

Publishing Advice for Graduate Students¹

Thom Brooks²

Please do not cite without author's consent.

Introduction

Gaining any advice on publishing has been one of the more terrifying experiences for me over the years as a postgraduate. Let me first explain why. The advice is usually uttered by someone of Senior Lecturer or Professorial rank (often intimidating enough) who we will simply call 'the Professor'. The first thing the Professor will say is that 'publishing is crucial to ensuring a career in the profession' followed by 'and it is very difficult to get published'. At this moment, I would begin to worry: if publishing is so hard to achieve and so important, will I be able to cut it?

Complicating things immediately, the Professor invariably introduces distinctions of publications in rank of importance which is generally (from best to least): article, book, article in book, and conference proceedings. (Personally, I think books are more important, but we will pass over this at the moment.) Now I think: 'My goodness! Not only do I have no publications which are hard enough to achieve 'in themselves', but there are various *distinctions* involved: how am I going to cope with this?' From here on in, these talks focus on mundane features of the publishing world: discuss work before sending it off, review periods vary between journals, there are delays between accepting an article and publishing it of several months or longer, and good journals have exceptionally low acceptance rates of no more than 15%.

¹ Originally entitled *The Postgraduate's Guide to Getting Published*.

² Dr Thom Brooks, Department of Politics, University of Newcastle, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU, United Kingdom, email: t.brooks@newcastle.ac.uk

While all of this is accurate, I believe these standard talks on publishing miss the mark. At the end of each presentation, I found myself more terrified about the academic world (and my hopeful career as an academic) and at a complete loss as to what to do about getting a publication.

I hope to fill this gap with this article. One of the most important things to know is that getting published as a postgraduate *is possible*: you need not have memorized every claim in every contribution to your particular area of study. The trick—if there is one—is to focus narrowly on the task at hand and ‘to find your voice’.

Book reviews

This ‘finding your voice’ stuff may sound fairly elusive, but it is something easier to develop than you may think at first. It can be found in the easiest route to publishing: *writing book reviews*. I have absolutely no idea why more postgraduates do not write more book reviews. In my view, they are the best and most simple (and instructive) guide to the publishing world available. Perhaps the reason why so few take it up is because no one advises others on how to become a reviewer. Let me explain how this works.

In general, all journals have two editors. One is ‘*the editor*’ in charge of article and discussion submissions to the journal. The other is ‘the reviews editor’ or ‘book review editor’ in charge of maintaining the journal’s publication of review essays and book reviews. Nearly every reviews editor I know is bending over backwards to find new reviewers for his or her journal. While the premier journals tend to prefer

established academics, I do not know of a second or third level journal that had a problem with postgraduate reviewers. If you want to get your first publication (and a free book!), become a book reviewer *today*.

Becoming a reviewer is a piece of cake. Type up a letter (email is also fine) that introduces yourself as someone who is a postgraduate working in a general field on a particular topic, offering to review a book for the said journal. That's it. Eighty percent of the time or better you will receive a positive response. If the journal has received something in your area, the book will be along in the post shortly thereafter. A good strategy is to search through the 'books received' sections often published at the back of journals and ask if you can review a particular book in your letter or email to the reviews editor.

If the editor says 'no', do not despair. If it is because a particular book you asked to review is with someone else, it is certainly acceptable to ask if a similar book might be sent to you in the future. For any other reason, turn your attention to a different journal and try, try, try again. Do not worry that because an offer to review has been turned down, that your future chances of publishing an article with the journal has been compromised: remember *the* editor and *the reviews* editor are different people and editorial decisions on articles and book reviews are taken separately. Again, no reason here for despair.

If the reviews editor agrees, fantastic. When you receive the book, that person will generally spell out when he or she would like you to send the review to them. These deadlines are never in stone (and you can be late and still have the review published),

but do everything possible to honour them—especially if you are a general fan of the journal and would like to contribute again in the future. In addition, formatting instructions for your review are provided: stick to them religiously no matter what (otherwise your review may not be published after all).

Here is where the ‘finding your voice’ part comes into play. In all likelihood, until this moment your audience has been primarily a lecturer or no larger than a class. When you write book reviews all of this changes: your audience becomes *the general profession*. This should not be worrying. A good piece of advice is not to get too fancy: avoid footnotes or referencing other works at all costs. Instead, focus only on the book at hand. In so doing, do not second guess yourself on how well you know your area compared to ‘the Professor’: you are making no more than general comments on the area and your comments should be fairly exclusive to explicating the book. Begin by discussing how the book has been put together and end by offering some criticisms (yes, good book reviews should not be 100% endorsements).

