
Viewpoints

Formatting manuscripts for journal submission – an author's editor's view

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Over the last 15 years or so, part of my job function has been that of an author's editor: assisting authors, or more usually author groups, to prepare manuscripts, and then going through the submission process on their behalf. A proportion of the time spent on preparing a manuscript is inevitably taken on formatting the text, figures and tables to suit the requirements of the target journal. More often than not our manuscripts would be rejected by the first choice journal, and sometimes by the second choice as well, before being accepted by the third. For each journal, a different set of formatting rules would apply, and besides making sure the revised manuscript conformed to the new target journal's word count, figure and table allowance, and permitted number of references, we would need to go through the text, tables and figures to change abbreviations, footnote notations, margin widths, line numbering conventions, and referencing format, to name just some. That's a lot of editorial hours and expense, the latter borne by the author's institution or a pharmaceutical client and representing money that might be better spent on research. Therefore, when I reviewed the third edition of Liz Wager's book "Getting Research Published – An A to Z of Publications Strategy"¹ (review published in ESE, 2016;42(2)44), I was pleased to learn that a few of the more "enlightened" journals now permit authors to submit manuscripts in "any reasonable format" with the expectation that they will be formatted in line with journal specifications after acceptance. The idea of not having to format a manuscript beyond its own internal consistency filled me and my colleagues with delight. We were already planning what we would do with all that valuable time (and hence productivity) hitherto spent on things that, to us, don't seem to be of great importance to scientific content. Our delight was, however, short lived. Despite apparently being initiated in 2011, and with Elsevier "leading the charge"², it would seem that these shining examples of sensibility are still few and far between, and I have yet to come across such a journal in the course of a decade or so of submitting manuscripts in clinical medicine and health economics. So, I decided to dig a little deeper into the question 'Why do journals insist on submitted manuscripts being in perfect journal style, even before they assess the content?'

It is well known that that only a very small minority of submitted manuscripts get accepted for publication without any post-peer review revisions, and that many get rejected without being sent for peer review at all. Why, then, does it matter what the format is on that first submission, so long as it is internally consistent and easy for an editor in chief and the peer reviewers to read? Given that many peer reviewers will carry out peer-review for more than one journal (especially

if they are experts in a niche field), surely it would be better for them if manuscripts were not highly styled according to any particular set of rules? But, based on the available discussions that have been archived on this topic (and there are not very many) even reviewers themselves are divided on this point. One opinion I came across was that of user Jakebeal at academia.stackexchange.com² who as an editor and reviewer states that "The vast majority of the papers that failed to follow prescribed formatting were definitely not good". He goes on to say that formatting isn't generally hard to do (note: ² is a forum populated mainly by mathematicians using LaTeX), and that "Neglecting it means that the author is being sloppy and unprofessional at something easy" and "... it's a good indicator that they are likely to be unprofessional in other places where it matters more as well"². In other words, if your presentation is sloppy, it gives the impression that your research may be less than rigorously carried out, which (in my opinion) would seem to be a fair point. In response to Jakebeal, an anonymous user expressed the opposite view: "As a referee, I have an instinctive negative reaction if I know that an author has taken the time and effort to conform to a particular journal's style ... for authors to refuse to do this suggests to me a principled refusal to waste their time". This implies that in mathematics at least, manuscripts that do not adhere to journal style do make it as far as peer review, which is often not the case in clinical medicine where manuscripts will be sent back to the author even before triage for something as minor as small deviations in the style of the references. One reviewer, user Corvus (also at academia.stackexchange.com²) took issue with journals continuing to insist upon "an archaic format in which the figures are all placed at the end of the manuscript" and said that "My personal opinion is that authors' highest priority should be to submit their work in a format that minimises effort on the part of the referees, and if this conflicts with house style requirements, the author has every reason to ignore those requirements²". Certainly this reflects my own view, which is that so long as the manuscript is clean and easy to follow, and consistent within itself, then science should take precedence over formatting minutiae. Reviewers' time is precious and we should not waste it.

