Reflections of a journal editor
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EDITORIAL
Reflections of a journal editor

This is my last issue as the editor of this journal. From 2011 the editorial reins of this journal will pass on to the capable hands of Professor Mark Holmes of the University of Waikato. I am sure that the journal will continue to thrive under his leadership. In spite of the progress we have made in the last few years, a number of significant challenges remain and I wish Mark all the very best.

I have had an interesting and instructive four years at the helm of this journal. This has been a time for significant changes. During this period we have found a professional publisher in Taylor & Francis, which currently publishes the journal under its most well-known imprint, Routledge. We have moved from two issue per year to three and hope to move to a steady-state of four issues per year in the near future. We have adopted the on-line Manuscript Central software for article submissions and refereeing. This has streamlined and quickened the entire process. All the articles, starting from the first issue in 1966, are now available on-line. Current issues are published on-line almost a month prior to being published in hard copy. The journal has a new cover-design. Finally, there has been a spectacular improvement in the journal’s profile and an upward movement in its ranking on various lists.

It would be remiss of me if I did not thank the people who put their faith and the journal’s fate in my hands. These include Mary Hedges, Stephen Knowles, Kirdan Lees, Dorian Owen, Grant Scobie and Frank Scrimgeour; especially Frank, who handed over the job to a man in very low spirits with a complicated compound fracture in his right leg. I am particularly thankful to Leonie Pope (of the University of Waikato) who did all our typesetting prior to our move to Routledge and did so with infinite patience and fortitude.

Dan Trinder, Philip Angell and Alec Dubber at Routledge’s London office agreed to take on the journal when other publishers passed. They have been tremendously supportive and have gone to great lengths to promote and publicize the journal. Rachael Lamney has been unstinting with her time in teaching me and others how to use the editorial software. Catherine Raw at Taylor & Francis’s Melbourne office did a superb job of handling all aspects of the journal’s production, and with Catherine now gone, Sianan Healy brings the same conscientiousness and dedication to the job.

A large number of international scholars have devoted time and energy to guiding the journal by agreeing to serve on the journal’s editorial board. And a number of young economists have put in a lot of hard yards by handling papers for the journal as associate editors.
At the conference dinner of the 51st Annual Meeting of the New Zealand Association of Economists, the Council of the association chose to honour me for my work as the editor of this journal. I was so flabbergasted and touched that I was at a loss for words as I mumbled my thanks. The above is what I should have said had I been coherent. I hope this rectifies my lapse on that occasion. I am only partially responsible for the journal’s success and if it were not for the efforts of the people thanked above, most of these developments would not have occurred.

However, rather than ending my tenure with this litany of thanks, I thought that for once since taking over as editor I would use (well, actually abuse) that privilege to impart some words of wisdom, aimed particularly at junior colleagues who are starting out on their careers.

Given our location it is not always easy for junior academics to turn to their advisors for guidance and often there is not enough mentoring. I am not entirely sure if I am qualified to offer this advice, but I am periodically asked about these things and so I thought I would take a stab at it. You are most welcome to quickly turn the page and go on to the first research article of this issue.

How do you go about being successful as an academic? The most important criterion for professional success is, of course, getting papers published. However, there are a number of other duties that are required of a successful academic. I will concentrate on aspects of the publication process. For far better advice on this and other responsibilities academics are expected to shoulder, see Hamermesh (1992).1

Ideally, the first few papers you submit should come out of your dissertation. But this is no easy matter because the gulf between what is acceptable as a dissertation chapter and what can be published in a peer-reviewed journal is vast.

It is important to present your work to audiences inside and outside your department before submitting the paper. Remember, if the journal editor is the first person outside your department evaluating your paper, then the likelihood of that paper getting published in the journal is very low. You will typically get lots of comments when you present. Listen to them carefully but do not obsess over each and every one of them. Use your judgment about which ones to take seriously. Remember that the comments that really matter are the ones made by the referees chosen by the journal to which you submit.

