

Understanding the needs of international authors*

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*Note: This article includes data presented as part of the session “Reaching a Global Audience:

Translation, Transnational Research, and Non-native Speakers” at the 34th Annual Meeting of the Society for Scholarly Publishing in Arlington, VA (31 May 2012).

The final published version of this article can be found in [Learned Publishing 26\(2\): 139-147](#).

Abstract

Research and scholarly publication are global endeavors, and English-language journals are receiving more and more manuscript submissions from international authors. A better understanding of the challenges faced by researchers who are not native English speakers will enable journal publishers to improve the process of submission for all authors, ensuring that the best papers are published in an efficient manner. We surveyed a sample of international researchers to determine what they perceived as challenges inherent to submission to English-language journals and found that they desire assistance with manuscript formatting and responding to reviewers, as well as clear policies about pre-submission inquiries and conflicts of interest. Taking into account these survey results and the experience our company has with international authors, we suggest several small changes to a journal's website, including clearer English and prominent links to select policies and guidelines, that may greatly simplify the submission process for second language authors.

Introduction

Scholarly publishing is a booming industry, with the total number of submitted manuscripts growing steadily each year. While submissions numbers are still strong from countries that traditionally put forth large shares of published works (e.g., United States, United Kingdom, France, and Germany), there is an increasing globalization of scholarship.¹ Because of this influx of manuscripts from various countries, it is advantageous to better understand the challenges faced by international authors during the submission process and devise new ways to help overcome those challenges. A smoother editorial process for international authors will reduce the administrative burden on editors and other journal staff, help journals reach a broader readership, and ensure that the best articles are published, regardless of their source.

In an effort to determine what international authors perceive as barriers to publication, we constructed a survey and sent it to a sample of researchers around the world. In particular, we sought to learn what challenges confront international authors as they submit manuscripts for publication in English-language journals and solicit their suggestions for ways that publishers could help alleviate those difficulties. For the purposes of comparison, we also gathered some demographic information regarding country of residence and experience with publication and peer review. Our results show that international authors' struggle with language barriers may also lead to confusion about other aspects of the editorial process at a journal. With some relatively simple changes to a journal's website, it may be possible to alleviate some of the challenges faced by authors whose native language is not English.

Methods

Survey

American Journal Experts provides manuscript services and educational solutions for authors seeking assistance in publishing their research. These services include English language editing, translation of manuscripts into English, pre-submission peer review, and manuscript and figure formatting. An electronic survey was sent to a segment of American Journal Experts customers who had ordered English editing, translation, or journal-independent peer review services. The survey was designed with predominantly closed questions to facilitate data analysis for a large sample size, but open-ended responses were also included to gather comments and reveal unanticipated ideas. The survey questions, written in English, were designed specifically to gather concerns about the publication process and suggestions for how publishers could improve that process. Additional demographic questions were included based on the desire to compare responses according to the prior experience of the respondents with publishing and peer review as well as to ascertain their level of familiarity with the English language. The survey questions and possible answers analyzed in this study are provided in Appendix I. Country data were collected directly from the customer accounts associated with completed surveys, but all responses remained anonymous.

Customers received an e-mail containing a link directing them to the anonymous online survey along with a description of the purpose of collecting the information. Of those recipients who opened the e-mail message, approximately 30% completed the survey. The overall response rate (7.7%) was similar to past web-based surveys aimed at academics^{2,3} (see Table 1).

Table 1. Survey response rate.

