

# Regional Insights

A REVIEW OF  
FRESH IDEAS

Regional  
Studies  
Association

THE GLOBAL FORUM FOR CITY  
AND REGIONAL RESEARCH,  
DEVELOPMENT AND POLICY

## PUBLISHING TOP TIPS

**Publishing is a way of life** *that you have to find a way to accommodate!*

**You need a publishing strategy** *that is right for your goals!*

**Choose the right journal** *to fit with your material and your strategy!*

**Always think of your readers** *when producing your manuscript!*

**Your paper needs a clear structure** *that is coherent and logical!*

**Convince your editors** *by submitting a properly prepared paper!*

**Use feedback and reviews** *to strengthen your article!*

**Books remain important** *even if they might not seem to be that valued!*

## ***INTRODUCTION***

*Regional Insights* is the early career publication of the Regional Studies Association. Its remit is to provide a platform for student and early career members of the Association to place their findings in front of a wider audience. *Regional Insights* publishes articles from early careers and students which convey a fresh idea. All our articles have a clearly interesting message for our readers, arguing for example that new approaches are needed for researchers, planners and/or policy makers or bringing a new region or regional situation into perspective. *Regional Insights* has a philosophy of “formative publishing”. By working closely with potential authors from the abstract stage onwards, we seek to encourage early career researchers not only to develop their writing skills, but also to learn about the formalities of publishing more general.

As part of our wider mission *Regional Insights* organised a “Publishing Workshop” in the frame of the RSA European Conference, held at the Delft University of Technology, May 13<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup>, 2012. Our six very engaged panellists (experienced authors, reviewers, editors and mentors) provided the audience with their personal “Publishing Top Tips”, specifically identifying the dilemmas that early career researchers might face, and providing insights on what to consider when developing strategies for improving their publication performance.

The six panellist, who presented at our Publishing Workshop were:

- Gillian Bristow, Cardiff University, UK
- Gordon Dabinett, Sheffield University, UK
- Andreas Faludi, Delft University of Technology, NL
- Vincent Nadin, Delft University of Technology, NL
- Brian Webb, Manchester University, UK
- Wil Zonneveld, Delft University of Technology, NL

We would like to thank also John Edwards (IPTS, Spain) who acted as rapporteur for the workshop and is separately producing a short “*One for the road...*” contribution to appear in *Regional Insights*. John’s report seeks to create a permanent record of the key messages, recommendations and advices from that workshop by distilling the main points emerging.

This “Publishing Top Tips” report has been prepared by the Editors of *Regional Insights* (*Paul Benneworth*, University of Twente, NL and *Beatrix Haselsberger*, Vienna University of Technology, Austria) as a resource for our workshop attendees as well as other early career researchers. It aims to provide a comprehensive summary and synthesis of what was said at the Publishing Workshop. As the panellists inevitably overlapped and complemented each other in their presentations and the subsequent discussion, the attribution of ideas to particular participants is not always possible and as a consequence this report is structured around the eight main themes (the 8 Top Tips) which emerged in this workshop.

We are very grateful to all our speakers for the participation in the event, and their permission to use their contributions for the development of this guide to scientific publishing.

*Paul Benneworth & Beatrix Haselsberger  
for the Editors of Regional Insights, June 2012*

**Top Tip 1:**

**Publishing is a way of life** *that you have to find a way to accommodate!*

- Understand the system of publishing and in particular the different roles people play within it (editors, reviewers, mentors, authors and readers).
- Become active in the publishing system by acting as a reviewer. This helps you to learn how to structure papers and how to make a good argument as well as provides you with insights how the opinion-forming and decision-making process works.
- Contribute to an academic debate by writing for blogs, if you have something current and timely to say.

**Top Tip 2:**

**You need a publishing strategy** *that is right for your goals!*

- Develop a publishing strategy which ...
  - a. is right for you and fits in with your goals,
  - b. corresponds with what you want to achieve,
  - c. allows you to build up a pipeline of articles,
  - d. is comprehensive in how your articles build on each other;
- Make clear what your contribution is if you write a co-authored paper.
- Publish in a range of different journals and eventually in many different disciplinary areas.
- Avoid self-plagiarism. Your papers should overlap like ‘roof tiles’, supported sufficiently enough on the one beneath it, but clearly playing its own role.