Execution is crucial. This means that first of all, you must present your ideas in a way that makes the reader care. Bear in mind that journal editors and referees are hard-pressed for time. Therefore, while you do need to put your paper in context, it is important to get to the point quickly. If you cannot capture the reader’s attention early on, you face an uphill struggle in getting the paper accepted.

Rather than citing a multitude of references, try to cite an article that provides an overview of the literature. If you do feel it is essential to provide a substantive literature review, then have a separate section on this but only after you have clearly pointed out what you are adding to the existing knowledge base.

The quality of the exposition is important. The editor – especially if the journal publishes articles from all areas of economics – is not necessarily familiar with the topic you are writing on. Often the editor will pass your paper on to an associate editor who is familiar with the literature but that is not guaranteed. Therefore, your introductory section should be written in a way that an economist, who may not be familiar with the literature, should still be able to perceive why your paper is interesting and important.
In terms of analysing your results, it is important to use the latest techniques, but remember that, at the end of the day, it is the appeal of your idea and the significance of your results that will sell the paper. If the paper is lacking in those areas then fanciful econometrics will probably not help. However, do provide a discussion of your results; that is, put some flesh on the bare bones of the numbers by pointing out interesting or surprising results and providing some intuition behind these.

When presenting econometric results, the usual convention is to present the coefficients with the standard errors in parentheses immediately below and then using ***, ** and * to denote significance at the 1%, 5% and 10% levels respectively. If you are presenting marginal values rather than coefficients then it is important to indicate this clearly.

For those writing in economic theory, Thomson (1999) is an excellent guide. McCloskey (1987) is an excellent reference for tips on good writing in general. Another good way is to read some of the better recent papers in your particular area of research and emulate that style.

It is easier for the reader if you explain things. Rather than relying on the reader’s powers of recall and saying ‘Comparing treatment 2 with treatment 1 we find . . .’, why not say ‘Comparing the treatment where group composition is fixed over time with the one where group members are randomly re-matched from one round to the next, we find . . .’?

What if you need to use techniques that you are not conversant with? Find someone who knows them well. Then pick his or her brains. If you feel the degree of assistance warrants it, invite this person to come on board as a co-author. There is no shame in doing so. After all, we economists have a name for it: comparative advantage. Editors do not mind if you add a co-author at a later stage. I have done so without detrimental results.

Finally, your conclusion is exactly that – a conclusion. Briefly summarize your findings, but there is no need to reiterate all your arguments or carry out more literature review. There is also no reason for you to point out any shortcomings of your study, unless explicitly asked to acknowledge this by a referee. Let others do the criticizing.

Edit the paper carefully before submission. Get rid of redundancies and typographical errors – because otherwise the reader starts to get frustrated and this may reflect poorly on your paper even if it is otherwise good.

If you are writing more than one paper on the same topic or using the same data-set then do not cut-and-paste your arguments from one paper to the other. Use different language, because, while this is not strictly plagiarism, at the very least it is considered a violation of copyright, especially where one of the papers is already published. When writing a follow-up paper, a good rule of thumb is to treat your own paper as having been written by someone else and by re-writing most of the arguments from scratch to avoid any inadvertent copying.

Rejections are a part of life for an academician. Or to paraphrase George Stigler, if you are not getting rejected then you are not aiming for journals of high enough quality. Don’t be disheartened. Leave the referee reports aside for a few days till your anger has subsided. Then read them carefully. There might be useful insights or suggestions in there that could lead to substantial improvements in your paper. If not, then, as Hamermesh (1992) points out, keep a submission tree in mind and move on to the next journal in your list.
However, if a referee has identified problems in your paper then think hard about whether you can afford to ignore the recommendations before you re-submit. It does happen that the next journal you submit to sends the paper to the same referee! If that happens then you are guaranteed a summary rejection and now you have burned a second journal.

