



# General Publication Strategies

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## 1. Diversify your research portfolio

- Average wait for an acceptance decision = 3 years.
- Average wait for a rejection = 6 to 8 months.
- Survival is more important than glory in the early stages of your career.
- Diversifying the research portfolio is particularly important during the first five or six years of your teaching career when each publication counts heavily. Diversify research topics for possible publication.
- If you have a solid hit in one area, then redouble your effort to establish your name as an expert in that field before you move into another field.
- Writing several papers in a very narrow area is risky. It is like putting all your eggs in one basket.
- Continuing to write papers in the same narrow area without clear evidence of success is risky.

## 2. Concentrate on one or two fields

- Normally, you should not select more than two fields of specialization. Research economies of scale often may require your undiluted attention in a single field.
- Choose, at most, two or three focused areas within your field of specialization. Then pursue those topics until you produce a couple of publications.
- If you have published no papers in one area for three years, then consider switching to another topic.

## 3. Generate one or two papers from your thesis

- You invested two or more years writing your thesis.

- Try to generate a couple of papers from the most important chapters of the thesis. This is easier than writing a totally new paper from scratch.
- Work jointly with your advisor to help market your papers.

#### 4. Maintain a stock of papers under review constantly

- If the acceptance rate of the top-ranking journals is 15%, one needs about 7 papers under review at all times to have one paper accepted per year at the targeted journals.
- If your goal is to get 10 papers accepted in the first 5 years of your career, you need about a dozen papers under review at all times.
- Half a dozen papers should be under review at all times for untenured authors. This does *not* mean that you should write 7 new papers each year.

#### 5. Don't put two good ideas in one paper

- Separate them into two papers.
- Do not try to put down everything you know about the subject in one paper. What will you do next?
- As the paper's length increases beyond 15 pages, the chance of acceptance shrinks geometrically.
- When a topic is appropriately split into two papers, the probability of getting at least one of them accepted more than doubles.
- You also will get a paper accepted sooner.
- If  $x$  = original length, and  $p$  = probability of acceptance, then

$$p(x/2) = 2p(x) + \alpha, \text{ where } \alpha > 0 \text{ and } x > 15 \text{ pages.}$$

The **alpha** ( $\alpha$ ) factor:

- Editors like short papers.
- The chance that a referee will detect a mathematical error declines.
- Referees will return the report faster.
- The chance that a referee will misunderstand the paper also decreases.

#### 6. Approach different types of journals

- Sending all papers to top journals is risky.
- Sending all papers to low-quality journals also is unsatisfactory. You will regret it when the papers are accepted!
- Your curriculum vitae should contain some publications in the top journals.
- Quantity of publications also is important.
- Having three papers in different journals is better than three in one journal, if the relative quality of the journals is the same.

### **7. Write clearly**

- The main assumptions and results should be explained clearly. If there are many assumptions, present them together in one place. Do not bury them in long paragraphs.
- Define every symbol when it is first introduced. Otherwise, the referees will be frustrated, and you won't get a favorable report.
- If many symbols are introduced to present your model, it is a good idea to define all symbols together and display them in one place so that the referees would not waste time hunting for them.
- Clearly state the contributions of the paper, relative to the literature, in the concluding remarks.

### **8. Learn word processing skills and master other relevant software programs**

- Be independent of secretaries. They do not work 24 hours a day.
- Word processing skills are particularly helpful when the amount of revision is minimal.
- Researchers without computer skills will be an endangered species in this century.

### **9. Scan current journals**

- Keep up with the current literature (e.g., EconLit).
- Using the potential key words, search to see if others have written papers on the same or similar subjects.
- By not duplicating what others have done, you will save time and effort.
- Subscribe to a couple of journals in your field of interest, rather than general journals.

- General journals are not cost effective as a source of research information. Fewer and fewer articles in general journals are relevant for your research.
- Utilize the libraries for other journals.
- *Social Science Research Network* features news about papers as soon as they are accepted; you can have the latest information about publications in your field.

#### **10. Present papers at conferences before submission**

- Present your papers at regional, national, or international conferences. You may get surprisingly valuable feedback.
- This also is an important way for you to become familiar with others working in the same area.
- Presenting papers within one's department is not effective. Except in top schools, most of the faculty in a typical department with 20 or fewer members are not familiar with the subject, and with due respect to their expertise, they generally are not qualified to make substantive comments on your topic.