**Top Tip 3:**

**Choose the right journal** *to fit with your material and your strategy!*

- Use the keyword search (e.g. ISI journal index or Scopus) to figure out the right outlet whereto to submit your article.
- Publish in those journals where you found the papers that were useful for you.
- Be realistic when seeking to move into new disciplinary fields and factor the additional time it might take to get into such an outlet.
- Ask yourself if your paper covers debates of interest to your chosen journal and why your paper helps the journal advance those debates.
- Never submit one paper to multiple journals simultaneously.

**Top Tip 4:**

**Always think of your readers** *when producing your manuscript!*

- A good article is immediately clear – from the opening paragraph – about the problem it addresses, the key issues emerging, and why that matters.
- Do not criticise others needlessly to increase the apparent importance of your own work. Good papers make a constructive contribution.
- Avoid a huge literature review at the start of your paper, focus strictly on literature necessary for your paper’s argument.
- Use words to communicate – simple and clear writing is far more convincing than affected, pretentious, jargon-ridden prose.

**Top Tip 5:**

**Your paper needs a clear structure** *that is coherent and logical!*

- A decent paper has an introduction, literature review, problem statement, method, analysis and conclusion, with appropriate abstract and clear title.
- Ensure all sections of your paper fit together giving progression and balance.
- Give the reader a clear reason to read the paper in the introduction.
- A good introduction provides a rationale, the key debates, your research question, approach taken and your argument.
- At the end of the paper always answer the questions raised in the introduction.

**Top Tip 6:**

**Convince your editors** *by submitting a properly prepared paper!*

- A good paper is interesting, timely, readable, reference, logical, making a contribution and is relevant to the audience and the journal.
- A poor paper is not academically sound, poorly researched, superficial, failing to convey a problem, missing facts, making errors in facts and is failing to deliver its goal.
- No editor wants to receive a paper that does not fit within its scope, has not been proofread, has 60Mb of illustration, or has sections that are either incomplete or entirely missing.

**Top Tip 7:**

**Use feedback and reviews** *to strengthen your article!*

- Use review comments to improve your paper to bring it closer to publication.
- You will get less fewer negative comments if you ask mentors, colleagues, conference contacts to preview your paper, and then you proof read it.
- When submitting a revised version of your paper, always explain to the editor how you responded to the reviewer comments.

**Top Tip 8:**

**Books remain important** *even if they might not seem to be that valued!*

- Publishing your Ph.D. thesis as a book makes sense when it is so integrated that it is difficult to carve it into paper-sized chunks out.
- Submit a convincing book proposal to a publisher, including a contents overview, an explanation of its novelty, its potential market and competitors, and potentially a draft chapter.
- Do not forget that your proposal will be reviewed, and contracts are only issued for promising publications.
- Publishing a book is time-consuming but can definitely be worth the effort.



The workshop was opened with the observation from Andreas Faludi that publishing is a way of life, and its pursuit is extremely hard work. He argued that the one piece of advice he hoped all participants would take away was that understanding publishing means also understanding that publishing is a system, and great stress can emerge if you confuse the experience as an author with the way that the system works. The basis of the system is the different roles played by various people, such as journal editors, special issue editors, book series editors, authors, reviewers, mentors and arguably most importantly, readers. It is only by *playing* different roles in the system that an author can really understand how the system works, and put into some perspective the (sometimes negative) experiences that authors have in trying to publish their research.

