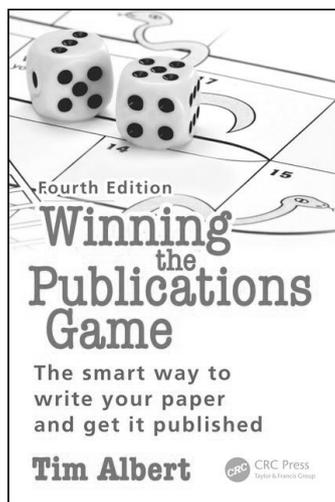


Book review

Winning the Publications Game: The smart way to write your paper and get it published

Tim Albert, Fourth Edition, CRC Press Taylor and Francis ISBN 978-1-78523-011-0 Paperback 141 p £23.99



The blurb claims this book to be the only ‘how to’ guide on writing a scientific paper; other books on the subject only explain what to put in the paper. For me, Tim Albert’s book is a ‘how to’-‘self-help’ hybrid. The latter genre instructs readers on solving personal problems.

Albert aims to motivate his young doctor and scientist readers with the mantra “writing should be fun, rewarding and liberating.” This is woven into a realistic approach: to succeed in the publications game you need to employ marketing skills. Research the style of your target journal and fashion your article to what the customer (editor) wants to read. Move away from the idea of writing a ‘good paper,’

“If ... a paper is rejected, [it] does not make you an incompetent doctor and a failed human being [but only that you made] a faulty marketing decision.”

Each of the ten chapters is a step towards getting your paper published. Every chapter has a checkpoint box affirms what you should have understood before proceeding to the next. Most chapters end with a book recommendation for further reading and why it is useful.

The first five chapters cover tasks to be undertaken before any writing starts: understanding the game, time management, and, in Chapter 3, setting the brief; in other words, thinking. The first exercise is to pluck only one message from the research, express it in a short sentence—with a verb—and get those troublesome accessories, the coauthors, to agree with the sentence. This is also when the target journal is chosen and studied, and deadlines set. The brief is expanded using a spidergram in Chapter 4, progressing to a linear plan in Chapter 5. Structure and its vital importance, what each section should contain and the

different types of sentences for opening and closing the paper are comprehensively examined in this chapter.

We meet the first draft in Chapter 6. The key is to be creative, use your own language and maintain a logical flow. Time and again, Albert urges the potential author to keep moving forward: do not fiddle; remain unconcerned about detail until Chapter 7—the break point—when you should brace yourself for the hard work of macroediting and microediting. Chapter 8 covers preparation of additional elements: title, abstract etc. Chapter 9 gives useful advice on how to handle internal reviewers, particularly those whose poor counsel is likely to decrease your chances of being published. Reviewers divide into those whose comments you value and those you have an obligation to consult, coauthors and bosses, when negotiating skills are necessary. Chapter 10 deals with coping with the review process.

It’s a light read that effortlessly packs in all the detail crucial for successfully publishing and Albert is a true expert. One joy, apart from the book’s deliberate short length, is the hiving off of detail into separate boxes. Thus, asides such as the tyranny of the impact factor, ICMJE guideline extracts and amplifications of points made do not disturb the flow. The reader can concentrate on these specifics once the main themes have been grasped. In-text examples explain concepts without overburdening, but examples of what not to write are not always accompanied by a correct alternative, which could disappoint non-native speakers of English.

The weak point is Albert’s handling of the style “in theory-practice” disparity. The style advocated in style books, the theory, is often ignored by journals, who insist on something else called “proper scientific writing.” In the spirit of giving the editor what he wants, Albert insists his readers replicate the “practical style” of the target journal. How does this work as, in effect, after encouraging authors to be creative and use their own language when writing the first draft, he later asks them to sabotage a natural text and redraft the manuscript to fit the “scientific” style of the journal? His justification? The only “criterion of whether a style is ‘right’ or ‘good’ is to ask the question: is it appropriate for the target journal?” I ask: is there any hope for clear text in academic journals?

Overall, it’s a unique and excellent book on how to motivate yourself to write and how to market your manuscript, from which both young and experienced authors can learn something.

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