Total sample	33,452
Undelivered e-mails	1,054
Successful deliveries	32,398
E-mails opened	8,375 (25.9% of successful deliveries)
Surveys completed	2,510 (30.0% of e-mails opened)
Overall response rate	7.7%

Statistical analysis

To discern statistical differences between the distribution of responses for a given subset of respondents and the overall distribution of responses, the chi-squared test was used. The chi-squared test is a statistical analysis tool that measures the difference between the observed values for a given subgroup and the expected values based on the overall response set. To ensure a statistically robust sample, only countries or other subgroups with 50 or more completed surveys were analyzed. A value of $p < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

Results

Demographics

Altogether, we received completed responses from 88 different countries. Table 2 lists the countries with more than 50 responses; a full list of countries can be found in Appendix II. The countries with the most responses corresponded well with the nations employing the largest number of researchers and those publishing the most scholarly manuscripts.^{4,5} For 159 responses, customers had not selected any country of origin (see Appendix II). These responses were included in our overall analysis, but not when breaking down responses according to country. In all, 64.5% of respondents ($n = 1,618$) were “somewhat comfortable” writing manuscripts in English, whereas 18.5% ($n = 463$) were “very comfortable” and 17.1% ($n = 428$) were “not at all comfortable.” As might be expected, respondents from the United States tended to be more comfortable with writing in English ($\chi^2 = 11.79$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.0028$). All other countries analyzed were similar to the overall breakdown of responses.

Table 2. Number of researchers and publications from countries with at least 50 survey responses.

Country	Survey Responses	Researchers (2007) ^a	World Rank ^a	Citable Documents (2011) ^b	World Rank ^b
Brazil	448	133,266	11	46,933	13
China	242	1,592,400	2	365,421	2
Taiwan	126	-- ^c	--	38,302	15
Italy	124	96,303	13	70,468	9
Spain	111	122,624	12	64,716	10
United States	101	1,425,550	1	471,524	1
Japan	97	709,974	3	108,877	5
Mexico	79	37,930	25	14,106	30
Turkey	79	49,668	19	30,170	19
Germany	77	290,853	5	125,568	4
France	65	215,755	8	89,420	6
India	63	154,827 ^d	--	81,914	7
Republic of Korea	58	221,928	7	57,987	11

^a Total researchers in full-time equivalents; see UNESCO Science Report 2010, Statistical Annex (ref. 4).

World ranks are based on countries for which data are available ($n = 83$).

^b Based on citable documents published in 2011 that are indexed in Scopus (ref. 5)

^c Data are included with the values reported for China.

^d Data are from 2005; therefore, no rank is given. This value would rank India 9th in 2007.

Respondents' experience with publication and peer review

When respondents reported the number of peer-reviewed publications that they had authored, the largest segment fell into the 1-4 group (30.8%), with a median of 11-20 publications overall (see Table 3). The group with 1-4 publications may also have included some respondents who had not published at all; 0 was not included as an option. Breakdown by country revealed that respondents from China were skewed toward fewer publications ($\chi^2 = 21.00$, $df = 5$, $p = 0.0008$), and researchers from Spain were slightly skewed toward a larger number of publications ($\chi^2 = 11.16$, $df = 5$, $p = 0.048$) (Table 3).

Table 3. Self-reported number of peer-reviewed publications.

Number of Publications	# Respondents (% Total)		
	All Countries	China	Spain
1 - 4	773 (30.8)	137 (56.6)	19 (17.1)
5 - 10	496 (19.8)	53 (21.9)	18 (16.2)
11 - 20	416 (16.6)	24 (9.9)	14 (12.6)
21 - 50	459 (18.3)	18 (7.4)	30 (27.0)
51 - 100	257 (10.2)	9 (3.7)	23 (20.7)
> 100	108 (4.3)	1 (0.4)	7 (6.3)
Total	2509	242	111

In terms of experience with peer review, 76.7% of all respondents had previously been asked to review manuscripts for an English-language journal (Table 4). Of those that had not been asked, 67% ($n = 387$) indicated that they would like the opportunity to review for English-language journals. Consistent with their publication records, Chinese respondents were less likely to have reviewed previously ($\chi^2 = 53.76$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.0001$), and Spanish respondents were more likely to have reviewed previously ($\chi^2 = 7.85$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.005$) (see Table 4). All other countries with at least 50 survey responses, including the United States, matched overall data trends.

