



VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY  
MEDICAL CENTER

# **Coaching Authors to Publish Better Papers in Better Journals**

(or Bringing the Professional Editor to Campus)

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## My background

- |                               |           |            |
|-------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| • Grad student, UCSF          | 1981-1987 | researcher |
| • Postdoc, C Nüsslein-Volhard | 1988-1989 |            |
| • Postdoc, YN Jan             | 1989-1994 |            |
| • Senior Editor, Cell         | 1994-1998 | editor     |
| • Deputy Editor, Cell         | 1998-1999 |            |
| • Editor, Cell                | 1999-2003 |            |
| • Executive Director, PLoS    | 2003-2005 | researcher |
| • Sabbatical, UCSF            | 2005-2006 |            |
| • Vanderbilt                  | 2006-     |            |



## **My goal when I decided to go back to academia:**

- Take this unusual set of experiences and do something more positive for scholarly research than rejecting 90% of the papers I receive
  - Teach manuscript writing and publishing strategy
  - Improve editorial practice
  - (Think about/prepare for “the future”)

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# Center for Science Communication

## About the Center

The Center for Science Communication at Vanderbilt aims both to help authors of basic biomedical research publish better papers in better journals and to help potential editors gain experience and improve their skills. The Center offers:

- Manuscript studios-- Authors meet with a chosen panel of Vanderbilt experts to improve a near-finished manuscript for publication in a high-impact journal, and to develop a publishing strategy.

- *NEW as of August 2010!*

Self-paced scientific writing training-- This series of 14 lessons and critical and revision exercises covers sections of papers and proposals, the writing process, and ways to make your writing clearer. Available on [OAK](#); if you don't see the course when you log in, ask Jessica for access. For more information, see [Communication Training](#).

- Individual consulting -

Dr. Siegel offers advice on matters related to publication (cover letters, responding to reviews, etc.) to faculty on a limited basis.

Ms. Moore offers help with writing concerns to students and postdocs. She can provide feedback and guidance on such issues as organization, clarity, coherence, emphasizing your point, and conciseness.

- Workshops and lectures-- The Center organizes programming in collaboration with the Writing Studio and other experts across the university to help VUMC researchers improve their skills in oral and written communication.

- Help to potential editors-- The Center offers guidance to faculty who have or seek editorial appointments and offers internships and training opportunities to students and fellows interested in science communication.



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and Mechanisms*  
Executive Editor, *Journal of the  
American Society of Nephrology*



## Definition of terms

- Better papers = papers with more “impact”
- Better journals = journals with higher “impact factors”



## How did we get started

- UCSF (office of career and professional development)
- Individual seminars (grand rounds, etc.)
- Editors' Club
- 1:1 consulting
- Professional development programs (postdoc, junior faculty, women on track)
- Manuscript “sprints”
- Manuscript “studios”
- Collaboration with Writing Studio



## What do we teach?

- Basic writing skills (starting with word choice)
- Rules and expectations specific to the writing project
- Strategy



## The Steps to Getting Published (in a high profile journal)

- Do important work
- Write “bigger” papers
- Write your paper well
- Write your paper strategically (for editors and reviewers)
  - Manage expectations
  - Anticipate and guide reviewer requests
- Make the editor your advocate
  - Use presubmission inquiries and cover letters
- Understand the decision and respond appropriately <sup>8</sup>



## Strategic questions

- When do you have enough data for a paper?
- What story do those data tell?
- How do you describe where it may lead?



## There are two very distinct audiences for your paper

- The Scientist in Your Field (includes **reviewers**)
  - Methods
  - Data (figures, tables, etc.)
  - Legends
- The Outsider (scientists, **editors**, others)
  - The “body” of the paper (introduction, results, discussion)

Each piece needs individually to tell your story in a way that is best suited to the appropriate audience.



# **What Do Editors Need to Know to Evaluate a Paper?**

***What's New and Why Should I Care?***



# Placing Work in Context

**Introduction**



**Question**

**Experimental Design**

**(Answer)**



## How simple is the question?

- The less you need to know in order to appreciate why a particular question posed in the introduction is worth answering, the more “generally interesting” the paper becomes



## Did you answer the question?

- The biggest single mistake authors make in “framing” their papers is to include in the introduction a question they don’t answer in the paper



## **Writing strategically: Reviewers always ask for more**

- Think about what you might be able to include in a revised paper, and whether it might make sense to hold back an experiment from the original submission



## Revising the Paper

If you can and want to respond to everything, great.

If not, discuss your plan of action with your editor  
before resubmitting the paper



## Responding to criticism

- Recognize that there is something to learn from every criticism, and act respectful (even if you don't feel it). Assume that the editors and reviewers worked hard to reach this decision, so if you want them to be open minded, you should not insult their intelligence or ability to do their job.
  - For example, a requested experiment might actually be in the paper, but was missed by the reviewer. Simply point out that the experiment has been done (and offer to make it more prominent) without voicing your frustration over the fact it wasn't noticed.



## If you decide to appeal

- Stick to the science. Arguments about the number of postdoc years the paper took or the effect this publication will have on your career will not help.
- Treat the editor as your colleague, not your enemy.



## Submitting your rejected paper to another journal

- Respond to the concerns of the original reviewers either in word or deed
  - It will improve your paper
  - You may get them again
- The pros and cons of telling a journal you've been somewhere else first
  - You may get a quick decision
  - Almost no one wants to be seen as taking rejects



## Building your reputation

If you are new to a field, people will look at your paper with an open mind. But once you have started publishing, your reputation will precede you. Build the best reputation by publishing work that is scholarly and significant.



## **Building your reputation with editors: an “old-boy’s network”?**

- What is the quality and significance of work you have submitted to the journal in the past?
- Where have you submitted your best work in the past?
- How enjoyable has it been to work with you?
- (Have you been helpful as a reviewer?)



Treat editors as your colleagues

and they will become your  
advocates



## Can other people teach this material?

- Provide both “insider” and “outsider” perspectives
  - Are the conclusions justified by the data?
  - What are the obvious next steps?
  - What is the narrative?
  - Are there other – more interesting – stories we could tell?
- Create environments that foster open feedback



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## Collaborations



FACULTY AFFAIRS & CAREER DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Biomedical Research Education & Training





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### UPCOMING WORKSHOP:

[Speaking with Confidence and Charisma](#)

Presented by Rebekah Maggor

Tues., Dec. 7 at 2:30 pm in 208 Light Hall

### • *NEW as of fall 2010!*

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*Thank you.*

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