

VIEWPOINT

Simplify manuscript submission and optimize authors' resources by eliminating formatting and cover letters

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Abstract

Academics are under constant pressure to optimize their time. Formatting requirements imposed on academics by journals or editors during initial manuscript submission may waste precious time, energy, and financial resources, especially if a paper is desk-rejected, and even more so when there are multiple rejections. Formatting, which does not reflect a manuscript's academic quality, should not be a requirement during initial submission, but only after a paper has passed peer review and been approved for publication. Several publishers offer a formatting-free option during initial submission, allowing academics to optimize their time and energy.

Keywords: academic publishing, desk rejection, editorial vs author responsibility, peer review, quality control

It is not uncommon to find journals that request authors to format their manuscripts as one of the requirements of the initial manuscript submission process. It is also not uncommon to find long, and sometimes complex, lists of submission requirements, reflecting complexities of publishing that editors and publishers are having to deal with and meet in order to make submissions compliant with an increasing number of ethical codes and guidelines. However, submission requirements can differ considerably among journals, even within a single publisher, leading some to suggest a tabular summary of such requirements in a journal's instructions for authors.¹ Indeed, more structured instructions that set out stylistic and formatting requirements in a more organized manner may save academics time. However, since text and reference formatting does not reflect a paper's intrinsic scholarly value, the request to strictly format a paper during initial submission may be a waste of precious resources (time, energy, patience, finances) for many academics, even more so if a paper is desk-rejected one or more times. A desk rejection based on lack of journal-specific formatting may be perceived by academics as unfair.^{2,3} Academics may feel considerable frustration at editorial requests to format their paper to strict and sometimes very specific stylistic requirements, such as abstract word limits or referencing style, only to have their manuscript desk rejected. Academics are usually not able to challenge such requirements, even though they should have this right.⁴ Software packages such as *Reference Manager* are helpful in handling the mechanized organisation of reference lists⁵, but the strict requirement to format references during initial manuscript submission, even using a software package, can waste a considerable amount of time, especially where there are dozens of references.

The instructions to authors given by many journals also request a cover letter to be submitted with a manuscript. It is common to find in such cover letters arguments put forward by authors as to why their manuscript should be considered for publication in that journal. Unlike the rebuttal letter,

which serves to offer a response to requests made by editors or peer reviewers during the submission process following peer review, and which has tremendous scholarly value, there is concern that the cover letter may be used by the author(s) to bias the opinion of the handling editor, who should remain as neutral as possible when handling any academic content.⁶ Editorial bias cannot be ruled out since the cover letter is often signed whereas the submitted manuscript itself is often anonymous, and since the decision by an editor who uses the cover letter as a screening device may be based on the authors' ability to deliver a convincing argument rather than on the intrinsic scholarly value of the paper itself.⁷ For these reasons, it has been argued that the requirement to submit a cover letter should be scrapped to eliminate possible editorial bias and to save academics time.⁸

In defense of journals and publishers, it is certainly reasonable to expect authors of papers whose manuscript has been accepted for publication to format to the style required for the journal, as specified in the instructions.^{9,10} In addition to author biographies and photos, other non-essential, non-academic formatting-related requirements should also be eliminated to save time and resources and to focus entirely on the scholarly content of the paper:¹¹

1. abstracts that are free of any structure
2. sections that are free of any order
3. references that are free of any style
4. figures, tables, and files that are free of any format.

The requirement for visual abstracts,¹² which can take time and considerable energy and even costs to develop, should also be suspended from the initial submission, but only be required, as for all other stylistic requirements, once a paper has been accepted for publication.

Curiously, academics' time and other resources can also be wasted with submissions to truly "predatory" journals that do not value peer review and do not respect basic principles of editorial scrutiny.¹³ Wasting time on reformatting may be a waste of public funding¹⁴, especially if one considers crude

estimates of wasted time – based on the volume of rejected papers – in excess of 1.5 million hours per year.¹¹ In order to address these problems with strict formatting requirements during initial submission, it is important to explore whether there are any journals or publishers that have formatting-neutral requirements. Such journals and publishers can serve as role models in a publishing system that is constantly seeking ways to improve the quality of submissions and peer review process to make it more equitable for authors, editors, and peer reviewers.

Although the following list is not exhaustive, several commendable examples of format-free publishers and/or journals have been found: hundreds of Elsevier journals in the “Your Paper, Your Way” programme;¹⁵ over 350 Taylor & Francis journals,¹⁶ although the exact list is not provided and authors are requested to read their target journal's instructions to authors; all (101) IOP journals;¹⁷ 77 Wiley journals, with a drop-down menu to select the desired journal;¹⁸ 53 Nature Research journals;¹⁹ and some from other publishers.²⁰

These are all highly commendable initiatives by journals and publishers who have shown themselves to be receptive to the needs of academics who have expressed frustration during the submission process pertaining to formatting requirements. Other publishers could adopt similar flexible stylistic requirements upon submission of a manuscript to a journal prior to editorial screening and peer review that would make the submission of work to a journal more equitable, fair, and pleasant for authors. Another option that could resolve the inconvenience of strict formatting in initial submission is to set one formatting style for all journals, irrespective of the publisher. In order to achieve this, larger representative bodies that encompass multiple publishers but share common principles, such as COPE, the ICMJE, or OASPA, could request their member journals and publishers to apply a fairer and standardized set of format-free submission requirements. Doing so might in fact make format-free journals more attractive, thereby potentially securing a greater number of authors who feel that their needs are being heard.

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Author contributions

The author contributed solely to the intellectual discussion underlying this paper, literature exploration, writing, reviews and editing, and accepts responsibility for the content and interpretation.

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