Table 4. Self-reported experience as a peer reviewer for English-language journals.

Previous Review Experience	All Countries	China	Spain
% Yes (n)	76.7 (1924)	57.4 (139)	90.1 (100)
Total responses	2449	242	111

Challenges inherent to the publication process

Respondents also answered two questions designed to gauge perceived challenges to publishing their work and to determine how publishers can help international authors with the process of submission and publication. Both questions requested that the survey taker select three answers. We first asked, “What are the top three challenges you face when submitting to an English-language journal?” Responses are

summarized in Table 5. “Correcting the English text of my manuscript” and “Responding to reviewers’ comments” were the top two answers by a wide margin. We also asked, “What should publishers do to help international researchers through the publication process?” (Table 6). Here, three responses were clustered together as the most frequently chosen: “Provide a template with proper manuscript formatting,” “Suggest other journals that may be a better fit,” and “Create an easy process for pre-submission inquiries.” Overall, the responses to the second question were more evenly distributed, indicating that a number of these suggested solutions may be useful to international scholars. The options selected did not vary considerably by nationality or publication history of the correspondent (data not shown).

Table 5. Responses to “What are the top three challenges you face when submitting to an English-language journal? Please select only three.”

Possible Selections	# Times Selected	% Respondents Selecting Option
Correcting the English text of my manuscript	1537	62.2
Responding to reviewers’ comments	1476	59.8
Formatting my manuscript	772	31.3
Translating my manuscript into English	758	30.7
Figuring out whether the topic of my manuscript fits the journal’s scope	604	24.5
Writing a cover letter that accurately describes my manuscript	515	20.9
Understanding the author guidelines/instructions	379	15.3
Understanding correspondence from editors and reviewers	344	13.9
Navigating the website	166	6.7
Other	74	3.0

Table 6. Responses to “What should publishers do to help international researchers through the publication process? Please select only three.”

Possible Selections	# Times Selected	% Respondents Selecting Option
Provide a template for the manuscript format or an example of proper formatting	1194	49.1
Suggest other journals that may be a better fit for my manuscript	1076	44.2
Create an easy process for pre-submission inquiries	1006	41.3
Provide clearer instructions to authors	810	33.3
Suggest resources for editing or translating my manuscript	809	33.3
Make the website simpler to use	564	23.2
Recommend an outside resource for help with the exchange of comments with reviewers	550	22.6
Translate the website into other languages	174	7.2
Other	89	3.7

Free responses

For each question, respondents could choose ‘Other,’ at which point they were prompted to fill in their own answers. When asked for the top three challenges to publication, the most frequently cited ‘Other’ issues involved finding the right words when writing in English (e.g., “explain correctly in English my ideas”; $n = 7$) and perceived language or nationality bias (e.g., “the unspoken barriers to publish posed to those submitting papers from outside US and Europe”; $n = 7$). Other authors mentioned difficulty writing specific sections of the manuscript, meeting word limits, and convincing reviewers to adopt their viewpoint, issues likely faced by any researcher. In addition, 12 respondents selected ‘Other’ to indicate that none of the responses represented barriers for them.

When asked about how publishers could help, the most frequently mentioned suggestions centered on expediting or improving the review process (e.g., “provide faster review”; $n = 13$) and creating a universal style for reference and/or manuscript formatting (e.g., “a sole common international reference format”; $n = 8$). Additional issues mentioned by multiple respondents included avoiding conflict of interest ($n = 5$) and maintaining author anonymity ($n = 2$). Again, 13 respondents selected ‘Other’ to specify that publishers did not need to follow any of the suggestions listed in the question.

