



# Writing Education Research

Guidelines for Publishable Scholarship

Joy Egbert and Sherry Sanden

ROUTLEDGE  


# WRITING EDUCATION RESEARCH

For both new academics and those with some experience, writing articles of publishable quality can be particularly challenging. Developing the necessary skill set requires useful information, hard work, and the type of direction infrequently offered in research methods courses, leaving researchers to piece together resources on their own. This book addresses this critical topic in a format that is easy to teach and understand. It is a practical volume that teaches researchers how to identify their audience, clearly state the nature of their work, provide exceptional literature reviews, cite appropriately, and explicate their research.

Beginning each chapter with reviewer comments, *Writing Education Research* is designed to help scholars understand both how to write effective research reports and how to get published. Practice exercises and resource lists in each chapter offer easy-to-access information about the review and publication process. A perfect accompaniment to standard research courses, this practical book demystifies the writing process for anyone looking to publish articles, chapters, or papers in education.

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# WRITING EDUCATION RESEARCH

GUIDELINES FOR  
PUBLISHABLE SCHOLARSHIP

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AND  
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For Mom, wherever you are, and for Princess Jamie and DavetotheMax (I know where you are!).

—J.E.

For Caleb and Haley—I wish for you a lifetime filled with sunshine and flowers and love.

—S.S.

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## PREFACE

Reviewing research papers runs the gamut from being fun and informative to being extremely tedious, but someone has to do it in order for the publication process to be effective. The majority of those who do it for the field of education are volunteers; this means that it behooves us, as writers of research, to do the best we can to make reviewing our papers worthwhile for those who take on the job. However, many, many papers submitted to books and journals across the field are not ready for publication. Aside from a lack of proofreading, these manuscripts contain all kinds of errors that make them less comprehensible and useful than they should be. This text is our answer to that problem. During our many years of both writing and reviewing, we have seen similar errors over and over again. Therefore, we have provided general guidelines and examples in this book to address those repeated issues that often lead to the rejection or major revision of a manuscript. We intend this book to be both a resource for new researchers and a reminder for those with

more experience of the essential aspects of an effective research paper. This book can be read from start to finish, or it can be used to look up ideas about how to respond to particular comments from reviewers. Most important is that the suggestions in this text are employed to support the successful dissemination of new knowledge in education in a timely and useful way.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## WRITING AND PUBLISHING IN EDUCATION

### **Overview**

This chapter introduces the following topics:

- Effective education research reporting
- Assumptions about submitted manuscripts
- The structure of a research article

### **Effective Education Research Reporting**

Writers of research—which, in this text, includes empirical, conceptual, theoretical, and practical scholarship—must be able to develop manuscripts that meet guidelines for effective

reporting in order to publish. Developing such publishable education manuscripts is essential to the dissemination of the important work conducted by researchers in the field. According to the American Educational Research Association (AERA), education research is

a field of inquiry aimed at advancing knowledge of education and learning processes and development of the tools and methods necessary to support this endeavor. Education researchers aim to describe, understand, and explain how learning takes place throughout the life cycle and how formal and informal processes of education affect learning, attainment, and the capacity to lead productive lives. Scholarship in this arena is undertaken at the individual, situational, institutional, and social structural levels of analysis. The unifying purpose for education research is to build cumulative and sound knowledge about human and social process of fundamental significance to individuals, to groups, and to the larger society.

(AERA, 2013)

This text explains and provides guidelines for preparing a scholarly manuscript that is of publishable quality. It focuses on the structures and language within research manuscripts that allow them to be comprehensible and useful in explaining researchers' models, theories, and studies. Failure to appropriately attend to the areas and topics that comprise these structural features is a central reason that manuscripts are rejected for publication. The goal for this book, then, is to explain how these features can reinforce the overall message of a manuscript and to demonstrate how to construct manuscripts that use these structural features to support rather than hinder that message. We hope this will improve the quality of research reports created for publication and reduce the large number of ineffectively executed manuscripts submitted to (and ultimately rejected from) journals, committees, and conferences.

Although surface feature errors are one of the major complaints commented on by manuscript reviewers, many good texts exist that examine discrete surface-level items such as punctuation and correct APA style (see, for example, any of the references in the recommended resources at the end of this chapter). Therefore, this text does not address surface features. On the other hand, few texts take on the specific concepts and structures that useful, well-presented articles and chapters contain. These concepts and structures include, for example, explaining previous research in the literature review rather than just including citations; integrating the theoretical framework as support throughout the manuscript; providing justification for methodological decisions; and including a limitations section *and* addressing how and whether the limitations were mediated. These manuscript features provide not only a consistent deep structure for the reader but also signposts so the reader can follow the manuscript's logic and flow.

