisions would be a major reworking of many important elements of the paper; however, some important elements are satisfactory. If the author resubmits, the revised manuscript could be sent back to the original reviewers or new reviewers. The resubmission could have any of these decisions, including a rejection.

Revise and Resubmit. Based on the reviewers' comments and their own reading of the manuscript, the editors have decided that this manuscript shows promise. This designation signifies that the revisions would be a reworking of some important elements of the paper; however, the majority of the paper remains the same or similar to the original. If the author resubmits, the revised manuscript is typically sent back to the original reviewers for feedback. The resubmission could have any of these decisions, including a rejection.

Accept, with minor revisions: The editors believe that the quality of the manuscript is good enough to publish in the journal if, and only if, the authors address the concerns that the editors and/or reviewers have denoted. These typically, as the label implies, do not entail a major reworking of the paper; however, this can still take time and rewriting. Editors typically expect authors to resubmit within the time frame mentioned in their decision letter. As editors of MWER, we typically review resubmissions at this stage without sending them back out to reviewers.

Accept. The manuscript is guaranteed to be published in the journal. This is rarely, if ever, done for a first submission. It will be copyedited and formatted for publication by the editors. Then, it is sent back to the author to review the page proofs. The author may be required to make minor grammatical or APA style changes; however, the author cannot make major changes at this time point. The page proofs could go back and forth between the author and editor several times. Once both parties agree to the page proof, the manuscript becomes an official "in press" article. And, congratulations!

To sum up, the journey of a manuscript to article can take various paths, including circular routes. For instance, the majority of manuscripts we have dealt with (as authors, reviewers, and editors) have had a decision of reject; reject: revise and resubmit; or revise and resubmit the first time submitted to a journal. A resubmission of a reject: revise and resubmit or revise and resubmit might move to the Accept with minor revisions, then to accept, and finally to published. Or, it might get another revise and resubmit or occasionally a reject. So, the journey can be a lengthy but hopefully fulfilling one once your research is published and disseminated.

Advice from the Editorial Team

To generate helpful advice for those preparing manuscripts for publication, we first created a list of questions to ask those with decision-making power in the publication process at MWER. The questions focused on what respondents are looking for in a manuscript: what they see as key indicators of quality, what they view as "red flags" when they recommend rejecting a manuscript, and what advice they have for those new to publishing in peer-reviewed journals. We (the current MWER Editors) answered each of these, and invited our previous Editor, Associate Editors, and Editorial Board to submit answers as well. In total, there were eight responses. After using inductive coding to categorize responses, we created a coding table for each question. Below, we first highlight the most salient categories for each question and dig into what they mean, and then we present the coding tables and summarize the rest of the responses.

Key quality indicators—what are some aspects of a manuscript you look for as important indicators of their quality?

#1: COHESION

The most mentioned key indicator of quality was *cohesion,* or alignment of various parts of the manuscript. Consider each of your sections, such as literature review, methods, and results, as puzzle pieces that must all fit together perfectly to produce the "big picture." One respondent wrote: "All parts of the manuscript are clearly aligned (e.g., there is a clear thread from the

introduction and why this is important, through the literature review, research question(s) and methodology to the implications/future directions)." Some responses focused on the alignment of specific parts of the manuscript, such as "Your methods should be appropriate for answering your research questions, and the data/results [should] refer back to the research questions originally stated." Sometimes during writing and revising things become disjointed, like when you change something in one section and forget to address the change in other sections. So, make sure your sections are well aligned before you click "submit."

#2: METHODS COMPREHENSIVENESS AND TRANSPARENCY

Second most mentioned was the *comprehensiveness and transparency of the methods section*. This was closely related to two other categories of responses: *methods citations* (including references to methods texts or articles) and *methodological rigor* (e.g., using "best practices"). If we take all three of these categories and lump them together, this would be the #1 response. But, we do think there's useful nuance here; providing well-developed description and justification of design and methods choices is a critical step in producing a publication-ready manuscript. One respondent put it this way: "All the elements of the methodology are included and follow recommended reporting standards (or provide the explanation/rationale for deviations or irregularities). If you used a less common method or approach, the reader may need a basic orientation; therefore, be intentional about providing context and support for your decision." The take-away here? Don't skimp on the methods detail!

