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ADVICE TO AUTHORS:

From the File Cabinet to the Journal Pages

Mark R. McMinn

Several suggestions are given for those considering authoring a journal article. These suggestions include timely submission of manuscripts, having a peer review the manuscript before submitting it to a journal, and selecting a journal that fits the style and content of the manuscript. Though authors of journal article must be resilient and capable of handling rejection letters, those who persevere often make significant contributions to Christian scholarship.

By the time the honors project, master's thesis, or doctoral dissertation is successfully defended, many students are ready to file away their data in an obscure place, to remain unseen by human eyes for years to come. The intense scrutiny of faculty committees and concerned peers has taken its toll—now it is time to hide the project safely away where no one can offer another critique. But time helps heal the deepest wounds, even those academic insecurities inflicted by tough-minded research mentors, and eventually it is time to consider publishing those research findings. Here are a few suggestions for those considering delving into the file cabinet to retrieve yesteryear's data.

Timeliness

As the data sit in that file cabinet drawer, they are becoming obsolete. Some have estimated that the half-life of information in counseling and psychology is approximately five years. That is, only half of that which is discovered today will be relevant in five years, only a quarter will be relevant in 10 years, and so on. The process of writing a journal article, submitting revisions, and waiting for publication can take one or two years—sometimes even longer. Keeping the post-reinforcement pause (after the thesis defense) to a minimum will increase the likelihood of publication.

The Need for Christian Scholarship

Interest in religious values and spirituality is increasing among counselors and psychologists (Shafranske, 1996). Unlike previous decades, Christians now have a significant voice in psychology (Jones, 1994). What will we say now that people are listening? Christian counselors who wish to be accurately understood among mental health professionals must use the language of science that is common among these professions. This poses a challenge for Christians (Stackhouse, 1996), both to conduct meaningful research and to publish the findings. Moving that former research project from the file cabinet to the journal pages may produce more than a line on a curriculum vita—it may also help the cause of Christian scholarship.

Peer Consultation

Most reputable journals send out paper submissions to reviewers who critique the manu-

scripts and make recommendations regarding possible revisions and publication decisions. Before sending a manuscript to a journal editor, it is wise to emulate this peer-review process by having a respected colleague read the manuscript and make recommendations. By responding to the colleague's suggestions before submitting the paper, you can eliminate many of the problems that journal reviewers would notice.

Finding the Right Journal

There are many different counseling and psychology journals, each with a slightly different mission. Journal editors look at goodness-of-fit as much as overall quality when making decisions. Sending a manuscript to the wrong journal costs time—several months may pass before you receive a rejection letter. Spending time in the library to identify the most appropriate journal is a good way to prevent publication delays. Most journals require that papers be written in APA-style (American Psychological Association, 1994) and that papers be submitted to only one journal at a time. Also, remember to keep the article as short as possible. Journal editors control expenses by limiting the number of journal pages in each issue.

Not for the Fainthearted

Those with experience publishing research articles have weathered many fair and unfair critiques of their research and writing. It is rare to have a journal article accepted in its original form. Most often the long-awaited letter from the journal editor contains one of three outcomes. First, some articles are deemed by the reviewers and editor to lack sufficient merit or to be unrelated to the mission of the journal. These articles are rejected, and the author is then free to revise the manuscript and submit it elsewhere. Second, some articles are not publishable in their current form, but the editor invites the author to resubmit the manuscript after making revisions. When the second draft is submitted, the editor sends it to the same reviewers who critiqued the first draft. Very often the second draft is deemed to be publishable, though sometimes additional revisions are required. Third, some articles are accepted with the contingency that the author revise the manuscript in certain ways.

Journal publishing opens one's research to public scrutiny—first by editors and peer reviewers and then by those who read the journal. This critiquing process, similar to the thesis defense that most hoped never to repeat, requires personal resilience and non-defensiveness. But as the risks are high, so are the rewards. Moving those data from the file cabinet to the journal pages promotes Christian scholarship as it gives others access to important research information.

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