



## *Editorial*

### **Five Commonly Overlooked Aspects of Manuscript Submission**

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Arguably, handling the editorial processes of the Philippine Journal of Allied Health Sciences (PJAHS) has been the most challenging aspect of my academic career. Three years into this job, I have read more than a hundred articles altogether. Performing editorial and peer review, sometimes at the same time, has not been easy. Ensuring that the journal disseminates quality research is a haunting task that has sat with me since the day the journal was handed over to me. Over the years, we have become stricter in handling the peer review process. Each call-for-papers season brings in several manuscript submissions with varying technical and scientific issues raised by our editors and peer reviews. However, the most common thread that runs through these reviews is the most mundane. Probably overlooked by authors as they pay more attention to their scientific methods and message. Nevertheless, what evades them is that these seemingly simple aspects have greater implications for the editorial decision of whether to accept the article.

In this editorial, I draw from my past and current experiences in handling editorial and peer reviews to elucidate manuscript submissions' five most common aspects. I intend that in doing so, future authors pay equal attention to these aspects and avoid falling into committing these mistakes.

### **FORMATTING AND STYLE**

Each journal follows a certain set of guidelines on how articles should be formatted or styled. These guidelines should be discussed by the journals as instructions for authors intending to submit to the journal. PJAHS has developed its submission guidelines. Almost always, these are overlooked by the authors. It should be stressed that PJAHS does not have enough resources to employ a format-free submission. Hence, instructions on word limits, essential sections, reference styles (in-text and reference listing), among others, are provided on our website.

Although not a misconduct, the inability to follow journal formatting and style guidelines has grave implications reflecting on the values and discipline of the authors. From my standpoint as an editor and reviewer, it puts the authors in a bad light. If they cannot follow simple format and style guidelines, how can I be sure that they could follow their protocols and methods appropriately? When authors are not respectful of a journal's guidelines, how can I be convinced that they have been respectful of the research process, let alone their participants' rights and safety? Editors and peer-reviewers are blinded to the authors' identity and personality. We are limited to interpreting their research capacity with the manuscript presented to us. Thus, the manner in how articles are presented following the journal's format and style guidelines is just as important as the content in that manuscript.

The EQUATOR Network provides a consolidated repository of guidelines for reporting research across research designs. PJAHS aligns itself with this movement and strongly recommends that authors use these checklists to prepare and report their manuscripts.<sup>1</sup> We believe that by following these guidelines, manuscripts greatly improve their quality and consequently their chances for acceptance.<sup>2,3</sup>

Authors should take the time to be familiar with the journal's submission guidelines. Specifically, the format and style of how manuscripts should be submitted should be an important step prior, during, and right before submission. When in doubt, always refer back to the submission guidelines or the author's instructions. In cases where the guidelines are not clear, you may always contact the editorial office to clarify things. While a well-formatted and style-followed article does not guarantee acceptance, it does decrease the likelihood of rejection.

### **AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION**

Listing the authors in a manuscript submission is not enough. More recently, journals have been placing great importance on identifying the specific contributions of these identified authors. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors has provided clear guidelines for who should be considered authors.<sup>4</sup> PJAHS recommends that the submitting authors read these guidelines. However, our experience in handling manuscripts point to overlooking this aspect.

Authorship is not limited to intellectual property. It goes beyond that and covers accountability and responsibility of whatever is published in research. Thus, authors are advised to take authorship issues seriously. Only include those who meet the guidelines and identify their specific contributions. We had previously returned manuscripts, refused their publication, and even advised that authors be dropped when authorship criteria were not met. While we may not have sophisticated measures to ensure the

veracity of authorship, their patterns of behaviors on how this section is accomplished provide us with context clues whether red flags are present, thus ultimately influencing our editorial decision.

### **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

As an allied health journal, PJAHS places great importance on ensuring that the articles we publish have ensured the protection of their participants. We subscribe to the tenets of the COPE Guidelines<sup>5</sup> and the Declaration of Helsinki.<sup>6</sup> There should be a clear statement in the manuscript submission that ensures this in their research's planning, conduct, and reporting. In fact, without ethical approval from a recognized institutional review board (or its equivalent), a manuscript will not be considered for review. We have previously desk rejected these manuscripts. In some cases, we have personally contacted the reported institutional review board to confirm and corroborate the ethical approval report of the authors. Best practices in reporting ethical considerations include a separate subsection dedicated to this information, placing it at the start of the methods section, and providing succinct information on where approval was sought and its reference numbers.

### **PROOFREADING AND LANGUAGE EDITING**

Regardless of whether you have submitted to PJAHS or another academic journal, proofreading and language editing issues will most likely be part of the editorial and peer review. While closely related to the first point I have raised on formatting and style, this aspect takes an independent discussion because of the possible frustration it brings to authors, editors, and peer reviewers.

Syntax and semantics are important to editors and publishers, considering them as an indicator of the quality and believability of research it publishes. Thus, time and time again, comments on this nature will most likely plague your

review results. In fact, journals may refuse publication or require proof of proofreading and language editing before acceptance. PJAHS is no different. Published from a non-native English-speaking country with limited resources that prevents us from having in-house proofreading and language editing service, we have seriously raised this concern. Unfortunately, we have to pass this responsibility to our authors in an attempt to keep PJAHS a publication charges-free open-access journal.

There are various research-related services available for authors that cover these issues. And yes, we agree that they do come with a cost more often than not. However, the pressure and problems taken off the shoulders of authors cannot be denied. Availing these services allows authors to focus more on the manuscript's content. I want to extend a word of caution to prospective authors intending to submit to PJAHS. While it is tempting to go for the cheapest available option, your reasoning should go beyond the price point. Consider proofreading and language editing services from trusted individuals and institutions who themselves are published researchers. When your proofreader has publishing experience, their outputs are more sensitive to what editors and peer-reviewers are concerned about. It goes beyond syntax and semantics and considers contexts and experiences sensitive to the intricacies of publishing requirements.

### **WRITING FOR JOURNAL READERSHIP**

As editors and peer-reviewers, we are gatekeepers of articles published in a journal, ensuring they are of high quality and relevance to our readers.<sup>7</sup> Frequently, authors can get so involved in their methods that they forget that publishing is with the intent to disseminate their works. Thus, the intended audience goes beyond their immediate groups. Therefore, manuscripts should be written in a manner that can be

understood by, in the case of PJAHS, allied health science researchers and practitioners.

Prospective authors should be mindful of their readership. While your theses, dissertations, research reports may be of good quality within the context of the curriculum where they were developed, it does not mean that they will have a similar impact on our readers. Your methods might be impeccable and your results groundbreaking, but if it is not communicated properly, the manuscript will stand editorial and peer review. Allow time and resources to ensure that submitted manuscripts are with the readers in mind. Often time, authors are lazy in re-writing and re-contextualizing their manuscripts, which is interpreted as rudeness and incompetence during the review. Thus, to avoid rejection and increase the likelihood of favorable and efficient reviews, write with the journal audience in mind.

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