Besides reading widely, and thinking which papers do or do not work, the best way for an early career researcher to gain an alternate perspective in the system is to act as a reviewer. This provides an opportunity to understand how the opinion-forming process works, and therefore to get an insight into the way editors are advised in forming judgements on one's own work. Acting as a reviewer also helps to understand how to structure papers and how to make good arguments, by forcing you to make judgements about the extent to which others have been successful in making arguments which seem convincing and logical. The same holds true to a lesser extent for reviewing books for publishers. All these activities provide an insight into how decisions are made, about what is and is not published, and hence what constitutes a good article. Understanding that decision-making process helps starting authors to give their work the best possible chance in negotiating that process.

Publishing as a way of life includes also writing for blogs, as they too play a role in developing writing skills. If you have something that is current and timely, it is a way for you to develop a concise narrative around your research and identify what your readers might find interesting. Blogs invite comments which at their best can be a form of academic debate, so responding to comments is a way to understand that process of academic debate. They are also useful in learning presentation skills, in particular finding ways to speak that allow you to bring theoretical debates into the ground in practical ways. Blogs can give you visibility and might lead to invitations to contribute to other publications, such as newspapers or magazines. But at the same time, you have to remember that you are writing in a professional capacity, and not to get carried away in the banter and slanging that can infect some corners of web discourse.



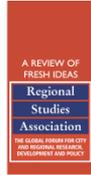
The speakers in the workshop highlighted the need to develop a publishing strategy which is right for you and fits in with your goals. The starting point for such a strategy is the question of what the individual wants to achieve, and that can vary – you might want to target building a career, achieving promotion or contributing to the field. It also relates to the kinds of research that you are doing (for example policy research using current contemporary data may age quickly, and that might require that it is published as soon as possible). The third consideration in developing a publishing strategy is ensuring that you have a range of different choices, so it is important to build up a pipeline that continues to progress even if one of your publications suffers from being (even temporarily rejected) or you encounter temporary problems in being able to write papers. Finally you should not forget that for every paper you write, you should have a clear narrative of how this paper contributes to what you want to achieve in the field! All these variables affect the speed, with which you should try to generate articles and the extent that you should stay in one field.

There is a trade-off between publishing more or fewer articles that may involve co-authors: if you choose to increase your output through collaboration, and you want your career to progress, then in every paper that you write, you need to have a clear sense of what has been your contribution, and how that contribution fits to your overall strategy. Working with co-authors changes the dynamics of writing, and guidance on how to make sure that your contribution comes through strongly is something that you can discuss with a mentor.

If you choose to contribute in many different disciplinary areas that do not have a strong tradition of interconnection, then you need to be clear why doing that is right for you, and why doing that helps you to achieve your goals. Even if you want to focus on one discipline, you should publish in a range of different journals, and gauge submissions to the level of ambition of both the journal and yourself.

There is no relationship between the level and quality of the paper, and the reputation of the author, or indeed whether English is the first language of the author – but a good proof read always helps! The various editors on the panel noted that there were Ph.D. students that submitted excellent papers, whilst some professors themselves submitted papers that were half-baked and did not stand up to scrutiny. Of course, you need to get independent opinions on the quality of particular papers you write, and that is where mentors, internal department reviewers, supervisors and conference presentations can help.

It is now common for there to be overlaps between your articles, and the panel gave guidance on how to manage that. The most important point is to avoid self-plagiarism – copying and pasting text from one of your papers into another one. Every word that you submit in an article either needs to be written especially for that article, or needs to be placed in quotation marks and referenced. Wil Zonneveld offered a nice metaphor for how much overlap between papers is suitable – he said it should be like roof tiles, resting just enough on the one beneath it, but also clearly playing its own particular role. The one exception to this was where publishers decided to publish special issues as books, or gave permission for you to use previously published articles – properly acknowledged – as the basis for chapters in your own books.



Once you have decided on a strategy for how you are going to divide your research work into packages as papers and books, the most important choice is where to send that work. The best way to do that is to think about what the editors are looking for. Generally speaking editors are searching for papers that connect to the current debates that they are covering in the field. The best journals to submit to are those that have already covered the debate, and the best way to frame a paper to that journal is to show how you are contributing to the stock of knowledge. Various speakers warned against strategic citation – including references to that journal – solely to try to increase its likelihood of publication. Nevertheless, you need to make clear both why the paper relates to debates that interest the journal, and how your paper, if published, would help the journal take those debates forward.