Unless a referee has made a substantial error in evaluating your paper, there is usually very little to be gained by appealing an editor’s decision. In most cases, the editor is basing his decision on more than the mistaken assessment of the referee. For instance, the editor might think that even if you are correct, your paper does not make enough of a contribution to warrant publication. Appeal if you wish, but start looking for alternative outlets because the chances of your appeal succeeding are minimal. If you do appeal then make sure you are polite. Shooting off an angry email is probably not a good idea. I have done this and usually, though not always, regretted it later. No matter how unfair you think the decision is and how angry you are it is essential to let a few days go by and then see how you feel.

As an editor, I typically do not hold a grudge when I get emails from disgruntled authors. At times, if the situation warrants, I try to provide a fuller explanation of why I decided to reject the paper, which has usually been enough. Otherwise, I simply ignore them.

This in turn raises the rather thorny question of which journal to send your paper to. The obvious answer is to try a top general-interest journal first. The downside is the very high probability of rejection, because the acceptance threshold is much higher. Suppose you work in international economics and you submit your paper to a top general-interest journal. Suppose this particular journal will publish ten papers in international economics in a year. So now the editor will need to take into account not only how good your paper is but also whether your paper deserves to be one of those ten international economics papers that the journal will publish.

To me, a serious scholar is one who is routinely publishing in the top journal of his field. And if you are hitting the top journal in your area with some regularity then the chances are that sooner or later one of those papers will make it into a top general-interest journal. Also bear in mind that economics is somewhat anomalous in this regard. In many other disciplines, such as the biological or physical sciences, publishing in field journals is the norm. These disciplines have few journals that would count as ‘general interest’; possibly *Nature*, *Science* and the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. My prediction is that economics is heading in that direction too.

It is also important to bear in mind – in the context of the impending 2012 Performance Based Research Funding Exercise – that the Tertiary Education Panel has tended to take a fairly expansive view of journal quality, with top field journals being ranked at par with top general-interest journals.

What should you do if you get that all important letter asking you to revise and re-submit? I sometimes hear people talk about ‘hot’ versus ‘cold’ invitations. I am telling you that there is no such thing as a ‘cold’ revision! All revisions are ‘hot’ and should be treated as such. If the editor was not interested in the paper then he would not give you a chance to re-submit.

But do papers not get rejected even after two or three revisions? Yes, they do; but that is an exception rather than the rule. It is possible that you will have to grind through multiple rounds of revisions. But editors and referees are humans too and it would have to be a pretty heartless editor to reject a paper after multiple revisions.
It can happen if there is a substantial flaw in your paper that you do not manage to address even after multiple attempts or you completely fail to replicate a major result that you reported in your initial submission. But, by and large, editors think long and hard before they decide to ask for a re-submission. If they think that they are going to turn around and reject the paper after a revision then most of them would reject at the outset. After all, why bother the referees yet again if the editor thinks the paper will not make it eventually?

Sometimes it happens that one referee suggests outright rejection while another asks for a revision. If the editor asks you to revise the paper in this case, then you should assume that the editor is implicitly siding with the more positive referee. In this case, if the referees continue to disagree then you would expect the editor to exercise his judgement and put more weight on the judgement of the referee who asked for a revision – even to the extent of only asking this referee for his input on later revisions. If the editor wanted to pay more attention to the negative referee then your paper would have been rejected already.

Therefore, if you do get an invitation to revise you should seize the opportunity with alacrity. Make an attempt to respond in good faith by doing what the referees are asking for or explaining convincingly why this is really inappropriate, unnecessary or impossible. Bear in mind that, by convention, you have one year from that date to submit the revision. Otherwise, most journals will treat your paper as a new submission with, most likely, a new set of referees, which is typically not good news.

You should certainly read the references listed below. If you wish to discuss any of these issues further or have questions to ask, I can be reached at a.chaudhuri@auckland.ac.nz.

**Acknowledgements**

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**Note**

1. For the more mature economist, a wonderful guide to professional etiquette is Hamermesh (1993).

**References**


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