Here are all the categories we created to capture the responses to this question. The numbers on the x-axis indicate how many (of eight total) respondents mentioned each. For example, six mentioned cohesion, and five mentioned comprehensiveness and transparency.

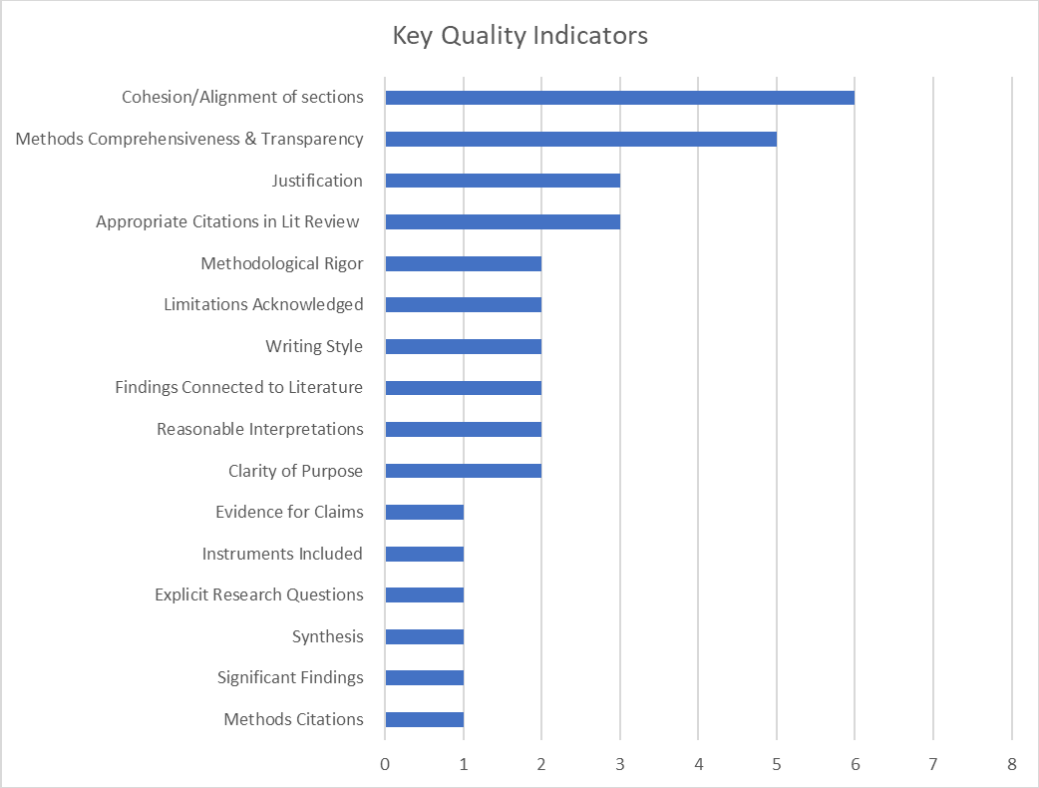

Figure 2
Coded Responses to Key Quality Indicators Question

Red flags—when you recommend rejecting a manuscript, what are some of the most common reasons?

#1: UNDERDEVELOPED METHODS

Consistent with the above second most salient indicator of quality, many respondents mentioned the lack of a sufficient methods section as a major red flag. They wrote things like "Not enough detail to understand what authors did in their study" or "methods are poorly described." We offered space for respondents to differentiate between qualitative and quantitative studies here, as well as empirical papers vs. non-empirical. Those who commented consistently noted that they often find methods sections too vague specifically when articles are qualitative (3 people mentioned this).

#2 LITERATURE MISSES THE MARK

The second most mentioned red flag is the lack of solid grounding in appropriate, recent literature. One respondent described being concerned when "a majority of citations are older, 10+ years in the field with few attempts to update." Another suggested making sure to avoid this mistake by aiming to include a combination of important "original" sources and newer sources. In addition to viewing outdated sources as red flags, respondents also mentioned "off-topic" or out of sync with the discipline/field.