Figuring out the right journal is not always that easy and therefore our speakers introduced another very simple strategy which might help you when trying to find those journals that might be useful and appropriate for you. ISI has a journal index which can be searched by keywords and Scopus allows searches for papers by keywords: both of those can be used to get a sense of which journals exist and certainly will help you to figure out the right outlet to submit your article. For people working in or hoping to worm there, then the Association of Business Schools publishes an Academic Journal Quality guide that is useful in deciding which journals you might want to target. At the same time, it makes sense to pitch the paper at a journal that has similar ambitions to the paper, in terms of quality and the scope of the contribution. A good working rule is that you should aim to publish in journals, where the papers you have found useful have been published.

There are particular perils involved when you are seeking to move into new fields. Although journals may cover similar topics, their approaches might be very different and it is not always easy for the new author to appreciate these differences. In these cases, when submitting a paper, you have to be aware that your chance of getting a “revise and resubmit” or “major corrections” is substantially higher. Although this can be off-putting, it can also be seen as the necessary cost of increasing the range of journals you publish in, and ultimately, the breadth of audience you are able to cover. But be realistic, and factor the additional time it might take to get into this outlet in your wider publishing plans.

Once you have identified a potential outlet, it is necessary to be clear what kind of submissions they are after. One panellist gave the concrete example that the *Journal of the American Planning Association* does not publish exclusively European research, and a better outlet for such an article might be the *European Journal of Spatial Development* or *European Planning Studies*.

A final point was made that a behaviour that can never be justified is to submit one paper to multiple journals simultaneously, and panellists were unanimous in recommending all early career researchers to avoid that temptation should it ever arise. Even if there are long delays in the process, make sure that you have clearly (and in writing) withdrawn a submission from consideration in a journal before submitting it to another.



Once you have decided on an outlet, the important thing to do is to produce an appropriate manuscript. From this point onwards in the process, the most important person that needs taking into consideration is the reader. This is less important in books, because there are many different kinds of readers, from those that read it cover-to-cover, to those that dip in and out, and those that peruse particular chapters as part of course reading lists (if you are lucky!). Reading widely will give you a sense of what you enjoy in a journal article. But a general rule is that a good article is immediately clear – from the opening paragraph – about what is the problem the paper addresses, what is the key issue that emerges, and why that all matters.

One panellist reserved their greatest irritation for a particular kind of self-centred writing technique in which the author simply argues that something is missing in the literature, that particular approaches dominate or that they are simply wrong. That often makes the reader feel that the author is putting others down to increase the apparent importance of their own work, but good papers are those that make a contribution. The general rule was given that if you have a quality message that stands on its own, then you don't benefit from kicking others. Sometimes even very experienced authors can fall into the trap of producing something that says that everyone else has got it wrong: there are only a handful of papers that can really shift paradigms, and it is much better to push the boundaries and add to the work of others.

A second common mistake that was highlighted in the discussions was the problem with authors who think that in some way the readers are interested in the author's personal learning journey in the paper. Rather than simply summarising the concepts necessary for the paper, there are authors who present a huge literature review at the start, setting out their own intellectual antecedents rather than what is strictly necessary for the argument in the paper. But understanding what concepts matter requires having a clear statement of the problem, issues and contribution of the paper stated at the beginning.

The quality of writing is definitely important to readers, and you could do worse than follow George Orwell's six rules for effective writing:

1. *Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print!*
2. *Never use a long word where a short one will do!*
3. *If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out!*
4. *Never use the passive where you can use the active!*
5. *Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent!*
6. *Break any of these rules sooner than saying anything outright barbarous!*

The final point to emerge was the perennial importance of papers having a clear, logical structure, as set out in the next "Top Tip".



The greatest factor determining the success of a paper at the review state is its structure (one editor noted that around 75% of the manuscripts received are insufficiently prepared). A good structure is one that conveys a coherent argument and has a logical development.