#### **11. Do not distribute unpublished papers to strangers (at big conferences)**

- If you do, your desire to become well-known may be temporarily gratified, but the penalty can be harsh later.
- Some people might steal your idea and submit a closely related paper sooner than you do.
- You get no credit.
- Distributing papers is okay in a closed circle of researchers, where everybody knows each other.

#### **12. Only the tough get going**

- One gets rejection letters more often than not. This is inevitable!
- Develop a thick skin and be a good loser. This game is not for the faint-hearted. If you cannot swallow rejection easily, don't submit papers.
- A good paper deserves at least three chances at publication in ranking journals.

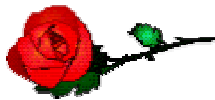
- If you ignore a rejected paper more than one month, you are likely to lose interest. Do something about it.
- Bad luck eventually comes to an end.

### **13. Get to know one hundred people active in your field**

- There are about a hundred people in your field who are likely to be referees of your papers.
- Prepare a list of one hundred active people in your main research areas. Try to meet them within a five-year period.
- Present papers at, or at least attend, two professional meetings a year.
- When presenting papers or attending regional, national, or international meetings, try to get to know these people. How? (Think!) This is your best opportunity for networking.

### **14. Maintain contacts**

- Maintain contacts with other economists via telephone, fax, or e-mail. Do not send copies of your papers to them unless requested to do so.
- What to do when they don't respond? Think!
- You also need these contacts later: they can write letters of recommendation when you seek promotion and tenure.



## Articles and Books

### **15. A journal article is preferable to a book**

- Don't publish a book, at least not before getting tenure.
- Readers find it easy to remember if your papers were published in journals because they are often abbreviated like AER, JPE, RIE, etc. They might even remember the years of publication.
- They won't remember your books, unless the titles are extremely short and sexy.

## **Life of a publication**

- The life of a book is about 1 to 2 years.
- The life of a journal article is about 10 years.
- Publishers will not spend much money to advertise your book because profit margins are small.
- Accordingly, most economists do not know whether you published a book, let alone know the title.
- Bragging to your colleagues about your recent book is like introducing yourself by long names with 10 or more words.
- Authors who have published an article in the same journal feel friendly toward you. It creates a bond among the authors.
- Book authors operate alone.
- Researchers know that books do not go through the refereeing process.

## **Weight of a publication**

- Your department or division may not clearly specify quantified weights to evaluate your research.
- But rest assured that they are there; a given number of papers in certain journals or certain ranks, etc. These standards are developed by consensus, and you can find these standards by checking the records of those who received tenure recently.
- Journal rankings often are used to evaluate the quality of your research.
- All things considered, the following weights could be used:
  - 1 = an article in a good journal
  - 0.5 - 1 = a whole book, maybe 2 if it is very popular.
  - 0.1 = a chapter in a book someone else edited.
- Textbooks do not count.
- Handbooks and some special series might be treated like a journal because of their long shelf life (10 + years).

- Do not give away your precious paper as a chapter of a regular book, unless it appeals to your **altruistic** desire to help others.

### **16. A journal article first**

- First, publish your original idea in an article.
- Then maybe in a book, not vice versa.
- Journals will not knowingly publish an article if the substance was published in a book previously.



## **Collaboration**

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### **17. Cultivate coauthors**

- Find seasoned coauthors with publication experience and share the glory.
- Working with your advisors is a good idea, at least for the first few years after receiving a Ph.D.
- You have to become independent at some point, though.
- Acting alone is a risky strategy, especially for those just out of graduate school.
- With seasoned coauthors, the probability of acceptance will likely more than double.
- Through your coauthors, you may be introduced to an established group of economists.
- You also may learn how to write better papers.

### **Weight of coauthored articles**

- Whatever rankings are used, given the quality, the following weights may be used more or less as a guide to estimate the overall impact of joint articles:
  - 1 = an article (sole author).

- 0.75 = first author in a joint paper.
- 0.7 = second author in a joint paper.
- 0.5 = an author in a paper with three authors.
- $1/n$  = four or more authors. (Don't do this, except in certain fields [e.g., agricultural economics], where it is more acceptable. You will be included in "et al.")

### **18. Make an agreement with coauthors ex ante**

- It is best to divide up the work with coauthors ex ante. This minimizes the chance of free riding when the paper is complete or accepted.
- Be considerate when determining the order of authors.
- To assure a long-term relationship, alternate the order of appearance, especially when the contributions are roughly equal.
- If you insist on alphabetical order just because your name precedes the others, they may not come back to you for further collaboration.
- Another practical idea: flip a coin.

