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Overcoming hesitancy to submit manuscripts for peer review

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Overcoming hesitancy to submit manuscripts for peer review

Abstract

Publishing completed research is essential for knowledge dissemination and career advancement, yet many academics experience submission anxiety. Reasons include fear of rejection, imposter syndrome, and perfectionism. This commentary reviews drivers of submission hesitancy and outlines evidence-based strategies to empower manuscript submission. Consequences of delays are detrimental for individual productivity and scientific progress. Indicators of unhelpful rumination during endless revisions include excessive time re-reviewing background literature or endlessly analyzing data. Plagiarism angst can also stall submission. Strategies to promote manuscript submission include setting readiness checklists and timeline goals, seeking mentor perspectives on drafts, forming peer writing groups for accountability, understanding text reuse conventions, viewing peer input as collaborative, and reframing rejection as an expected part of review. While incentives must be reformed, mindset shifts can initiate positive norms amid existing pressures. Scientists have a responsibility to disseminate timely research and can implement techniques to do so.

Keywords

writing, academia, publishing

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Overcoming Hesitancy to Submit Manuscripts for Peer Review

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Abstract

Publishing completed research is essential for knowledge dissemination and career advancement, yet many academics experience submission anxiety. Reasons include fear of rejection, imposter syndrome, and perfectionism. This commentary reviews drivers of submission hesitancy and outlines evidence-based strategies to empower manuscript submission. Consequences of delays are detrimental for individual productivity and scientific progress. Indicators of unhelpful rumination during endless revisions include excessive time re-reviewing background literature or endlessly analyzing data. Plagiarism angst can also stall submission. Strategies to promote manuscript submission include setting readiness checklists and timeline goals, seeking mentor perspectives on drafts, forming peer writing groups for accountability, understanding text reuse conventions, viewing peer input as collaborative, and reframing rejection as an expected part of review. While incentives must be reformed, mindset shifts can initiate positive norms amid existing pressures. Scientists have a responsibility to disseminate timely research and can implement techniques to do so.

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Publishing research manuscripts is an essential step in disseminating and advancing scientific knowledge. However, many academics experience hesitancy around submitting their work for peer review and potential publication (Kelly et al., 2014). Reasons for submission hesitancy include anxiety about rejection, imposter syndrome, and perfectionist tendencies, which can prevent scholars from believing their work is ready for external evaluation (Reed & Costner, 1998; Sullivan, 2012). While some refinement during final manuscript preparations is expected, excessive submission delays of largely completed work can be counterproductive.

The downstream consequences of submission hesitancy and publishing biases underscore the need for culture change around manuscript submission in academia. Strategies and supports for timely submission could have multiplicative benefits for individuals, institutions, and scientific advancement (Iskander et al., 2018; McGrail et al., 2006). Although systemic incentives in academia must be reformed to fully address the problem, individual behavior change can initiate positive norms even amidst existing reward systems and pressures. This commentary outlines the consequences of submission hesitancy for scholars, reviews key drivers of submission hesitancy, outlines associated unproductive behaviors, and provides evidence-based strategies to promote effective manuscript submission practices. The goal of this article is to empower researchers to prioritize dissemination through a growth mindset and concrete techniques to navigate emotions for submitting one's scholarly work for external review.

Consequences of Submission Hesitancy

Submission hesitancy has detrimental ramifications for scholars, scientific

productivity, and collective progress. At the individual scholar level, studies show academics who chronically delay submitting their complete manuscripts have lower research productivity in terms of publications, presentations, and grants over time (Guthrie et al., 2018). For early career researchers, delays in publishing can limit first-author publications, which are crucial for academic job market competitiveness (Reed & Costner, 1998; Sullivan, 2012). At the scientific productivity level, delaying publication can hinder the disclosure of study findings to broader audiences, postpone potential replication studies, and/or stifle incremental scientific progress that builds upon the published literature. Low productivity metrics further restrict researchers' ability to achieve tenure and promotion, particularly at research-intensive institutions (McGrail et al., 2006).

Imposture syndrome contributes to a lack of gender, racial, and ethnic diversity among authors in papers that are ultimately published (Sills et al., 2020). In fact, women and those who are racially/ethnically diverse are significantly less likely to achieve senior authorship compared to non-Hispanic White men, which may be a result of the failure of the structure in academia to support diversity (Marschke et al., 2018). Furthermore, women and minoritized populations are often pressured to perform more service roles, taking on these extra tasks that may lower their time for research (Domingo et al., 2022).