Discussion

Recommendations for publishers

International authors are a critical part of driving research forward, but their lack of familiarity with academic writing in English can lead to inefficiencies and misunderstandings during the submission process. The survey results reported here highlight a few areas in which language issues may cause confusion for second language authors: pre-submission inquiries, formatting requirements, reviewer responses, and fears about conflicts of interest, among others. These concerns can be addressed with relatively simple changes to a journal's website, the first (and often only) point of interaction with any researcher interested in submitting a manuscript. Here, we provide suggestions for publishers that we believe will address the concerns raised in the survey based on our experience with international authors.

Short of providing English editing directly to potential authors, journals can best tackle the language barrier by using clear, simple English themselves. When the journal's guidelines and other information are easy to understand, second language authors will need to make fewer inquiries or guesses, which are a source of anxiety. Clear instructions also lead to better compliance on the part of the author and less communication about manuscript requirements before submission.

There are several ways to make English text accessible to second language readers, largely through the use of simple grammatical constructs. First, keep sentences short. Going beyond 20 words is likely to confuse a reader who is not fluent in English, and a limit of 16 words may be even better.⁶ Rearranging or splitting sentences can help meet this goal. Second, avoid grammatical structures that are uncommon in other languages. Two examples include double negatives and false subjects. Double negation can actually convey the opposite meaning to speakers fluent in foreign languages such as Spanish, in which a second negative serves as an intensifier. Thus, the phrase 'not uncommon' could be interpreted

mistakenly as ‘very rare.’ Sentences that start with so-called false subjects (‘It is...’ or ‘There are...’) can also confuse non-native English speakers. In such cases, the reader may struggle to define the antecedent for the initial pronoun, when in reality, no specific antecedent exists. Table 7 includes examples of rephrasing sentences to avoid peculiar grammatical constructs.

Phrasal verbs, verbs formed out of multiple words, are also a potential pitfall. Substituting a single word (e.g., ‘reduce’ for ‘cut back on’ or ‘tolerate’ for ‘put up with’) will reduce confusion. English has an abundance of prepositions, and their use in other grammatical capacities only makes them seem more challenging. Similarly, long stretches of short words can be difficult to understand, as each word is often interpreted or translated individually by non-native English speakers. Phrases such as ‘in order to’ or ‘for the purpose of’ should be simplified (often ‘to’ or ‘for’ work fine). The passive voice, while grammatically correct and appropriate for formal writing, likewise leads to a greater number of words where fewer may suffice. Table 7 includes additional examples of phrases and sentences with extraneous words.

Table 7. Examples of potentially confusing phrases and simplified alternatives.

Original phrase or sentence	Simplified alternative
As a consequence of	Because of
With regard to	Concerning
Along the lines of	‘Like’ or ‘Such as’
At the same time	Simultaneously
Authors must ensure that appropriate permission has nevertheless been obtained.	Nevertheless, authors must obtain appropriate permission.
For those investigators who do not have formal ethics review committees, the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki should be followed.	Investigators without formal ethics review committees should follow the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.
Manuscripts submitted are expected not only to be of significance within their field, but also of interest to researchers outside the field.	Submitted manuscripts must contribute significantly to their field and also interest researchers outside the field.

Other website features

Survey respondents expressed a desire to receive more assistance with manuscript formatting.

Manuscript preparation guidelines written in clear, accessible English will undoubtedly help, but the additional step of providing a template file with basic formatting may prove extremely useful. At the very least, a template should include the preferred font, margins, style for section headings, layout of the title page and/or abstract, and prompts for any other specific features required (running title, keywords, etc.).

When a number of other criteria must be met (e.g., ethics statements or financial disclosures), a downloadable manuscript preparation checklist is advisable.

Survey respondents also indicated an interest in pre-submission inquiries, presumably with the goal of determining whether a manuscript would be a good fit for the journal before formatting it appropriately and following through with the entire submission process. Most editors will accept a pre-submission inquiry, but even if not, the policy should be clearly stated on the journal's website. A prominent link on the homepage to a description of how to make a pre-submission inquiry (or failing that, a clear description of aims and scope) will enable second language authors to quickly find the information that they are most interested in, without having to scan the entire author guidelines.