### **19. Maintain collaboration**

- If a personality conflict develops, collaboration does not work.
- It takes time and effort to cultivate relationship with coworkers. If you have found a good working relationship, don't tamper with it to obtain small gains.
- If you do seek small gains, it is difficult to restore a good relationship should you change your mind later.

### **20. Be patient with inactive coauthors**

- Be tolerant of your coauthors.
- Remember that the sum of subjective contributions of coauthors of a paper always exceeds 100%.
- Removing an inactive coauthor from the paper may not give you peace of mind, especially if it is done insensitively.
- Keep pace with your coauthors. If a coauthor does not contribute anything, caution must be exercised. Often the animosity generated is not worth the gain.

- If a joint work is being terminated because of unforeseen developments, make it clear who holds the ownership of the disputed papers. This eliminates untold misery later.
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## Choosing Topics

### **21. Do not waste time on dead or dying topics**

- If your most recent references in a projected paper are ten years old, it will be difficult to publish it. It is a dead issue. Do not start such a paper (until you get tenure)!
- If the most recent references closely related to your paper are 5 years old, it is a dying issue. Editors are reluctant to accept such papers, even if the referees recommend publication.
- It is difficult for the editor to find suitable referees for outdated topics.
- Your inability to find sufficient references indicates
  - You have not read the literature.
  - Others are not interested in the topic, hence, it is unlikely to get published.
  - No problem! Dig further.
- If the work is completed already, cite some papers that are more recent.

### **22. Do not write papers with breakthrough ideas at first**

- Avoid writing about your breakthrough ideas, at least in the early stage of your career, unless your mentor is the editor of a major journal.
- Papers with breakthrough ideas are not often published.
- Wait until you get tenure to tackle breakthrough ideas.
- "I told my own young colleagues that they should preferably start off with the received wisdom with some changes until they get their tenure." - Douglas North, 1993 Nobel Laureate in Economic Science (see Nyaw and Yu, 1995).

- If you do advance breakthrough ideas your papers will be rejected, and they might reappear in a modified, clearly written paper by someone else later.
- After you are established, perhaps you can tackle breakthrough ideas, and become better known, instead of publishing many papers with minor ideas.
- Or as you gain more experience, you may find that the ideas turn out to be trivial.

### **23. Extend existing literature**

- The bulk of papers published today are modifications of the existing literature or tests of existing theories.
- Something in the paper must be original.
- Duplication is not an extension of knowledge.

### **24. Write something creative**

- A journal's primary goal is to publish original ideas.
- A good journal is interested in disseminating new ideas, not in publishing papers that elaborate some existing ideas or examine the implications of a minor change in assumptions.
- These papers only show that some results do not necessarily hold. Such efforts are basically a comment on someone else's paper.

### **25. Mix ingredients of other papers**

How does one extend the literature? Suppose there are two important papers in the literature,

$$p_1 = \{A, B, C, \text{ and } D\}, p_2 = \{C, D, \text{ and } E\}$$

where  $A, B, \dots$  are ingredients.

Let  $p_{new} = \{A, B, E\}$  be a new paper.

- Does the new combination make sense? Does it describe an important economic phenomenon in a certain country or does it capture an interesting situation?

- If  $p_{new} = \{A, C, X\}$  where  $X$  is totally new, and if it makes sense, it may be an original idea.
- Original papers add something new and dare to eliminate some old notions. Do not worry about compatibility with old papers.

## 26. Write on interesting subjects

- There must be an interesting story, a story that nonexperts—who would skip all the equations—would find intriguing.
- Equations should not dominate the paper. People lose interest.
- Controversies and debates stimulate reader interest.
- Before writing, answer the question: what new ideas or results does this paper offer?
- You have to demonstrate that there is some interest in the topic on which you are working.