So, despite Elsevier's announcement of 'Your Paper, Your Way' for a selection of its journals in 2011, and then expansion of this to all Elsevier journals in 2013³, it seems that the remarkably sensible idea of 'any format goes' has yet to gain wider acceptance. But, it does exist. Earlier this year *Development*⁴ changed its submission process and introduced a new 'format-free' submission policy, which (unsurprisingly) has been something of a success⁴. As well as applying to first-submission manuscripts, this policy also

encompasses manuscripts already rejected elsewhere. A few other examples are *European Journal of Transport Research and Infrastructure*, *Journal of Consumer Research* and *Transactions of the American Mathematical Society*. Besides Elsevier, the Genetic Society of America, the Federation of European Biology Societies, European Molecular Biology Press, the Company of Biologists, the EMBO Journal and Rockefeller University Press have all adopted this approach. These journals are “taking back the formatting baton” as suggested recently by John Moore in his letter to *Nature*, a call for days past “when publishers took responsibility for the full production process”.

To sum up, after following the discussion mentioned above and the few others that exist on this topic (none very recent, however) I got the impression that some journals are a bit more ‘enlightened’ and regard formatting so precisely to be a waste of valuable research time, and anyway a job for a typesetter. These tended to be mathematical and physics journals which commonly use LaTeX software. Others however, in particular some of the clinical medicine journals, have their roots in old establishments and perhaps like to retain their ‘traditions’. It could, however, just as easily be a case of not fixing something which is not per se ‘broken’: while authors continue to jump through the formatting hoops, and journals get more submissions than they can possibly publish, why change the way things are? Despite both authors and editors getting exasperated at yet another round of seemingly fruitless reformatting, it appears to me that there is no great movement to change the way things are for the majority of journals. Or will the more pragmatic journals, such as those mentioned above, gradually become more popular venues to submit – and bring about change ‘by stealth’?

It would be interesting to hear from our membership, particularly those who are chief editors, how they feel about this. Do you favour strict adherence to journal style, even at

submission, or do you regard styling beyond word count and numbers of display items secondary to manuscript content? Submission aside, that journals continue to have their layout and style foibles is understandable and not a bad thing at all when some journals can be instantly recognised simply by seeing the layout of the pages. I would also be interested to find out from the chief editors among our membership how their journal style came to be, how it has evolved over time, and whether they think some of the conventions could usefully be harmonised between journals. Perhaps, as editors, we can ‘wave the flag’ for spending less time on pedantry, and more time on content, at least at the pre-peer review stages.

References

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- 2 Academia Stack Exchange at: <https://academia.stackexchange.com/questions/36677/should-you-conform-to-journal-formatting-requirements-for-the-initial-submission/36696>
- 3 Elsevier. Your Paper, Your Way. At: <https://www.elsevier.com/editors-update/story/author-support/your-paper-your-way-now-available-to-all-journals>
- 4 Brown K, Pourquie O. 2017. Editorial: Going format-free. *Development* 144: 1919 doi: 10.1242/dev.154161. Available at: <http://dev.biologists.org/content/144/11/1919>

Further reading

- Brischoux, F, Legagneux, P. 2009. Don't Format Manuscripts. The Scientist. Available at: <http://www.the-scientist.com/?articles.view/articleNo/27482/title/Don-t-Format-Manuscripts/>
- CofactorScience.com at: <http://cofactorscience.com/blog/do-you-really-have-to-reformat-for-each-new-submission>
- Sack, J. “Format-neutral”: Why doesn't every journal accept submissions this way? Highwire at: <https://blog.highwire.org/2016/05/16/format-neutral-why-doesnt-every-journal-accept-submissions-this-way/>

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COMET is planning to raise awareness about its work with research funding agencies and is seeking representatives from different countries who are best placed to start that dialogue with funders in their country. Those outcome sets are available in a searchable database on the COMET website, and COMET is also working with the ISRCTN trials registry to provide advice at the time of registration.

What all the prize winners have in common is a focus on the role of systematic reviews and the need to exert influence via networks. A well-conducted systematic review will identify what research is still needed in terms of the research outcomes and the study design, and what research is not needed, to answer a particular question. And while preparing a systematic review can be an intensive ‘head-down’ process for authors and editors, the best results are achieved by teamwork and transparent processes, and a really useful systematic review will inevitably rely on, and build on, the work and decisions of countless other funders, institutions, researchers, editors, and consumers. The Cochrane-REWARD Prize will be awarded again in 2018.

Details for applicants for the 2018 prize will be announced in late 2017 for submission by mid 2018.

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Competing interests

JH is a full-time employee of Cochrane.

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