Additionally, submission hesitancy exacerbates well-documented publication biases in the sciences, where positive results are more likely to be published than negative findings. When academics avoid submitting completed studies due to anxiety or perfectionism, this skews the literature by disproportionately keeping ambiguous or contradictory results in the "file drawer" (Franco et al., 2014). Beyond limiting

knowledge dissemination, these biases negatively impact meta-science and reproducibility. For example, pre-clinical research with biased effect sizes, due to selective publishing, may lead to wasted resources pursuing false leads in human trials (Munafò et al., 2017).

Drivers of Submission Hesitancy

Hesitancy, Anxiety, and Fear of Rejection

Anxiety about rejection is a major driver of submission hesitancy. Academics often view journal peer review as a referendum on their abilities rather than an opportunity for constructive improvements (Reed & Costner, 1998; Sullivan, 2012). Strong emotions of fear and avoidance can be triggered when contemplating exposing one's work for external judgement (Guthrie et al., 2018). The highly competitive nature of academia exacerbates these anxieties, as scholars worry about how rejections will reflect on their scientific standing, reputation, or career progression.

Relatedly, imposter syndrome also stokes submission fears, particularly among early career researchers and marginalized groups in academia (Reed & Costner, 1998; Sullivan, 2012). Imposter syndrome involves persistent self-doubt and feeling like a fraud, which can make scholars highly apprehensive about external assessment. Given the power dynamics around those whose work is traditionally valued, these anxieties disproportionately affect who is willing to put their scholarship forward for evaluation (Guthrie et al., 2018). Tied to this, systems that incentivize high-prestige publications compound fears of rejection among academics suffering from imposter syndrome.

Perfectionism

Perfectionist tendencies or maximizer mindsets are another contributor to submission delays (Reed & Costner, 1998; Sullivan, 2012). Perfectionism involves rigidly high standards and excessive self-criticism. Academics high in perfectionism can always find additional minor improvements that could be made to a manuscript. This endlessly delays reaching a point when they feel a piece of work is truly finished and ready for others' consumption. Perfectionists can also overly fixate on the potential criticism they may receive rather than viewing peer review as constructive.

Interestingly, perfectionism appears linked to both imposter syndrome and anxiety about negative evaluation from others (Reed & Costner, 1998; Sullivan, 2012). Interventions targeting unhelpful perfectionist mindsets may also help alleviate submission fears. Finding healthy balances between rigor and reality could help academics become more comfortable with peer critique (Jaremka et al., 2020).

Indicators of Rumination

Rumination involves repetitive, perseverative thinking focused on negative content (Smith & Alloy, 2009). In academia, submission rumination manifests in unproductive thought patterns that signal a manuscript is stuck in endless cycles of revision and never truly deemed ready for peer review by perfectionistic authors. These ruminative behaviors reflect mindsets that academic publishing is about eliminating all flaws versus improving work through collaborative review.

Common indicators a manuscript is dwelling in rumination include spending an excessive amount of time re-reviewing literature to exhaustively cover background material or confirm novelty (Markowitz &

Hancock, 2016). Similarly, academics may get stuck analyzing data in different ways versus submitting the completed analysis that reasonably addresses their research aims (McGrail et al., 2006). Submission anxiety also manifests as plagiarism obsession, where researchers obsessively check for potential textual overlap versus recognizing some overlap as inevitable during literature syntheses (Davies & Howard, 2016; Grossberg, 2008). Finally, hesitant authors engage in drawn-out negotiations among co-authors, rehashing old comments or seeking endless feedback from all collaborators.

Plagiarism Concerns

Obsessive worrying about inadvertent plagiarism can also drive submission rumination. Early career researchers may lack confidence navigating scholarly writing conventions, fueling anxieties about textual reuse (Davies & Howard, 2016; Grossberg, 2008). Mentorship around appropriate literature integration can alleviate these concerns. Further, excessive plagiarism angst often reflects unrealistic expectations - minor reuse of phrases or standard methodological language is inevitable when synthesizing prior work. The goal should be avoiding substantial reliance on others' prose versus obsessively eliminating all subtle overlaps. Modern plagiarism identification software also reduces risks during peer review. Adopting reasonable standards around background development, and acknowledging some unintentional reuse as normal, may help perfectionistic scholars submit their original contributions rather than endlessly scrutinizing text.