## Comments or Notes

## 27. Avoid writing comments on other papers

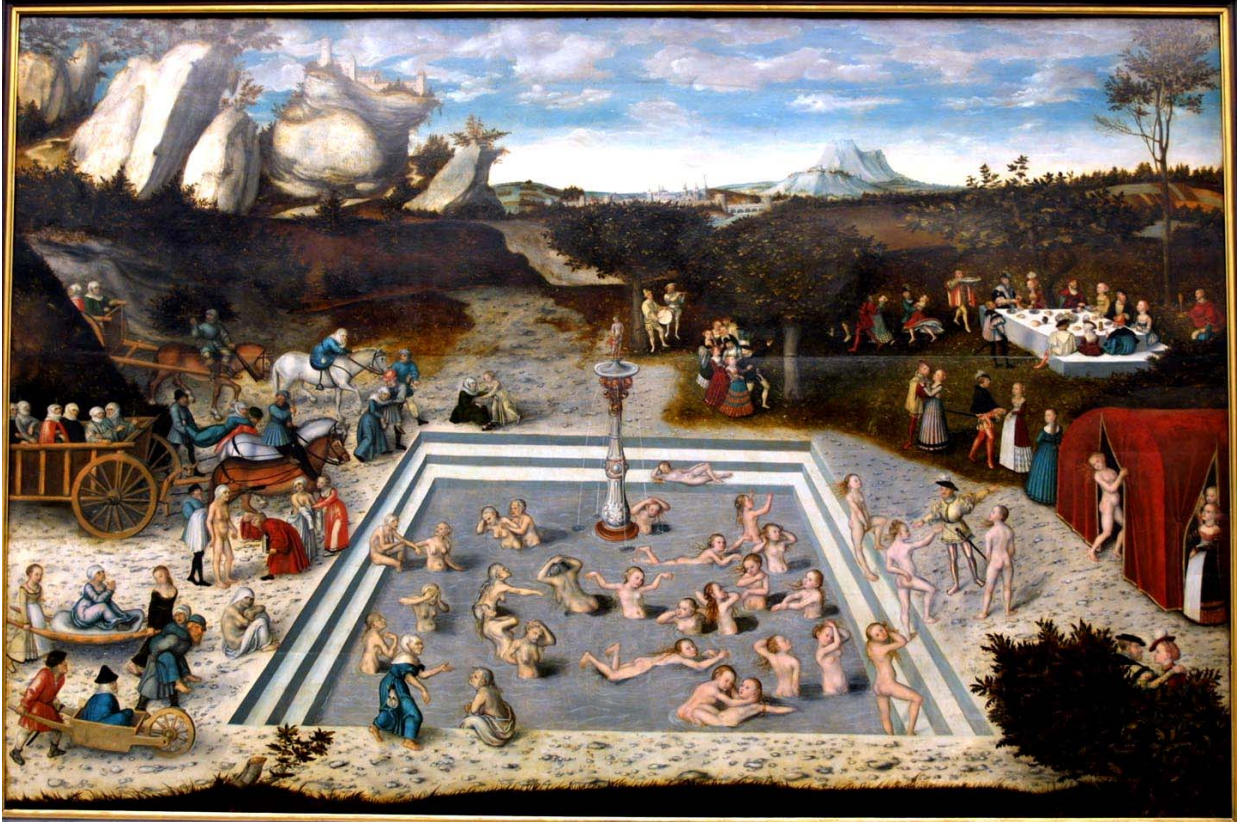
- Writing comments is risky because you are at the mercy of the original author.
- If a comment or note is rejected, you cannot send it anywhere without substantial rewriting; it is too short.
- When a comment or note is rejected, abandon the note or expand it to a full-blown paper.
- If you add something new while making the original author shine, you might succeed. For instance, if you name the result after the original author, it makes everybody happy.
- If you point out errors in the original paper, your referee (the original author) will find something wrong in your comments also, whether they are real, imaginary, or spurious.

- Occasionally, writing comments is okay (once every few years). But do it quickly, while the editor's memory is still fresh.
- A safer approach is to write an independent paper.
- AER has a standing policy not publishing comments, even to correct errors. Remember Robert Fulghum's advice "Clean up your mess"?
- Do not develop a habit of writing comments on others' work.

**28. Do not correct small errors others make**

- It is dangerous. This practice rarely earns you respect.
- You may not be right. As you rush to prove your points, you may not have grasped all the fine points of the original paper.
- Even if you are right, the original author may lurk in the trenches where he/she can stage a counterattack and damage your credibility in the future.
- You also don't like to have your errors pointed out.
- Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? (Matthew 7:3)
- The referee may then be negative toward all your future papers.
- Communicate with the original author before you submit your comment. If you are diplomatic and fortunate, you might acquire a friend who would look at your papers with favor in the future. On the other hand, you may find an enemy who will always find fault with your future papers.

Lucas Cranach, Der Jungbrunnen. Proof that swimming shorts were recently invented.



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