All decent papers will have some kind of introduction, literature review, problem statement, method or overview of approach, analysis and a conclusion, and every paper needs to have an abstract as well as a good title. So the starting point for a good structure is making sure that those different sections fit together well, and that means that there is progression and balance between these sections. Progression means that there is a flow between these sections, whilst balance involves making sure that one section does not dominate – all too often there can be an excessive literature review or empirical descriptions which crowd out the space for analysing and making a contribution.

As many readers are overloaded with information, you need to give the reader – already in the introduction – a clear reason to read your paper. One panellist set out their ideal introduction as a journal editor. There would be a short opening sentence that sets out the problem, issue and contribution, and then a few paragraphs which establish the problem or issue, and raise a question which the paper then seeks to answer.

The following five questions should be addressed explicitly in every introduction:

- The rationale for the paper: why does it matter and why is it important?
- What is the key literature in the field, the key debates and their recent progress?
- What is the problem and research question and why you are addressing it?
- What approach will you take to answer that question – is it conceptual or empirical, and if empirical what methods will you use and why are they reasonable?
- How is the paper organised, and what is the next step of the argument?

The introduction needs to be crafted – to convey as concisely as possible the direction the paper will go, and manage the reader's expectations about the benefits they will have from reading the paper. But the value of the introduction lies in then guiding what happens. The introduction is a roadmap through the paper – it is important not to veer off that path too far or to lead the reader down the blind alleys.

Finally, at the end of the paper, you should close the circle, answer the question raised in the introduction, and remind the reader that you have done this.



The panel were unanimous as editors that the best papers are those that are easy for the editor to deal with. But that means having a sense for the kinds of challenges that different editors face. Editors, who receive too many papers, and as a consequence have high rejection rates, look for papers, which might pass the review process smoothly. For other editors, who have fewer manuscripts, the issue could be in receiving promising papers that could be published, but take repeated reviews and editor interventions to get them there. But no editor wants to receive a paper that does not fit within its scope, has not been proofread, has 60 Mb of illustrations, or has sections that are either incomplete or entirely missing.

One of the panellists who is an editor of a journal read out two very contrasting reviewers' comments as examples of what editors really want to hear about papers, and a review of a paper that is difficult to deal with. The first paper was described as

*... interesting and timely, generally readable, referenced and logical, adding to knowledge in the field, and being relevant for both the audience and the journal.*

That paper is a clear success for the author, because the paper gives the editor a clear reason to accept it for publication. That was contrasted with the second paper, described as

*... being in a subject area with tremendous potential for your readers, but as a paper not being academically sound; it was poorly researched, scratching the surface, failing to convey the problem, not getting to the facts, not getting its facts correct and ultimately not delivering on its goal.*

That paper is definitely not ready for publication and the editor received a strong signal that the paper has to be rejected, and so for all the effort ends up with nothing.

The keywords from those two reviews provide a useful checklist highlighting the general characteristics of good and poor papers:

<b>A good paper is ...</b>	<b>A poor paper is ...</b>
interesting	not academically sound
timely	poorly researched
readable	superficial
referenced	failing to convey a problem
logical	missing facts
making a contribution	making errors of fact
relevant to audience / journal	failing to deliver its goal



The hardest stage of the process in writing can be in dealing with feedback. When you put your heart and soul into trying to answer a question that you find interesting, it can be devastating for your “labour of love” to be dismissed as trivial, superficial, inconsequential or even misguided. But dealing with the review process is a central challenge of living the publishing way of life, and the best way to deal with criticism is always constructive, using the comments to improve the paper and bring it closer to publication. The panel offered several thoughts on the ways that more junior authors can avoid becoming disheartened in the review process.