The important thing here is thinking about how you can present these materials to someone who has at least a general acquaintance with the area, but will have no familiarity with the book you are reviewing. This is a subtle, but important difference with everything you may have written until this time: before when you would discuss work by someone, you wrote for an audience that had some knowledge of that work, perhaps acquired over several years. Book reviews are a simple way (in one thousand words or less) of trying out a new style of presenting your ideas on your field that is invaluable. Once you gain a feel for writing for a general audience in this way, writing acceptable articles becomes a far more easier task.

There are a few more things that can be said about book reviews. Perhaps the best thing about them is that they offer a crucial glimpse at the world of publishing. Probably a few months after you submit your review (perhaps you have forgotten what you wrote already), you will be sent publisher's proofs and a copyright assignment form. This will usually be accompanied with some kind of order form. In general, you will have no more than a week or two to get these documents back to the publisher. The publisher's proofs are copies of the typesetting of your review. What you will need to do (in red or blue ink) is make any necessary corrections to your review: if you do nothing, what you see is what you will get as a final product. It is never a good idea to add anything: if you add too many words the publisher will charge you per word for their inconvenience. The copyright form is ego boosting: a publisher actually wants to *own* your work. While handing over the copyright to your work can also seem contrary to self-empowerment, it is usually a legal necessity prior to getting published: depending on how prestigious you are in the world, if you do not sign on the dotted line your review will never be published.

Finally, there will usually be some kind of order form. In most instances, the publisher will send you something like one copy of the journal in which your review appears and/or five to ten copies of the review section of a whole of the journal in which your review appears. For 'a nominal fee' you can purchase individual copies of the journal as well. Some publishers also offer discounts to authors: if interested, you should contact the reviews editor at this stage and ask about it. In most instances, your review will appear in the journal a few months afterwards. All of this may seem

administrative and tedious, but it plays on a grander scale when publishing articles. The difference is that now you know what to expect through this experience.

When you have written your review—surprise!—you can add your first entry on your c.v. under ‘publication’. A star is born. While book reviews never made or broke anyone, I do not know personally anyone who has been offered a tenure track position who did not have a book review somewhere on his or her c.v. It demonstrates that you have an interest in contributing to the profession, however small that contribution is. They are simple to get and for that reason far less prestigious than articles: forget about listing them as publications for the RAE. However, when you attempt to gain an academic position and try to distinguish yourself from other candidates, this will help do the trick.

Conference papers

With your book review under your belt, it is time to take the next step: writing conference papers. While not every article published existed previously as a conference paper, most have done so. Moreover, many of the more well known articles were presented more than once. I do not suggest a coincidence—so don’t try to make a record for the most presentations of a single paper, a horrible idea—but highlight a correlation.

Getting onto conference programmes is not difficult, although not as easy as becoming a book reviewer. In general, conferences hold ‘calls for papers’ several months prior to the date the conference is being held. Thus, you have to plan ahead of time to be on top of them. In most cases, conferences ask for complete papers

prepared for anonymous review. What this means is that you should submit one or two copies (or more, depending on what the conference organisers stipulate) of your paper without acknowledging yourself: for each copy, attach a title sheet with the paper's name, your name, and your contact details.

Sometimes instead of a full paper, conferences ask only for a paper *proposal*. These conferences can be easier to get into if you have a nifty 250 word or less (in general) proposal. The difficulty always lies in the rush to actually having the thing ready by the conference date: it is not the case that there is not enough time, but instead these things are put off for far too long—I am the poster boy for this problem.

A good idea is to try to get into postgraduate conference programmes before a professional conference. For one reason, the competition to postgraduate conferences will be less intense than if one had to compete with well known professors. A second reason is that postgraduate conferences tend to be more receptive and open, than more rigid professional conferences. Either way, if you can get on a programme, you have your first entry under 'conference presentations' on your c.v.: further distinguishing yourself and improving your chances of securing an academic position in the future.

