



Ready! Aim! Fire! An Insider's Insight to Targeted Journal Selection

Finding the best vehicle in which to publish your research findings is a perennial challenge. Choosing the wrong journal can result in your publication being delayed with you having to commit considerable resources to handling unnecessary journal rejections and preparing alternative journal submissions.

One of the most common reasons for manuscript rejection is poorly considered journal selection. An informed process that targets optimal journal identification will save you time, money and heartache. We offer some insights from the Niche medical writing team who have been submitting manuscripts to learned journals since 1998.

Before you start

- Even the best journal selection process will come to nothing if you don't have a realistic and objective opinion of the true 'value' of your work.
- Choosing a journal in the absence of a structured process is like setting out on a journey without a map – you may arrive at your destination but it will take longer than you hoped and success involves a degree of luck.
- Journal rejection is common; most manuscripts submitted to prestigious journals are rejected.
- It is essential to have a Plan B in the form of a shortlist of journals you will consider if your first choice rejects your manuscript.

Prepare to succeed

- You have the best chance of achieving your publishing goals if you identify your target journal before you start writing your manuscript.
- Gather any information you can about potential candidate journals, the more information you have the better informed the outcome.
- Accept that your research may reach a broader audience and have greater reader engagement if published in a less prestigious journal focused on your field of study.
- Rationalise why you selected the journal in your letter to the editor at the time of submission, giving evidence where appropriate.

Key Insights

Choosing which journal to publish in has become more and more complex following the many changes to the publishing landscape. Open access, online only and pay-to-view choices have been added to the more traditional considerations: impact factor, publication lead-time and your target journal's ambition to be identified as an elite publication. The proliferation of new journals and novel areas of specialisation coupled with the emergence of interdisciplinary topics have only served to further confound the selection process. Choosing the wrong journal can result in your publication being delayed with you having to commit considerable resources to handling unnecessary journal rejection and preparing (multiple) alternative journal submissions.

It is highly unlikely that your research was completed in isolation. As Sir Isaac Newton famously remarked, our work is achieved through the addition to the existing body of knowledge – 'standing on the shoulders of giants'. As such, you should be aware of which scientific journals most frequently publish your type of research. It should be possible to assemble easily a list of candidate journals. You can expand that list with suggestions from your peers, checking online journal listings and cross-referencing journal information provided by relevant professional associations.

Obviously, reviewing your list of journals and making a selection based on your own preference is simple and avoids the heartache of actually doing any planning. In these circumstances try to remember that it is ok to target a lower impact journal. Alternatively, if you have a single message to convey you might consider a brief communication in a higher impact journal.

However, an ad hoc approach may inadvertently confound any publishing goals you may not have considered when you first compiled your list. You may want to adopt a more objective approach, such as constructing an assessment grid that will facilitate a process of scoring the candidate journals on key variables.

"Nanos gigantum humeris insidentes" – discovering truth by building on previous discoveries

attrib. Bernard of Chartres –
circa 12th century

Assessment grids and algorithms

When constructing an assessment grid, it is possible to rank the importance of specific selection criteria by weighting them so that greatest emphasis is placed on those factors that best represent or reflect your publishing goals; for example it may be important to you (or your team) to select a journal with a high impact factor, rapid turnaround time or a specific target audience (Figure 1).

An example of the Niche journal selection grid is provided on our website: www.niche.org.uk. You can adapt your assessment grid into a journal selection algorithm but any system you devise will need to integrate a realistic/objective assessment of the value of your research with a measure of the target journal's prestige (Figure 2).