Further, this book emphasizes the review process. In addition to providing common ground and helping researchers receive positive editorial reviews for their manuscripts, we also hope to help researchers move through the review process effectively. Having a manuscript accepted with no changes requested by the editor is quite a rare occurrence in many areas. Therefore, researchers need to know how to revise their manuscripts in response to reviewers' comments, which sometimes can be unclear or unneeded but are more often central to the clarity of the research. This text looks closely at editorial reviews and how to address changes in the manuscript structure and content. By providing actual examples of reviewer comments and related guidelines for how to revise and/or respond, we provide a number of perspectives on text content and structure and a variety of choices authors have in addressing them.

In other words, by briefly defining, discussing, and providing examples of the important components of a publishable

research manuscript and the review process, this text both provides novice researchers with a head start to publishing and also reminds experienced researchers of what makes an effective research report. As in our previous text (Egbert & Sanden, 2014), we hope to provide common ground from which to work so that readers and authors understand each other and so that more high-quality research can be published. This goal is crucial to the field not only for those on a tenure track who are required to publish in certain journals but also for “voluntary” researchers looking for a broad audience for their findings and for consumers of research, such as administrators and teachers. With a set of common understandings of what manuscripts should contain, we all will know what to look for and how to evaluate them more evenly.

With that said, however, there are those who will disagree that all of the issues we address in this text are warranted or perhaps argue that there is a thin line between description and prescription that we might cross. This may be so, but the rather generic solutions we provide can be used or not based on the researcher’s choice. We certainly do not begin to suggest that all research manuscripts should look the same, or have the same voice, or use the same vocabulary. We do recommend, however, that the underlying structures and signposts have some consistency, and this is where we focus our attention.

### **Assumptions About Submitted Manuscripts**

Throughout this text, reviewers’ comments start each chapter and section to provide an authentic introduction to the issue under discussion. These excerpts are from reviews that we have received on manuscripts we have prepared and on papers we have reviewed, as well as reviews that have been shared with us. For example, the two comments that follow show some of the issues described in this section.

**Reviewer:**

The article is very well written, certainly, and it explores in a basic way an important issue; however, I find that this article is more appropriate for a journal that focuses more on applied or “how-to” issues than on original scholarly contributions. It has nothing to do with how the article has been prepared—the author(s) seem to have been meticulous in their preparation; in fact, I think a different journal might accept this article as is. The problem for me is fit with this journal. Typically articles in this journal present a deeper exploration of a topic based on a very well-explicated theoretical framework and stand on their own as a clear step toward understanding the issue under investigation.

**Reviewer:**

The research reported here has been done many, many times over. We have had these kinds of reports for years, in this and other journals. It's time to use other, more complementary methods, in order to broaden our understandings. . . . Although the author feels that something new is being reported, I didn't see it.

The first review describes a lack of fit, and the second indicates the need for useful content; as we explore writing for publication, these are two of the considerations that we will take for granted because they are covered elsewhere. These are listed and explained in the following, along with other assumptions we make in this text.

***Useful Content***

“Useful” in this case does not necessarily mean “applied,” but rather it indicates that the research adds new information to the extant literature. Even a replication study, done well, adds to the field; however, if the study has already been replicated to the point where no new knowledge is gained, then it ceases to be

useful. We expect, and therefore do not address in this text, that manuscript content is useful for some purpose, whether it is explaining a new concept, outlining a theory in a way not previously done, or exploring an old topic with a new methodology.

### ***Rigorous Conduct***

We also assume that if the manuscript reports an empirical study, the research itself was conducted rigorously and is valid and reliable. We expect that, even if missing from the manuscript draft, the important elements of the research were attended to in the study itself. In other words, if the research (empirical, conceptual, or theoretical) was not well conceived in the first place, then the writing probably will not matter in getting it published.

### ***Surface Edits***

In addition, we assume that the manuscript is grammatical and that it has been spell-checked and proofread. If the manuscript is not comprehensible to begin with, it will not matter if the relevant content and structures are present, because the reviewer will not be able to tell.

