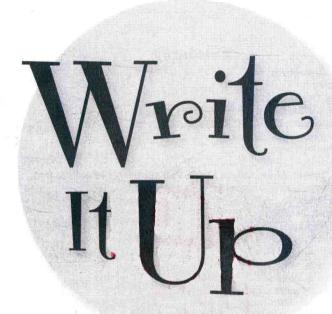


Practical Strategies for Writing and Publishing Journal Articles

Paul J. Silvia, PhD



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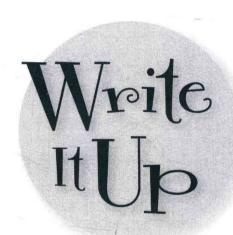
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Paul Silvia's book of advice provides everything you wanted to know—and even more that you didn't know you needed to know—about how to get published in the best journals. And he achieves all this with both wit and wisdom. This book is essential reading for all graduate students and young faculty pursuing careers in scientific research.

—Dean Keith Simonton, PhD, Distinguished Professor of Psychology, University of California, Davis

Silvia does it again: How to Write a Lot inspired us to write, and Write It Up provides the nuts and bolts on crafting a high-impact—and even eloquent—empirical report.

—John Dunlosky, PhD, Department of Psychological Sciences, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio



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Preface

Beginners have a lot of good resources for learning how to write articles: The latest *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA, 2010) and related books (e.g., Nicol & Pexman, 2010a, 2010b) are touchstones, and many other books give good advice for people who are getting started (e.g., Sternberg, 2000). These resources are valuable for teaching beginners the basics of what a scientific paper in APA Style should look like, what the different sections are for, and what common flaws should be avoided.

But book smarts only go so far. Street smarts—the knowledge and strategies gained from hard-earned experience—are also needed to navigate the mean streets of academic writing and publishing. How do prolific writers write? How do people who have published dozens upon dozens of articles pick journals, outline Introductions, and decide what to discuss in Discussions? How do they deal with reviewers' comments and craft resubmission letters? How do they decide which projects are worth their time?

Write It Up develops a practical approach to writing and publishing journal articles, one rooted in my own experience and the good advice others have shared with me. If you work in an IMRAD field—your papers have an Introduction, Method, Results, and Discussion in APA Style—in the social, behavioral, educational, and health sciences, this book will show you how to plan, write, and submit good manuscripts. Along the way, we'll also consider some issues that rarely come up, such as how to write effectively with coauthors, to cultivate a strong sense of style, and to create a broader program of research. My approach emphasizes writing not for mere publication, but for impact, and for making a difference in the scholarly conversation. Our work will matter more if we are reflective and discerning, if we focus on our stronger ideas and try to communicate them well.

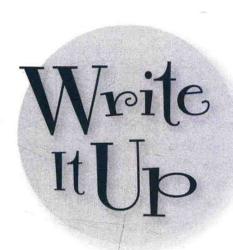
This book is a companion volume to How to Write a Lot—an older and hopefully wiser companion, one with more gray in the beard and more tales from the trenches of academic writing. How to Write a Lot focused on motivational aspects of academic writing: how to make a writing schedule and stick to it, how to avoid binge writing, and how to write during the workweek instead of on the weekends and holidays. Write It Up focuses on the nuts and bolts of writing and publishing empirical articles. I've wanted to write a book about how to write good journal articles for at least a decade, but it took publishing a few dozen articles before I felt that I knew what I was doing and a few dozen more before I thought I could put my tacit ideas into words.

The great team at APA Books, as before, was a pleasure to work with. I want to give particular thanks to Linda Malnasi McCarter, both for her advice and her partnership in culinary crimes; to Susan Herman, for her developmental guidance; and to the reviewers of an earlier draft, for hitting a lot of nails on the head. So many people have given me good advice about writing over the years, more than I can thank, but Janet Boseovski, Nathan DeWall, Mike Kane, Tom Kwapil, Davna Touron, and Ethan Zell, whether they knew it or not, were particularly helpful while I was writing this book. In hindsight, I can see that I was lucky to get excellent advice and mentoring in writing during graduate school at the University of Kansas-my thanks particularly to Dan Batson, Monica Biernat, Nyla Branscombe, the late Jack Brehm, Chris Crandall, Allen Omoto, the late Rick Snyder, and Larry Wrightsman. I'm still coming to understand much of what I learned there. The graduate students in my academic writing seminar and research group—Roger Beaty, Naomi Chatley, Kirill Fayn, Candice Lassiter, Emily Nusbaum, and Bridget Smeekens-helped to refine the ideas and to mock the many jokes that didn't work. To be sure, I don't imagine that anyone thanked here agrees with all, most, or any of the ideas in this book, for which I alone take the blame.

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Introduction

I had so much more free time in grad school. Of the many quirky hobbies I developed to keep me off the mean streets of Lawrence, Kansas, the oddest was founding Broken Boulder Press, a registered nonprofit that published experimental poetry and fiction. Many people say they like poetry, which usually means they had a Birkenstock-shod friend recite a few lines from Kahlil Gibran at their wedding. But our press published weird and wondrous stuff, from found poetry to algorithmic writing to visual poems. And we always got the same response from our less adventurous friends: Why do people write that stuff? Does anyone read it? Where did you get that awesome saddle stapler?