Concerns about conflict of interest or bias

International authors sometimes perceive biases based on language skills, country of origin, or other factors, and the present study revealed some of these same fears (see free responses above). Although some evidence of bias in the peer review process exists,^{7,8} the overwhelming majority of reviewers and editors provide honest assessments of research submitted to scholarly journals with the goal of improving the final product. Nonetheless, it may be possible to alleviate some of this perception by improving communication during the submission and review processes. As with pre-submission inquiries,

prominently displaying a link to the journal's policy about conflicts of interest (both for authors and reviewers) will remind authors that they will be treated fairly during the submission process.

Reviewers and editors frequently comment on grammar and diction in manuscripts from second language authors. One study of medical manuscripts written by Italian researchers found that 44% of all reviewer comments dealt with language issues.⁹ Helpful comments on the language in a manuscript are completely appropriate for a review, but mentioning a large number of language issues can make the author feel defensive and may even create concern that the manuscript is being judged more harshly than it would have been if the manuscript had been written by a native English speaker. To combat the possibility of perceived bias, author instructions should include a statement stressing the need for a certain threshold of English language quality (e.g., "All manuscripts must be written in clear English to provide reviewers the opportunity to properly assess their content"). By explaining the rationale behind any comments on the language in a manuscript, such comments can be taken constructively and not in a pejorative manner.

The language barrier can also make reviewer comments seem harsher than they were intended to be. It is therefore important to provide clear instructions to reviewers for these comments to be constructive and polite. Providing reviewers information about writing in clear English (such as the suggestions listed above) will improve the exchange between international authors and reviewers. Reducing author issues with the comments based strictly on language will, in turn, allow the authors to more carefully reflect on the suggestions and concerns raised by reviewers. In addition, writing or mentioning an editorial on how to respond to reviewers at your journal can provide concrete suggestions to authors on how to properly communicate their replies.^{10,11}

Survey respondents

With any survey, it is important to understand its strengths and limitations. The use of closed questions certainly limited the breadth of responses but allowed for analysis of a larger sample. Additionally, while the pool of customers to which the survey was sent represented nearly all areas of study (in both sciences and humanities), individual responses could not be associated with any specific field. Therefore, we cannot say whether responses may have differed based on area of study. It is also important to note that all respondents were customers of American Journal Experts. As such, the survey data represent researchers who have already sought outside assistance in navigating the publication process. Their suggestions and concerns may not entirely reflect researchers without any experience with a manuscript services company. Overall, however, the survey respondents had considerable experience with the publication process and represented the vast majority of countries with highly active research programs (Tables 2, 3, and 4 and Appendix II).

It is also important to note that most respondents were at least somewhat comfortable writing academic manuscripts in English. Indeed, the decision to provide the survey only in English selected for respondents with passable English proficiency. Whereas some respondents who reported being “very comfortable” writing in English may be native speakers, the vast majority of the participants are likely to speak English as a second language. Therefore, these responses reflect the input of international authors who are capable of understanding and writing English, but who may need some additional assistance navigating the submission and publication process. Reaching this segment of authors will likely provide rewards in terms of submissions and readership, as small clarifications and suggestions may be all that is necessary to help them publish more easily.

Breaking down survey responses according to nation of origin revealed that the data from most countries mirrored the worldwide data set. China and Spain were exceptions, with less experienced and more experienced respondents, respectively (Tables 3 and 4). However, analysis of the responses to other questions revealed no strong effect based on country or publication record. Therefore, the challenges faced by international authors seem largely independent of geography and experience with publishing papers. As such, improvements that address the concerns revealed in this study are likely to assist investigators worldwide.