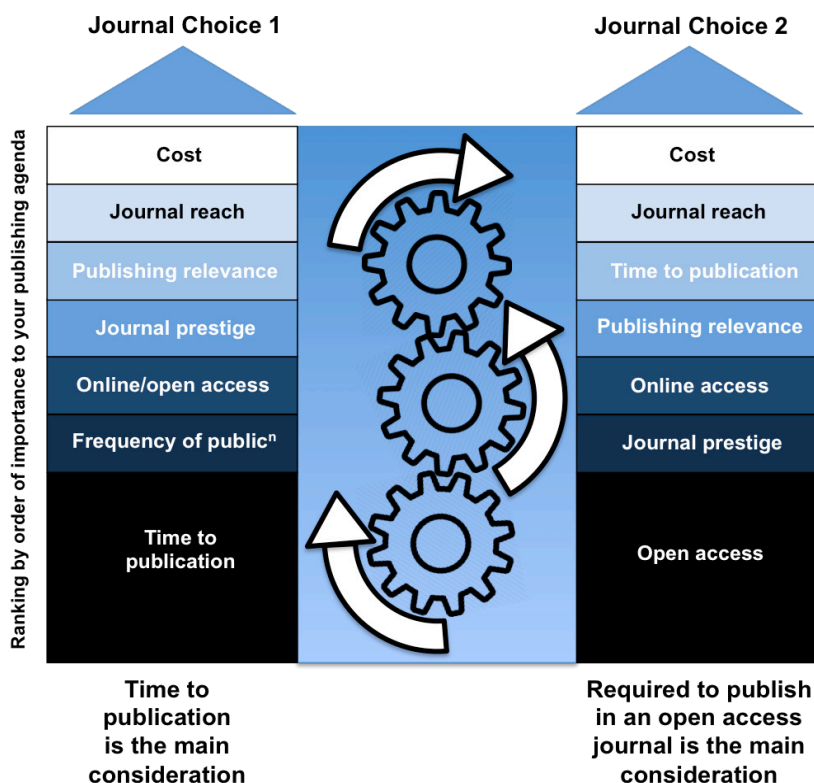


Figure 1: Alternate journal selection pathways

According to Knight and Steinbach [1], the five major considerations an author should contemplate when selecting a journal are:

- Likelihood of manuscript acceptance
- Journal reputation
- Journal visibility and potential article impact
- Likelihood of timely publication
- Philosophical and ethical issues

When you have undertaken the process of journal 'grading' or 'ranking' on pre-specified criteria, it is normal for several journals to emerge from the pack as good candidates. At Niche we provide this shortlist of candidates to the author along with a summary of the journal's profile and why it was identified to facilitate an 'informed' selection.

If you are still struggling to decide which journal to select we would normally ask ourselves whether the findings of the work shifts any paradigms in the field. If yes, we advise the author to aim for the highest impact, broader scope journal in the list. If the findings are solid and the study complete, but unlikely to be paradigm-changing we would advise an author to go for the specialty journal in the field that is read by most investigators in that area.

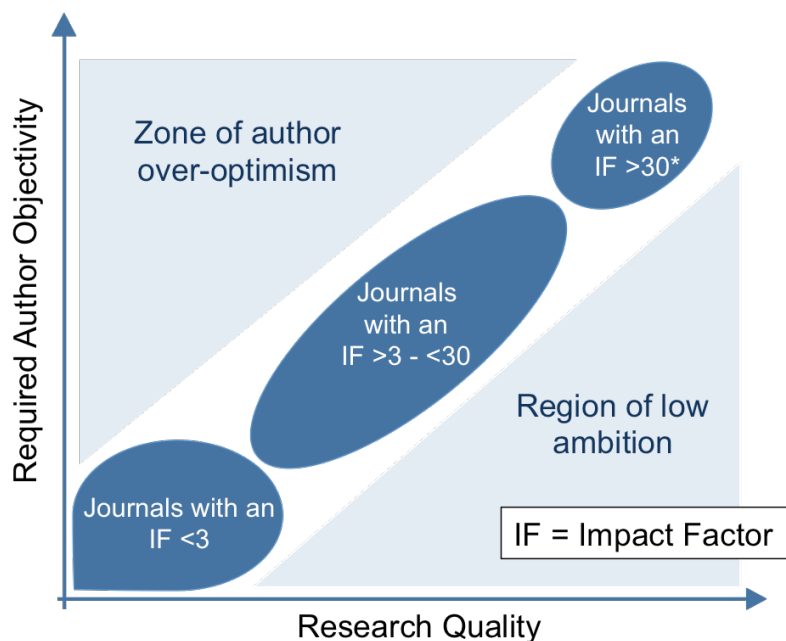


Figure 2: Considering the importance of author objectivity in journal selection

* includes journals such as The Lancet, Nature Genetics, New Engl J Med, etc.