Let me say a few brief words about conference presentation giving before discussing how to use conference papers for publishing. First, when you arrive to present your paper, never staple it. This is important advice: get in the habit of using clips and never stapling your work. (We will see below reasons why you should never staple a journal submission.) Second, speak slowly and loud enough to be heard by everyone. Third, do not worry about questions from the audience. Whilst they may well be

legitimate concerns about what you are up to, the mood is almost never any 'hostile fire'. Sure, if you did a great job on your paper, you may earn some approving slaps on the back. However, like book reviews, no one's career is made or lost giving a paper: you will not be blackballed from Harvard because not everyone there was convinced you were right at a conference. (Of course, an exception may be if you insult a member of the audience!)

The relevance for publishing is getting some good feedback. As you may probably know already, it is hard enough getting anyone besides your supervisors to go over your work and give you comments. Giving a conference presentation is an easy way to get commentary from (usually) a half way decent number of people. Problems the audience sees may be entirely mistaken, but it is important to see what they pick up on. If and when the time comes to submit your paper to a journal, the journal's referees may well pick up on these points too. What you should do is pre-empt these problems when revising the paper.

In certain circumstances, a conference presentation is a one way ticket to a publication: some conferences publish their proceedings. In other instances, someone in the audience may ask you to submit the paper to a particular journal for publication. These instances are unfortunately rare. I must admit that I am personally sceptical about conference proceedings and would suggest giving the paper at the conference, but opting out of the proceedings when possible. Why do such a thing? Well, publishing the paper in conference proceedings may require assigning copyright to the publishers. If so, that means you cannot publish the paper elsewhere in another journal. In most cases, you may get the paper into a higher profile journal than the

proceedings, perhaps with a bit more effort. In any event, conference proceedings are the least important category of article publication. This is not to suggest for a single moment they should be discredited: indeed, getting a paper in conference proceedings are akin to killing two birds with one stone—you gain on your c.v. both an entry under ‘conference presentations’ *and* the hallowed ‘publications’. However, usually with a little extra effort you can do a bit better.

The final thing to keep in mind before moving to the next section on publishing itself is what giving conference presentations allows you to do: it allows you to hone the development of your ‘voice’. That is, it is a fantastic opportunity to present your thoughts to a general audience. The better you can communicate to this audience, the more successful your career will be.

Articles

We are now ready to delve into articles. The lessons learned from book reviews and conference papers will be put into action at this stage. Several things can be said. Perhaps the most difficult question is knowing what exactly you should write on. At this stage you should really immerse yourself with journals in your area: be aware of which journal is publishing what. If you are working on, say, theories of property or democratic transitions, know which journals are publishing articles on these topics. For one thing, if you have something in mind that is very similar to what a journal just published, they may be unwilling to look at your article as it would cramp variety. Hopefully, if something is published in your area on something you have been working on, a good idea is to consider putting together a ‘reply’ or ‘discussion piece’ (they are essentially the same thing).

Writing replies is the easiest way to publish an article, albeit a brief one. Why? Well, when you put together a full article it must be made plain the importance of what you are working on: why exactly should *they* worry about *this*? When a journal has decided to publish an article on something, this first test has passed: the editor(s) and the journal's referees are confident in the ability of the piece to contribute positively to the literature. Thus, when you put together a reply you need not say anything about why the general topic is particularly important.

Instead, you must make plain the particular importance of some kind of defect in the article, perhaps linking it to problems elsewhere in the literature (although this should be hinted at, not brought in at any length). Make a list of possible shortcomings first and then rank them from most to least important. As a good general rule of them, you should not worry about more than two or three defects—preferably just one—no matter how many dozen you believe the author has made. In addition, you may question the perfection of the article, but never question the decision to publish the article: if the article was not important to begin with, then surely a short reply is even more worthless and you will appear the greater fool for wasting your time on a reply.

When writing about the defect it is best to begin with a short presentation of the author's view that you will criticize and how this problem might infect his or her argument as a whole. The key here is being concise and to the point: clarity is everything. The reader must get a clear picture of what happened in this article you are taking issue with in only a few steps. The more complicated a picture you present, the more difficult it will be for the reader to see what is going on: and if the reader is

unclear what is going on, convincing him or her will be next to impossible. After presenting the author's view, discuss the one or two points you wish to raise. These points should be as direct as possible: do delete points that are not so. End with a conclusion that states clearly and accurately why what you did is important for readers to consider.