Conclusions

Publishing research in one's native language is difficult enough, but second language authors face additional challenges. Survey results from over 2,500 experienced researchers around the world point to several steps that can be taken by publishers who wish to make the publication process simpler for a growing pool of international authors:

- Use clear and concise English on the journal website, avoiding phrasal verbs, false subjects, and unnecessarily long phrases
- Clearly indicate journal policies on pre-submission inquiries and conflict of interest
- Encourage reviewers to use simple English in their comments, and justify the need for a threshold of English language quality in submitted manuscripts
- Provide a template or other example of proper manuscript formatting

With increasing submissions from nations around the world, every effort that publishers take to simplify the submission process will result in more efficient publishing and a more unified global research community.

Acknowledgments

I thank L. Pautler and A. Loggie for assistance in generating and administering the survey and P. Klenk for helpful comments on the manuscript. Special thanks to K. Collier for help designing the survey and valuable feedback throughout the study. I also thank the survey respondents for being willing to share their concerns and suggestions.

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Appendix I. List of survey questions and possible responses analyzed in this study.

- How many peer-reviewed papers have you published?
 - Possible answers: 1-4, 5-10, 11-20, 21-50, 51-100, More than 100
- How comfortable are you writing manuscripts in English?
 - Possible answers: Very comfortable, Somewhat comfortable, Not at all comfortable
- Have you been asked to review papers for an English-language journal?
 - Possible answers: Yes, No
- *If no*, would you like to review papers for English-language journals?
 - Possible answers: Yes, no
- What are the top three challenges you face when submitting to an English-language journal?

Please select only three.

- Possible answers: Translating my manuscript into English, Understanding the author guidelines/instructions, Writing a cover letter that accurately describes my manuscript, Figuring out whether the topic of my manuscript fits the journal's scope, Correcting the English text of my manuscript, Formatting my manuscript, Navigating the journal's website, Responding to reviewers' comments, Understanding correspondence from editors and reviewers, Other (free response)
- What should publishers do to help international researchers through the publication process?

Please select only three.

- Possible answers: Translate their website into other languages, Suggest other journals that may be a better fit for my manuscript, Suggest resources for translating or editing my manuscript, Create an easy process for pre-submission inquiries, Provide clearer instructions to authors, Make the website simpler to use, Provide a template for the

manuscript format or an example of proper formatting, Recommend an outside resource for help with the exchange of comments with reviewers, Other (free response)

Appendix II. Full list of countries represented by complete survey responses.

Country	Responses
Algeria	7
Angola	1
Argentina	21
Armenia	2
Australia	8
Austria	10
Belgium	12
Benin	1
Brazil	448
Bulgaria	2
Canada	21
Chile	18
China	242
Colombia	14
Croatia	20
Cyprus	1
Czech Republic	39
Denmark	21
Dominican Republic	1
Egypt	14
Estonia	4
Ethiopia	2
Finland	15
France	65
Georgia	4
Germany	77
Greece	21
Hong Kong	10
Hungary	6
Iceland	1
India	63
Indonesia	10
Iran, Islamic Republic of	2
Iraq	4
Ireland	1
Israel	7
Italy	124
Japan	97
Kazakhstan	1
Kenya	2

Korea, Republic of	58
Kuwait	2
Kyrgyzstan	1
Latvia	6
Lebanon	1
Lithuania	4
Macedonia	1
Malaysia	46
Malta	1
Mauritius	1
Mexico	79
Morocco	2
Nepal	1
Netherlands	31
New Zealand	2
Nigeria	6
Norway	24
Oman	3
Pakistan	6
Panama	1
Philippines	1
Poland	33
Portugal	16
Puerto Rico	1
Romania	11
Russian Federation	34
Saudi Arabia	13
Serbia	13
Singapore	4
Slovakia	2
Slovenia	2
South Africa	1
Spain	111
Sweden	19
Switzerland	18
Taiwan	126
Thailand	35
Togo	1
Tunisia	12
Turkey	79
Ukraine	6
United Arab Emirates	2
United Kingdom	7

United States	101
Uzbekistan	1
Venezuela	4
Vietnam	2
Yemen	1
<i>No country indicated</i>	<i>159</i>