Building an assessment grid

Factors you might want in your assessment grid include:

Publishing relevance:

Has the journal published similar articles in the last 5 years? If yes, then this might be the right journal for you. However, if a similar article has been published in the last 6 months a journal may not consider a related article.

Article types:

Does the journal publish the type of articles you are planning to submit? For example, does the journal publish review articles, methodology papers, clinical trials, case studies etc.

Journal restrictions:

Can you deliver your project within the journal's requirements - article length, number of figures etc. Information on editorial policies and practices should be sought in order to anticipate any situations that could arise during the submission and/or peer review.

Time and cost of publication:

Publishers often provide metrics on the time lines between submission and publication on the journal's web page. Rapid publication may be an important issue if there is the possibility that other groups may trump your findings.

Cost of publication can differ significantly from journal to journal. This can be an important consideration for those with limited budget.

Journal reach:

Does the journal serve an international or regional audience? Do authors, editors and editorial board members display a truly international distribution? How many people read the journal (Eigenfactor)? If researchers in other fields are likely to be interested in your study, then a multidisciplinary journal or one that covers a broad range of topics may provide exposure to the largest number of readers.

An article that is only going to stimulate interest in researchers in the field would be better placed in a field-specific journal where it will inform the greatest number of readers and consequently have the greatest impact.

Journal prestige and longevity:

A journal's recognition or impact factor has always been a major consideration for authors. However, it is well recognised that top tier journals have high rejection rates (> 90%) making this something authors need to take into account when choosing a journal. Quantitative measures of prestige, such as the Impact Factor, SCImago Journal Rank and H-Index, are readily available on journal websites and can be used to rank journals.

Prestige also equates to longevity. The publishing arena is an ever-changing field with new journals always popping up and established journals going out of print. You may want to consider how likely it is that the journal will still be around in 5 years' time, although with the dawn of the electronic era that may not be as important as it once was.

Eigenfactor

Most authors are aware of the Impact Factor but what is the Eigenfactor? Although its calculation is complicated, put simply a journal's Eigenfactor is an estimate of how many people read a journal and consider the contents to be important. Since it would be almost impossible to measure this property directly it is calculated indirectly by counting the total number of citations a journal receives over 5 years. It should, however, be noted that the Eigenfactor is a product of the total number of citations. As such, a journal that publishes 1000 articles a year, will have twice the Eigenfactor of one that only publishes 500 articles - assuming a comparative article is cited the same number of times.

Bradford's Law

The British mathematician and librarian Samuel C. Bradford formulated his law after studying the bibliography of 326 journals in the field of geophysics in the mid-1930s. He observed that nine key journals contained 429 articles, 59 contained 499 articles, and 258 contained 404 articles.

Bradford noted that for any given subject area 'there are a few very productive periodicals, a larger number of more moderate producers, and a still larger number of constantly diminishing productivity' [2,3]. For any single subject, the top third (Zone 1 or core) includes those journals that are the most frequently cited in the literature (for that subject) and that are, therefore, likely to be of highest interest to researchers in the discipline. The middle third (Zone 2) includes journals that have had an average amount of citations, and the bottom third (Zone 3 or tail) comprises journals seldom cited and regarded as of marginal importance [4].

Bradford's observation has since been extrapolated across many disciplines. Although the maths behind Bradford's Law are not statistically accurate, it remains a fair description of the scientific literature and librarians still frequently use it as a rule of thumb (Figure 3).