Read and re-read the reply, double-checking your grammar and spelling, page numbers cited, etc. In general, editors will not consider replies more than 1500-2000 words so be sure to keep within their limits. Every journal has 'guidelines for contributors': find these out and stick to them, whatever you think the journal should do otherwise. If you are able, try to have colleagues or supervisors take a quick look. Before I send anything off (including this piece) I am sure to read it aloud (to my cats Miles and Ella) to double-check myself.

A few last mechanics to keep in mind. I never, never, never staple my work. Editors I know sneer at stapled submissions. Why is that? Editors send submissions to referees. Not every referee who is sent a copy of something to report on has the time to put together a report. When this happens, editors need to make an extra copy of the paper and send it on to someone else. Having to remove staples from papers that will then get stuck and jam the department's photocopier produce an unnecessary irritant. Irritating editors is a bad idea, especially when it is easily avoided. Moreover, flipping around a stapled paper at conferences is more awkward than just turning loose pages over (depending on how strong any breeze is). Thus, you should get out of any habit of stapling your work.

My unstapled work is always kept together with a simple black binder clip or paperclip. The paper I use is always thick colourlaser paper that is of 100 g/m² grain. The reason is simple: appearance is everything. What you submit will be in the hands of someone who will decide the acceptability of your work. Using good paper, justifying the margins, not using staples, etc. will look and feel like something publishable. When sending off your submission, always include a cover letter that states that you are submitting the said piece to the particular journal for consideration, what (in one or two sentences) you are up in the submission, state that it is not under consideration elsewhere (otherwise you could be wasting the time of editors and referees who may learn your identity when they notice the title in a rival journal—one bad idea), and list your contact details including an email address.

The key to publishing a reply or discussion is in staying ‘on message’ (as it were) and being quick to submit. A good motivation to have is thinking ‘if I saw a defect so convincingly and quickly, I may not be alone’. If a journal has already accepted a reply to a previously published piece, they may be unwilling to run yours as well, even if yours is a better reply. After all, publishers set page limit guidelines on editors: once the journal has committed to publishing something there is immediately less space to use and devote to other materials.

If you can get your reply in fairly quickly, your odds of getting it accepted are much better than if you had submitted an original article. The difference? Well, articles are typically scrutinized via anonymous refereeing where referees have about three months (on average) to write reports to the editor. Replies may be read only by the editor or one referee: no formal report need be submitted, only a thumbs up or down.

Therein lies the importance of striving for a readable, concise, ‘on message’ reply: if your piece has these qualities, you have yourself a great candidate to get in. Even more importantly, journals generally love to receive feedback like this. It lets them know people are reading the journal and taking it seriously. In addition, if you point out some obvious problems with something, they may reconsider who referees for the journal—perhaps using *you* in the future—to ensure quality control.

After you have submitted the piece, you will receive an acknowledgement postcard, letter or email that will say the journal has your materials safely. On occasion, they will indicate immediately whether or not they will review the submission. Hopefully, they will. If they do review it, expect not to hear anything for only a month or two: the editor will generally let you know how long he or she expects the process to take. If the time elapses, wait an extra week or two before emailing the editor to check your submission’s status—although this is always a reasonable thing to do.

Now when I said that your chances are better with a reply, that is a far cry from an ‘easy’ acceptance: the vast majority of articles and replies will be *rejected*. That is how it works. The big shortcoming of being in the reply business is that if your reply is rejected you may well be snookered: all reputable journals have policies against publishing work critical of articles in other journals. If you are lucky, you might sneak the reply into somewhere else, but it is bound to be much lower profile.

At this point you may wonder what to do about full length articles. The answer is simple: basically, the same thing as replies. The difference (other than greater prestige) is the longer length and the need for making a case for the article. In other

words, in your article you try to identify some problem in general—as opposed to a particular article—or a new interpretation. You will have to say a few words making plain why what you are looking at should be of interest to others in your area. At all cost, do not get into anything but clear and short reviews of other work on your topic and focus as much as possible *only* on your central contentions. Whatever you do, do not allocate space in your article to side issues: journals have precious little space and referees tend to be allergic to articles that lack clear focus. Funnily enough, in keeping a strict focus, your article may be easier to write. For one thing, it is completely unnecessary to include ‘everything’. In fact, including citations or arguments not central to what you are discussing distracts from your argument overall and threatens the acceptability of your article for publication in a journal.

