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How to sabotage your Pacific Conservation Biology paper

Mike Calver

School of Veterinary and Life Sciences, Murdoch University, Murdoch, WA 6150, Australia

Many years ago, not quite as far back as the original Gettysburg address, but still before the birth of many readers, I qualified as a schoolteacher. One snippet I recall from that remote time is that a bad example is often more instructive than a good one, because it focuses on mistakes to avoid. Therefore rather than reiterate the advice on preparing a good paper that seems a staple for editors everywhere, I offer a list of the best ways to ensure that a submission to Pacific Conservation Biology returns to the author like a boomerang, or languishes in the production queue.

Hurdle 1: Not getting to review

No editor wants to waste a reviewer's time by sending an incomplete, poorly written paper out for review, so the first chance to sabotage your paper comes with the editor's initial read. Try:

- ensuring that your paper has no relevance to conservation in the Pacific region (as defined on the journal website)
- omitting tables or figures referred to in the paper
- omitting pagination
- not formatting the paper to journal conventions
- omitting a whole section of the paper (who needs the methods anyway, just segue from the introduction to the results)
- saving time by just spell-checking the manuscript, not proof-reading it. It won't matter if a word is in the wrong context if it's spelled correctly. When the editor comes across gems such

as ‘genitally modified food’ instead of ‘genetically modified food’, ‘male-biased sex ration’ instead of ‘male- biased sex ratio’, or ‘thylacine’ for ‘thymine’ (‘thiamine’ for ‘thymine’ is a little too subtle) the chances of a fast return of your paper will multiply

- not even spell checking. The editor is unlikely to read the manuscript phonetically to discover your meaning
- leaving all the formatting, proofing, referencing (and preferably most of the writing) to the least experienced author, especially if that author is not fluent in English.

Hurdle 2: Failing the reviews

Even if you bypass the first editorial cull, you can still achieve rejection by confusing or annoying reviewers. Good strategies are:

- including a biased or incomplete literature review in the introduction. Remember that the reviewers are likely to be prominent researchers in the field, so give them ammunition by ignoring significant papers or including another person’s ideas or data without attribution. With luck, you might even ignore your own reviewers!
- giving a confused or unconvincing rationale for the work, or no rationale at all
- giving an incomplete account of methods, especially study design and analysis
- ignoring essential points of rigour, such as experimental controls or tests for the assumptions of statistical analyses
- choosing a title that has little, if any, relation to the subject matter of the paper (it doesn’t matter as long as there is a colon in it somewhere)
- writing an uninformative abstract or one that reflects the paper you wish you’d written, not the one you actually submitted
- giving the same information in figures and tables, or even go for the trifecta and repeat yourself in figures, tables and text

- overwriting – it's a winner! 'The male post-copulatory refractory quiescent period' is so much better than 'exhausted'
- recovering from the mistake of actually including aims in the introduction by covering a different set of aims in the discussion. Experienced reviewers often look for aims in the introduction and check if they are met in the discussion, so it is easy to disappoint them
- working on the editor while the paper is in review by emailing every fortnight to ask if the reviews are available yet.

Hurdle 3: Mishandling reviewers' reports

The simplest strategy at this point is to ignore the reviewers' reports until your opportunity to revise lapses and your paper is treated as a new submission (with the chance to trip at Hurdles 1 or 2 this time around). Direct approaches are to:

- resubmit with a covering letter saying that you dealt with the comments when you didn't. Editors will take such statements on trust
- make the changes, resubmit, but don't list your changes in a separate document to facilitate checking by the editor, or enclose a version of the paper with track changes so the editor can see your edits
- use your right to disagree by disputing all comments and asserting that the original submission was flawless
- abuse the editor or the reviewers, especially if the editor said that the paper would go for further review.

Hurdle 4: Delays in production

If, despite your best efforts, the paper has made it this far you still have a chance to sabotage it. You can:

- flout copyright. If you want copyright material in your paper it is your right, so obtaining permissions is a waste of every- one's time. The editor and production team will disagree, so delays are assured and you might even win a rejection
- ignore guidelines for the presentation and submission of figures. If it looks good on your computer, it will be fine in print
- delay returning your proofs, or return them without attending to queries raised by the copyeditors (what would they know, anyway?)
- treat the proof stage as an opportunity to rewrite substantial sections of the paper now that there will be no further review.

Let me be serious at the end. Authors want to be published and the PCB board and the CSIRO Publishing team want to assist them in that goal. Sometimes though, pressure to publish sees manuscripts submitted prematurely, resubmissions rushed, or frustration with the final steps to ensure a high standard published product online and in print. Nobody wins in that case. Please submit your papers, but don't make them a case study for one of the points above.