Here are the categories that summarize all responses to this question:

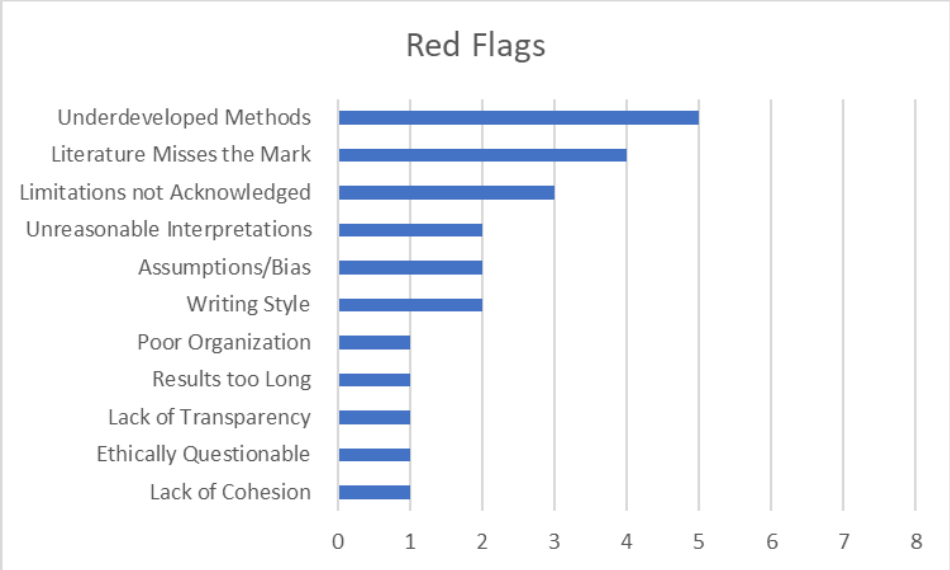

Figure 3
Coded Responses to Red Flags Question

What advice do you have for graduate students or others who are new to publishing in peer-reviewed journals specific to writing up the research? Dealing with the publishing process?

#1: PROCESS REVIEWER FEEDBACK

Receiving criticism can be tough. But, responding to feedback by making revisions is a critical and focal part of the publishing process. Lots of advice focused on usefully processing reviewer feedback so that you can improve the quality of your work, and thus your chances of getting it published. Some also focused on the actual revisions (e.g., responding to every reviewer comment in some way, and including a table to make detail how you responded to individual points of feedback), but we coded these separately (see Figure 4). Comments in the *process reviewer feedback* category specifically acknowledged the emotional and cognitive processing of the feedback; respondents said things like "take reviewers' comments seriously, regardless of decision" and "if the feedback makes you mad, step away for a few days and come back to it." As one respondent wrote, "feedback may be overwhelming and intimidating, but more often than not, a very helpful part in the publication process." So, try to go into the process expecting that you will get critical feedback (often a lot of it!) that you will need to be willing to address meaningfully to progress.

#2: JOURNAL FIT

Tied for first place in response to this question is *journal fit*. Finding the right home for your work is important, and targeting appropriate journals early on will likely improve your experience with the publishing process. In addition to seeking appropriate outlets, learning about what editors and reviewers are looking for will help you to craft your work in that image. One respondent wrote: "It can be helpful to review a few of the articles in the journal first to see what

the styles are. Review the types of articles and see which one is the best fit for what you want to submit." This was echoed by several others; one respondent wrote "Don't just submit your dissertation the same way you submitted it to your faculty committee. You need to read articles in the journal where you want to publish, and craft your research in that image." Remember, "fit" is a two-way street—part *finding* the right journal for your work, and part *crafting* work that is appealing to a journal/audience.

Though we only highlighted the top two response categories for the first two questions, we think several other words of wisdom here deserve some further description and illumination.

#3: EXPECT REJECTION

Framing the steps of the publication process correctly is important. We have seen many graduate students and new scholars feeling devastated and defeated by journal rejections. Several respondents commented that it is important to understand that rejections are part of this process; they do not mean you are incapable of producing work worthy of publication; two respondents said "don't take it personally." A closely related category, *R&R is a win!* recommended aiming for a revise and resubmit decision as the marker of success, as papers are so rarely accepted (even pending minor revisions) outright. And, when a paper is rejected, do not give up on work that you believe in. Instead, process the feedback, make the revisions you find helpful, and move on to a different outlet (see Figure 1).