The easiest way to avoid negative reviews is to have received prior comment on earlier drafts before the paper is submitted. Working entirely in isolation is particularly dangerous for early career researchers and students, and – as a minimum – supervisors, principal investigators, department chairs or colleagues should be approached and asked to comment on the paper before its submission. Some departments have more structured processes (e.g. some economics departments require all journal articles to begin life as an internal working paper), but it is important even where those formal structures are not present, to use people around you informally to engage with the publishing life. If you present your paper and talk to people at conferences, do approach people and ask if they will give you feedback in the paper. Finally, avoid making mistakes that all referees will criticise, so referring to points that are not made, missing evidence or tables, contradictory statements and unfinished sentences. These common mistakes you can avoid easily by close proofreading.

But even if you are rigorous in your preparations, it can still happen that you get negative feedback, and the trick here is to use this negative experience to create a positive outcome. Some reviews are extremely negative without suggesting how the paper could be improved. However all the editors on the panel agreed that they felt a duty – especially to early career authors – to explain what the paper would need to have additionally, before it could be published in some format in some publication. Whatever happens, you should not just throw your research in the bin: even if your blood pressure spikes on reading the comment, put the reviews down for a few days, re-read later when calmer, and formulate a plan to deal with the comments.

Other reviews may lead the editors to make fairly extensive demands for restructuring and editing work, and panellists argued that it was acceptable for authors to go back to editors and ask them for an explanation of how to deliver those points.

When submitting a revised version of your paper, always include an explanation of how you have responded to the reviewer comments: don’t be modest in rejecting reviewer comments that you have a good argument for ignoring, but make the argument explicitly in your response. And don’t just rebut their points – start a tactful dialogue with the referee in your comments, and explain why you feel justified in believing the reviewer is on the wrong trail and validate your alternate approach.



The final area of discussion was reserved for the issue of books, which has been discussed quite in detail as one panellist noted being personally very disappointed by the fact that their university Vice Chancellor seemed to have been dead set against books, and demanding a focus on inventions, patents and journal articles. Another speaker however noted that books were – ironically enough – the easiest way to reach policy-makers, because although they were very unlikely to read a journal article, a book had the advantage of being visible on their book shelf, reminding them of your contribution.

There are many kinds of books! For example textbooks are targeted specifically at students and provide a very wide, if not necessarily deep, perspective of a field as a whole. A handbook covers a specific theme, and will have contributions provided from a range of perspectives, usually drawn from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds and summarising the key debates on that theme within these different disciplines.

A Ph.D. student or post-doc may seek to publish their thesis as a research monograph book. It makes sense to do this where it covers a topic that is so integrated that it is difficult to carve sensible chunks out of it, or indeed in an area where the work gains coherence from the way the different elements hang together. Theses involving very deep case studies which produce understanding through their comparison are difficult to slice neatly into good thematic articles, and a book can provide an author with the space to develop ideas and concepts across the case studies. Authoring a book gives the writer more freedom to decide on the way in which ideas are developed and material is presented, in part because the audience for books are far more diverse than for journals.

Of course, getting a book published is a very different process to getting a paper published, because the whole process hinges on getting a contract from a publisher. The choice of publisher is important – there are a range of good quality publishers that specialise in different fields. The RSA has its own book series with Routledge, *Cities and Regions*, and the process for publishing in that does not differ too much from other reputable publishers (see for example the so-called “level 2 list of publishers” produced by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research). You have to submit a proposal to a publisher that may be 30 pages long, and will typically include an overview of the book and its contents, an explanation of its novelty, an analysis of its potential market and competitors, and potentially a draft chapter.

All the comments made about writing paper introductions apply equally to book proposals. You should write a short synopsis of what problem the book is trying to solve, why that matters and how it achieves that, and then make sure that the rest of the proposal follows the blueprint you establish in that synopsis. Publishers will typically send the proposal out for review, and if necessary, invite a resubmission of the proposal on the basis of those reviews. When the publisher is happy that they have a promising publication on their hands, they will issue a contract. Once you have a book contract, you then complete and submit the manuscript, which is then reviewed either by the series editors or by independent reviewers. Finally, the manuscript can be completed and the book enters in production.

The book publishing process is time-consuming, and before getting involved, it is worth taking advice, and being clear on why it makes sense for you in terms of your overall publication strategy to write a book right now.