I closed the press many years ago, but I get the same questions about my scholarly writing from the blunter of my friends: Who reads that stuff? Why do you write for such a small audience? These are questions that all writers have to face, whether they're dabbling in experimental language art or experimental social psychology, so we'll face them in this chapter. Time is short, writing is hard, and papers are long. Why do we do this? What's the purpose behind all this effort? What writing

projects are worth our time? What is worth publishing, and what is worth burying?

WHY WE WRITE

Why do we publish work at all? The answer to that question is easy: The written word will outlast us (Greenblatt, 2011), and our ideas must be fixed and archived for present and future scholars to evaluate them. But why should we publish work? What are good and bad reasons for dipping our toes into the fetid waters of peer-reviewed journals? Whenever we consider the panoply of human motives, we feel both ennobled and depressed, and examining motives for publishing papers is no exception. Exhibit 1 lists reasons for publishing that I have heard firsthand over the years. Take a moment to read them, and add some of your own if they aren't there.

All the reasons for writing sort into a few clusters. The first cluster has the noble reasons, the reasons we learn as undergraduates: to share knowledge, to advance our science, to foster positive changes in the world. These are good reasons, and we should resist applying either our aged cynicism or youthful irony to them. Science is indeed a candle in the dark (Sagan, 1995), and sometimes it feels like the sun burned out.

The second cluster has the practical reasons, the honest and pragmatic motives that respond to the realities of scientific institutions: to get a job; to keep a job; to promote your students; and to build your credibility with

EXHIBIT 1. Reasons for Writing, Grand and Scurrilous, That I've Heard Firsthand

- To share knowledge with peers
- To pass the quantity cutoff for promotion and tenure
- To show my colleagues that I'm right about something
- To further our science
- To make myself a cooler person
- To denounce a foolish idea in the literature
- To build credibility when applying for grants
- To get a job
- To help the grad students get jobs
- To get a better annual merit raise, which is pegged to quantity rather than quality
- To advance social justice or influence public policy
- To build a professional relationship with a new colleague
- To avoid looking like a failure
- To show a track record of successful collaboration before applying for a collaborative grant
- To learn a new method or research area
- To outdo the people I went to grad school with, who did better then and got better jobs
- To educate the public at large
- To show I still can do it
- To have fun
- To impress my grad school adviser
- It's an interesting challenge
- No reason—it's just what I do
- It beats working for a living

funding agencies, community groups, and the public at large. Humans respond to incentives in the environment. The environments of most social scientists encourage publishing more and discourage fresh paint and windows.

The third cluster has the intrinsically motivated reasons. Many people find writing articles fun. Most of us will look askance at that one—I usually hear it from people who also say, "All your body really needs is water!" and "Put down that coffee and hop on a bike!" as well as other exclamatory curiosities—but it's a good reason. If not fun, writing articles can be challenging, a kind of mental weightlifting. In this cluster is the writing-to-learn method (Zinsser, 1988)—a favorite of mine—in which people decide to write a book or article as a way of teaching themselves a new area and discovering what they think about it.

The vain and sordid and unseemly reasons, our final cluster, usually lurk in the dark recesses of the scientific mind. Over the years, people have shared with me, in moments of honesty and impaired sobriety, some cringe-worthy reasons. Some people publish papers to compete with their peers; to see if they still have the stuff; to impress their advisers; to prove to themselves that they aren't one-hit wonders; and to feel like a better, cooler person. It sounds sad to publish journal articles to feel validated as a person—some people need a dog or hobby—but it happens. Analyses of the downfall of the notorious Diederik Stapel, who published fraudulent data for decades in social psychol-

ogy, point to ambition mixed with an unhealthy desire for celebrity and attention (Bhattacharjee, 2013).

WRITE FOR IMPACT, NOT FOR MERE PUBLICATION

What can we take away from this airing of academic writing's coffee-stained laundry? My opinion is that people may write for whatever reasons they want so long as they recognize that their readers don't care why they wrote something up. Authors are entitled to their reasons, but they aren't entitled to an audience. Readers want something good, something interesting, something worth their time and trouble. Papers written out of vanity or desperation won't win you a reader's respect or repeat business. Think of all the weak papers you've read. Did you ever think, "I'll overlook the rushed writing, tired ideas, and lack of implications for anything. That guy needed a job, so I totally understand about this woeful 'least publishable unit' paper. So, what else of his can I read and cite?"

This takes us to our book's guiding idea: Write for impact, not for mere publication. Early in our careers, when we're twee naïfs trying to find our way in the confusing world of science, most of us just want to get published—publishing anything, anywhere, with anyone would be better than remaining a vita virgin. But once we get a few papers published and the infections from the more sordid journals have cleared up, most of us learn that publishing papers isn't in itself especially