### ***Fit to Journal***

Further, we take for granted that the researcher has read the requirements for submitting papers to the journal or book chosen—in other words, that the paper is a fit for the outlet (i.e., that it is appropriate for the journal's purpose and audience). Not only does content matter to fit, but the forum may also determine issues such as how long each section and the whole paper should be, which type of citations should be used, and how the researcher(s) should refer to themselves (i.e., first or third person).

With 619 international and national academic education journals listed by SCImago Journal and Country Rank (2014) and hundreds more that can be found in other contexts, different journals have different requirements for fit. For example, *Teachers College Record* requests:

Feature articles are typically full-length papers running thirty pages or more. Both empirical and theoretical papers are considered, but papers that combine well developed theoretical frameworks with careful empirical work are particularly appreciated. Feature articles may contain research, analysis, and commentary. *TCR* invites submissions utilizing all methods of inquiry, and all topics related to the field of education, broadly conceived, are welcome. Feature articles are considered for both online and print publication. Online features can take advantage of the variety of media made possible through electronic publishing, including the use of audio, video, complex or dynamic graphic displays, interactive sessions, performances, and other means to improve the communication of scholarly work. Features may be presented as a single article or in serial form. (Natriello, 2005)

Contrast this to the submission guidelines from a very different type of journal, ISTE's *Learning and Leading with Technology* (found at <https://www.iste.org/learn/publications/learning-leading/submission-guidelines>):

We love to publish lively, engaging content that is clear and direct. Please read some of our past articles to get a sense of our tone and style before you submit. We accept several types of content, including:

- How-to articles, 500–1,500 words
- Articles about digital learning trends, best practices and innovations, 500–1,500 words
- Tips for using specific tools or techniques, 250–500 words
- “Best of” lists, such as specific tools, resources, apps

- Reviews of resources, such as products, tools, software and books, 500–700 words
- Classroom, school and district success stories, 500–1,500 words
- Step-by-step how-to videos, screencasts, animations, Prezis, Glogsters, etc., 3–5 minutes
- Video tips, 2–3 minutes
- Most of our writers are educators or education thought leaders.
- We prefer submissions that clearly connect content to the ISTE Standards.
- If you write for us, you'll earn our sincere gratitude, a byline and respect from your peers, but no money.
- We like lively and engaging content written in AP style. We especially like a first-person point of view and a conversational tone.
- Please identify all adults mentioned in examples or as sources by first and last name, position and/or job title, school or district, city and state/province, and/or country. Identify minors by their full names when possible.
- Avoid hypothetical situations or composite characters. If you must use them to illustrate your point, make it clear they're hypothetical.
- We include no more than two author names per article. We grant bylines only to writers, not to contributors, mentors, supervisors or partners who worked on a project.
- We prize diversity and look for articles that span all grades, subjects and technologies.

A paper written for the first journal would surely not fit at the second, and vice versa, and it is a waste of reviewers' and editors' time to review papers that do not fit.

### ***Appropriate Journal Level***

Similarly, we also suppose that the researcher has chosen a journal at the appropriate level (rankings are typically designated "Level 1," "Level 2," or "A level," "B level," depending on

the perceived prestige or importance of the journal). One way that prestige is measured is by using the journal impact factor. For example, Science Watch (2011) lists journal impact by the level of journals using the number of times the journal is cited divided by the number of articles published in the journal in a year in their *Journal Citations Reports [JCR]*; see, for example, the list at [http://archive.sciencewatch.com/dr/sci/11/jan2-11\\_1/](http://archive.sciencewatch.com/dr/sci/11/jan2-11_1/)). Although this way of measuring the value of a journal has pros and cons (for arguments, see Egbert, 2007; European Association of Science Editors, 2014; Nederhof, Luwel, & Moed, 2001), many institutions use it for at least part of the evaluation of the value of journals in which candidates for promotion and tenure publish. Therefore, we expect that researchers to whom this matters will be familiar with the ranking of the journal to which they are submitting. Figure 1.1 presents an example from a 2009 impact factor report for education journals.

<b>Rank</b>	<b>2009 Impact Factor</b>
1	Review of Educational Research (3.33)
2	Int. J. Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning (2.69)
3	Language Learning & Technology (2.53)
4	Learning and Instruction (2.37)
5	Journal of Engineering Education (2.32)
6	American Educational Research Journal (2.24)

*Figure 1.1* 2009 impact factor for education journals (archived at <http://sciencewatch.com>)