Before submitting, you will hopefully have an opportunity or two to present it at a conference to see where others see potential sticking points or possible confusion. (If you are economical, perhaps one of your central resources for the conference paper you hope to submit for publication was a book you wrote a review of.) Again, when these things arise all you need to do is consider the fact that the referees may well have the same difficulties. Do what you can to pre-empt these worries.

When sending the paper off, do all you would do if it were a reply: make sure the paper’s arguments are entirely ‘on message’, do not staple it, use full margin justification, print on good paper, do not acknowledge your authorship in the article, stick to the journal’s guidelines for contributors, and include a cover letter with full contact details (including email address) explicitly stating your intent to submit the paper to this journal only, a brief one to two sentence statement on what you are up to

in the paper and end it with ‘My contact details are listed below. I look forward to hearing from you’. The key to good cover letters is keeping them short and sweet.

Afterwards you can expect to wait a few months during which time the journal will have hopefully sent the paper to referees. In any event, you must be psychologically prepared for a negative response: I have been told that (on average) for every one article that gets published, seven are rejected. While I have been lucky enough to have several publications, my first attempts were all swift failures.

You cannot be afraid to try. I know of too many exceptional minds that claim something like this for the reason why they have thought against submitting a paper for a journal or conference: ‘Well, I want to make sure I get it *right*’. I have always thought this a sign of insecurity. In this RAE life we all live, reviews of departments happen every so many years. If you decide against submitting papers, you may become a liability for departmental funding. The greatest academics in all areas at least as early as Plato have had any number of flaws in what they were up to. There is every reason to think that no matter how hard you try, one day something any one of us does may be found to be less than completely perfect. I think a leap has to be made and a risk taken. If you try and fail, you will most likely receive the referees’ reports that will signal the problems they saw in your paper. This offers a great opportunity to improve your work and get it accepted elsewhere. If you never try, you will never publish. Honestly, there is little to lose in trying and everything to gain.

Better still, once you are published it is an accomplishment none can ever take away. No matter how stinging the potential replies are to your own work (and any citations

of your work only adds to the piece's prestige!), your having won acceptance into a journal—especially if it can be done early in your career—will help tremendously on the job market. Moreover, once you have published something you are always free to change your mind: if Plato can do it, anyone can.

Before concluding this discussion a final word on what to do if, in all likelihood, your article does not get accepted into the first journal you send it off to. In general, it is good advice to never submit to a journal more than once per year, and fewer times than that if they have recently published an article you wrote. Hopefully, you will have received some form of comments for their decision. Make sure that rejecting your submission was not too easy: never allow a journal to reject your submission because you did not reference sources in their style or some other formatting consideration. Double-check recent issues of the journal to ensure that your topic is something the journal would be open to considering devoting space to. Moreover, as an extra touch, it is a good idea to work in (if, and only if, possible) a past article of the journal you are submitting to in your submission.

In any event, take into consideration the referees' comments. They are not always helpful, but when they are they can be invaluable. Make the suggestions they call for: they will improve your chances in getting the paper accepted elsewhere. The next step? Easy: submit and submit again! (For an excellent list of potential journals to submit to, please visit the Postgraduate Network's Research Directory.)

Final remarks

I do hope that there is something useful in the discussion above. Rather than harp on and on about the obstacles to publishing I hope that here I have given a view to what you—a postgraduate—can do about publishing today. For instance, as soon as you finish reading these remarks search out someone to contact on writing book reviews. Afterwards, get your hands on calls for conference papers in your area and begin preparing a submission. In so doing, stick to the lessons of replies and articles: keep the arguments tight, stay ‘on message’, and avoid making more points than necessary. Take into consideration any sticking points your supervisors or conference audience suggests to you, revise your paper, and submit the paper to a journal. As the review process can take a few months, always be sure to have something under review at any given time once you get more comfortable writing for a general audience in your area.

If I am making all of this out to sound simple, I am only doing so because it is. All you need to do now is start on the road to publishing today.

Thom Brooks was Secretary of the PGN and founding editor of the *Journal of Moral Philosophy* published by Sage. He is the author of nearly thirty articles that have appeared in journals such as *Utilitas*, *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, *History of Political Thought*, *Politics*, *Review of International Studies*, *Rutgers Law Record*, and many others. Coincidentally, he began with writing book reviews and has written for *Ethics*, *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, *Res Publica*, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, and others.