Team Science

Modern research increasingly involves collaborative team science across multiple study authors. Successfully navigating team

dynamics is critical for timely manuscript submission (McGrail et al., 2006). A common rumination pattern is drawn-out internal negotiations among co-authors. Study leads may seek endless feedback rounds from all collaborators or become stuck addressing lower-priority co-author comments. Disagreements about authorship order or manuscript focus can also stall submission. Clear authorship policies, timeline agreements, and issue escalation strategies can help circumvent co-author spin cycles (Reed & Costner, 1998; Sullivan, 2012). Further, shifting away from perfectionist mindsets around unanimity is important - reasonable dissent is part of collaborative scholarship.

Strategies to Overcome Submission Hesitancy

As discussed, avoiding timely submission has detrimental consequences for academic careers and can stall knowledge dissemination. Interventions focused on promoting effective submission practices could have multiplicative benefits for individuals and their broader scientific communities. The strategies below can help researchers overcome barriers to timely manuscript submission:

1. Create checklists of readiness indicators, such as background covered, for objective submission gauges. For clarity, outline what you need to accomplish before submission. Avoid subjective judgments about manuscript quality.
2. Set timeline goals for submission, treating it as any other project milestone. Avoid open-ended revision cycles by establishing target submission dates, either self-imposed or in consultation with mentors and co-authors. Schedule submissions in your calendar. Enforce the deadlines barring emergencies.
3. Prioritize your individual development and dissemination over unattainable perfection. Remind yourself that “done is better than perfect.” Meet your own needs for growth rather than imagined external expectations.
4. Seek mentors who can offer guidance about assessing manuscript readiness. Ask experts in the field to review drafts and provide their perspectives about completeness, which may help scholars feel more prepared to submit their manuscripts.
5. Develop co-authorship agreements upfront to prevent internal team delays. Clarify authorship order, responsibilities, and timelines early. Address disagreements directly through open conversations and compromise.
6. Form a peer writing group to enhance accountability and productivity. Peer writing groups can enhance productivity by establishing collective manuscript deadlines, providing accountability measures such as regular writing check-ins, and offering support through collaborative expertise and knowledge sharing (e.g., relevant journals and subject matter).
7. Seek mentorship around appropriate literature integration to alleviate plagiarism anxieties. Understand conventions in your field for acceptable reuse of standard language or methods descriptions.
8. Recognize that minor textual reuse is inevitable when synthesizing prior work. Avoid substantial reliance on others’

prose. Use plagiarism identification software to catch major issues before peer review.

9. Celebrate small submission goals and preparatory steps, like submitting drafts to co-authors or choosing a journal. Reward yourself for accomplishments leading up to submission to stay motivated. Recognize when you are actively advancing the manuscript versus being stuck in rumination.
10. Cultivate growth mindsets around using reviewer feedback to strengthen your work. View peer input as collaborative improvements versus flaws in your abilities. Think long-term about how revisions improve your scholarship. Reframe rejection as an expected part of peer review rather than a referendum on you or your work. Rejection of manuscripts is common, especially when targeting prestigious journals (Dhammi & Rehan UI, 2018). Publishing regularly requires learning how not to take rejections personally; rather, how to view rejections as constructive feedback and opportunities for manuscript improvement. Talk with mentors about their experiences.

Implementing such strategies can empower scholars to take control of their submission timeline and contribute to scientific advancement. Of course, broader incentives and supports also shape submission behaviors, making institutional reforms crucial as well. However, individual mindset shifts can initiate positive norms amidst existing realities.

Conclusion

Anxiety, perfectionism, and rumination are common barriers academics face when

preparing to submit their work for external peer review. These factors lead to detrimental delays in disseminating findings, which limit productivity and scientific progress. Strategies exist to help scholars overcome internal and external drivers of submission hesitancy. Mentorship, growth mindsets, and productive practices can empower researchers to prioritize dissemination in their academic careers. While institutional and systemic factors shape submission behaviors, scholars must take personal responsibility to publish and advance science. Scientists who implement evidence-based techniques to navigate manuscript submission in turn promote healthier norms for those around them. The rewards of contribution and growth must be emphasized over the illusion of perfection. Through collective culture change, academia can realize its full potential as an ecosystem for collaborative advancement.

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