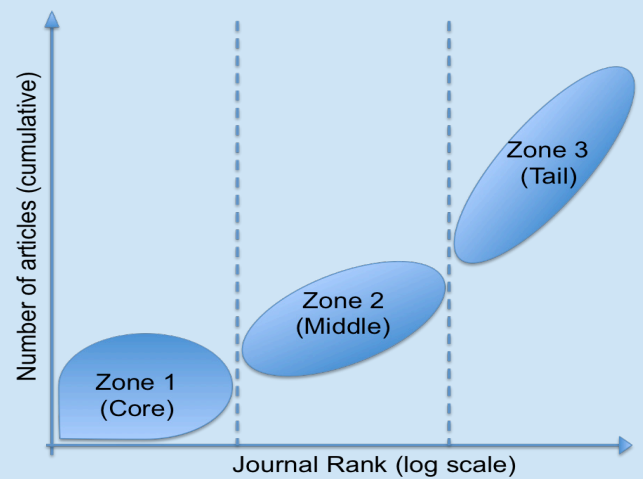


Figure 3: Bradford's Law of publishing zones

An interview with our house editor...

- Q** What is the most challenging aspect of journal selection?
- A** Author objectivity. No matter how logical or clear you make the selection process, it can be difficult for some authors to fully appreciate the value of the shortlist we provide. This is generally a result of the author having an unrealistic opinion of the importance of their work and a preconceived idea of the journal it should be published in. A further confounding factor can be the pressure that authors often feel from their institutions and/or sponsors to publish in high-ranking journals.

- Q** Is the grid method infallible?
- A** On occasion the grid method has appeared to be unsuccessful. There is a degree of user error. It relies on the author being familiar with the journals most likely to publish similar studies. If the starting material is poor, the final output will be poor. There is one other factor: it is more likely for a manuscript to get into the peer-review process (not necessarily accepted for publication) when the author is known to the editor (in some cases it can also make acceptance much less likely).

- Q** How do you handle authors who do not want to accept the findings of the search process?
- A** If the author decides they want to use a journal that wasn't in the starting search list it is easy to add it to our list, re-run the analysis and let the scores do the talking. Sometimes authors want to change a factor's weighting, and this is also easily done. Occasionally, this changes the journals we get in the final shortlist. If this approach doesn't work, we often ask the author if they have a colleague who could provide all parties with an objective opinion of the research. If all else fails, we submit the manuscript to the authors' choice making sure we have Plan B ready - second- and third-choice journals. That way, if your paper is rejected you can quickly submit to your second-choice journal.

- Q** Where do you go once you have mapped out the optimal target?
- A** When you have chosen the journal that you think is the best fit for your study and your goals you can contact the journal's editor to see if they agree with your choice. Send an email asking if the journal would give their opinion on an abstract or synopsis of the work – or ring the editorial office.

And finally...

Despite its impact, little consideration has been given to the subject of journal selection within the literature. What has been written generally appears to fall within the realm of common sense [1,5,6]. Perhaps the best advice is to remain objective.

Alternative solutions are available if the thought of all this effort seems overwhelming. For example, Edanz's online, free-to-use Journal Selection tool indexes over 18,000 journal titles and uses Parity Computing's Semantic Profiling Engine to match an author's research to journals that publish articles on similar topics [7]. Currently, the service provides a rather simplistic approach to searching, and only involves titles offered by a few publishers. Other tools include Elsevier's Scientific Journal Finder and SJFinder [8].

These tools allow authors to see where and when 'similar' articles have been published. This can be helpful when developing lists of possible journals (perhaps allowing you to devise a form of suitability score to include in your grid model) but remember that not all journals are included in these searches. It remains to be seen whether it will ever be possible to adapt the algorithms these programmes use to fully consider your publishing 'agenda'.

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Next Steps

We created this Insider's Insight into Targeted Journal Selection to share a few helpful pointers and key learnings that we have gained over the years. We can also share a template you can use yourself, which we hope will serve as a great start to finally getting your article published.

Until software intuitively identifies candidate journals we feel that journal targeting remains a skill that all authors should practise. The Niche medical writing team is happy to work with you to determine your publishing priorities and conduct a search of possible journals, narrowing the target options down from hundreds to a shortlist of the most appropriate candidates.

I hope you found our guide useful. If you would like to discuss support for any of your publishing challenges please contact me at the email address below.

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