#4: LEVERAGE MENTORSHIP

Several respondents suggested leveraging mentorship relationships you already have by asking them to help you navigate the publication process. This can include asking for specific types of help before and after you have submitted a manuscript. One respondent suggested asking "someone else to proof-read your manuscript before submitting -- it is hard to see tangents, lack of detail, etc. in your own writing." You might also ask mentors in your field for feedback on journal fit prior to submission. Another recommended asking a mentor if they are "open to you sharing the feedback with them" once you have received a decision from the journal.

Here is the full list of categories summarizing all responses to this question.

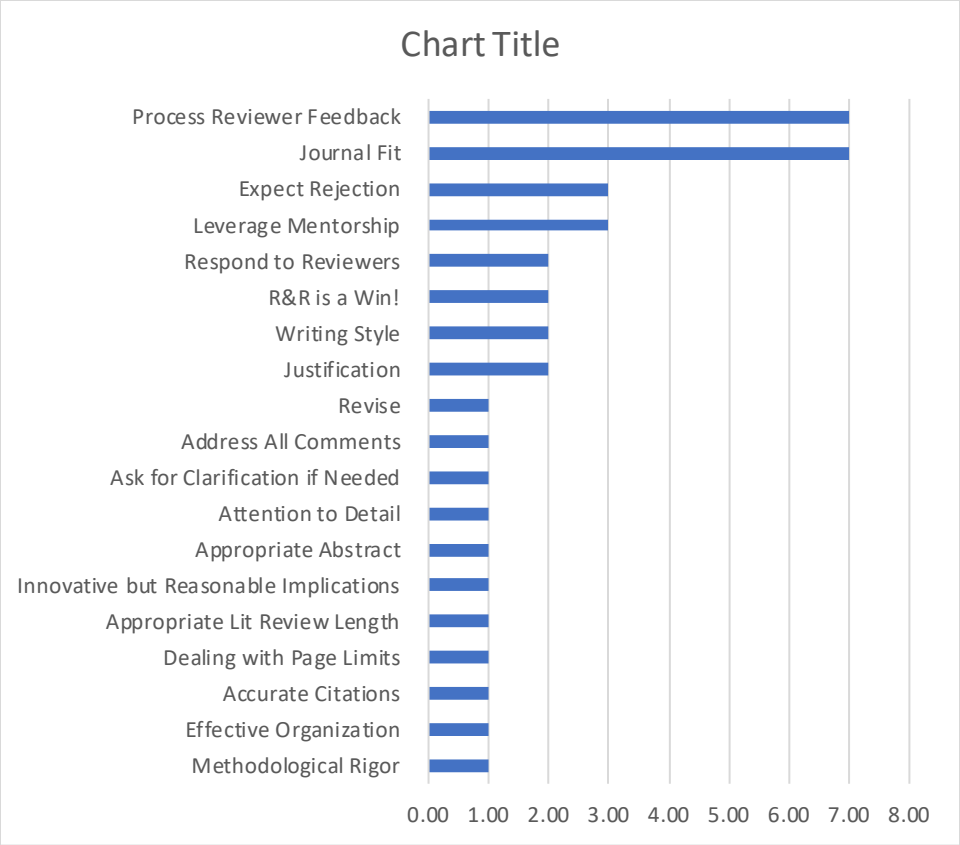

Figure 4
Coded responses to Advice for Newcomers Question

Anything else you would like to add about getting a manuscript published in a peer-reviewed journal?

There were three responses to this question:

- "If you are working on a revise and resubmit and something does not make sense, the feedback is contradictory, or you will not meet the deadline, it is acceptable and recommended to communicate with the editor."
- "The most important thing new authors can do is read articles in the journals where they want to publish. Every journal's articles tend to have a pattern, and new authors don't get to change the pattern because they don't like it. They have to learn to follow it."
- "Expect that this process will take a long time regardless of journal (often more than a year), and it will take multiple rounds of heavy revisions to get there. This expectation will often be met. If you find the process faster/easier, you will be pleasantly surprised!"

Concluding remarks

If this article piqued your interest in the publishing process but left you wanting to ask questions about various aspects of the process, please look forward to more specifics, including examples, on different aspects of this process in future issues. For instance, we plan on doing a deep dive into what to do when you get a Revise & Resubmit or a Reject: Revise & Resubmit decision,

including how to prioritize reviewers' comments, especially when they are conflicting, and how to structure a response to reviewers document.

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