

Getting Published: An Overview for Off-Campus Librarians

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Abstract

Librarians who provide service to distance education patrons have a lot of knowledge that they could share with the wider profession by publishing. Fortunately, this is easy to do. This paper provides information on the different kinds of publishing that are available from book reviews to submitting articles to peer-reviewed journals. It also offers advice on how to find the right journal to submit to including looking at factors such as the audience, prestige, and length of time to publication for the journal. Further, this paper includes tips on what to do when submitting a manuscript, including the query letter, following author guidelines, and proof reading. It also has ideas on how to respond to comments from editors and peer-reviewers. Finally, this paper covers what to do when a manuscript is rejected and examines non-traditional publishing options such as blogs and Wikis.

Introduction

Librarians involved in distance education have long been on the leading edge of serving patrons. From the use of telephones and the postal service in the 1970s, to the discovery of chat and e-mail reference assistance in the 1990s, to taking advantage of all the possibilities that the Web and course management software has to offer, it has been off-campus librarians who have helped to lead the entire library profession into this new era of librarianship. It is a safe bet that this trend will continue.

The library literature is rich with the contributions of off-campus librarians. Many books and journals have featured articles from librarians writing about issues relating to distance education, and by extension, librarianship as a whole. Despite this, many librarians in distance education do not publish or publish very little. For whatever reason (fear, dislike of writing, not knowing how to submit), the profession is missing these important voices in our scholarly communications. In addition, these librarians are missing the many personal benefits that accrue to a person by writing and publishing.

All librarians have something to contribute to the literature of the library field. Gordon (2004) wrote, "Always keep in mind that you are qualified to write for the profession merely by being a part of the profession" (p.1). It stands to follow that off-campus librarians are qualified to write about their jobs by the very fact that they hold these jobs.

In addition to benefitting the profession, librarians who write also help themselves. Henson (1999) noted, "The combined activities of writing and publishing cause us to escape our routine ways of thinking. Thinking in new ways is energizing. If we are clever, we can direct this energy so that it helps us achieve many of our professional and personal goals" (p. 21). The very act of conducting research or reporting what you know by writing articles is likely to help a librarian see her job in a new light. It may also help get the librarian noticed by others in the profession. Librarians who regularly author papers are more likely to be cited in other papers, invited to speak at conferences, and recognized as experts in the profession.

Types of Publishing Opportunities

There are a variety of options for publishing in the library field. They range from the fairly simple to the rather complex. Librarians with little experience may want to start with the easier publication venues and then try for the more challenging options as they gain experience and confidence. Some options for publishing include: Book reviews, newsletter articles, how-I-do-it-good articles, research articles in journals (either peer-reviewed or not), regular columns in a journal, and writing or editing a book.

The choice of the publishing option will help to dictate how the article is written. In fact, the same topic can often be written about several times by the same author and targeted to different venues. Johnson (1985) wrote:

A straightforward description of a new library operation might be adequate for a newsletter or one of the more popular periodicals in the profession. On the other hand, in describing this operation for a specialized journal, the author will wish to relate it to other similar operations, present a review of the literature, and summarize the investigations undertaken prior to its introduction. (p. 23)

Of all of the publishing choices, the book review is perhaps the easiest. Reviews can run from a small paragraph like in a publication such as *Choice* or can be a minor essay that takes up several pages of a journal. These types of publications do not garner much credit for those seeking tenure or promotion but they are useful to the library profession in the area of collection development. Book reviews also provide an easy way to break into publishing. If you want to be a reviewer, search through library journals. Find the ones that print book reviews in your areas of interest. E-mail the editor of the journal, explain what you want to do and what your qualifications are, and hope for the best. It should not take many attempts to get accepted as a book reviewer if you try several publications. One perk of reviewing books is that the reviewer usually gets to keep the book.

Another fairly easy route to writing for publication is newsletters. Most state and regional library associations have monthly or quarterly newsletters which are used to keep members informed. The editors of these newsletters are often looking for writers who will contribute articles about programs that libraries are doing or summaries of professional development activities. Often, a simple query to a newsletter editor is all it takes to start writing for other librarians.

One of the most useful (and vilified) types of library articles is the “how-I-do-it-good” or “how-my-library-does-it-good” article. Such articles provide a detailed report on how a person or library is serving patrons or solving a problem. These are published not only in library magazines but often in library journals as well. These articles are useful to the profession as a whole because they give reports from the field on what is going on. However, some library scholars do not like them because these types of articles usually contain little or no research. For those wanting to write for an actual journal for the first time, this type of article can work well. Most off-campus librarians can think of something novel or different that their library does. If a writer is willing to write this up in a serious manner and also include a literature review and suggest how others might use the information, it probably will result in a publishable manuscript.

The article that most librarians think of when pondering the library literature are research articles. These articles can contain qualitative, quantitative, or mixed research methodologies. The articles usually have well developed literature reviews followed by an in-depth review of the research conducted, why it is important, and what the researcher(s) found. Writing this type of article is time consuming and usually requires a librarian to receive institutional approval to work with human subjects. Knowledge of esoteric software like SPSS or NVIVO is often required. It also means that the librarian may have to work with charts and graphs. If a librarian is required to publish to achieve tenure or promotion, this is the kind of article that is required. Even for those who are not required to publish, writing research articles is one of the quickest means of gaining recognition in the library profession.

There are two methods of gate keeping for what gets published in library journals. Most journals use a double blind peer-review method for submitted manuscripts. The editor of the journal sends manuscripts out to reviewers who comment on the article and make recommendations on whether to publish or not. However, some journals have only an editor who makes the final decision and no peer-review is used. As peer-reviewed publications are preferred by those in tenure-track positions, editor only gate keeping for a journal may not be desirable for many authors. However, these journals are often still of high quality. For example, *Phi Delta Kappan* is considered to be the most prestigious journal in the field of education and it does not use peer-review.

For those who want to write for journals but who are not interested in conducting research, writing a column may be the answer. Many journals have regular columns that are submitted by one person or that are rotated amongst a group of authors. The writing in these columns does not go through peer-review but is vetted by the journal editor. This type of writing usually addresses hot topics in the field and is meant to both be entertaining and thought provoking. A good example of this is the TechMatters column at *LOEX Quarterly*, which has been written

by Krista Graham since 1999. One of her recent articles (Graham, 2007) wrote about search boxes on browsers. Committing to a column requires a willingness to write on a regular schedule, but it also allows a librarian to share her knowledge with the profession without having to engage in lengthy research projects.

Finally, librarians can also write and publish books. This is perhaps the most difficult way to get published but it also can be the most prestigious. It also can make the author some money. Writing a book requires commitment and may take years. Many authors seek agreements with book publishers before they even beginning writing to assure that their final work will be published. Book publishers are looking for experienced writers, so it is unlikely that a new writer with nothing to show on his vita will get a contract in advance. Authors can also get a book published by agreeing to edit a book. This route does not require nearly as much writing, but it does require the editor to find and manage multiple authors, which in many cases can be harder than writing the entire book alone.

Finding the Right Place to Submit

After deciding that you want to write an article for publication in the library literature, it is important to find the best place to submit it. Journals have different focuses and what is appropriate for one journal might not be for another. There are several ways to go about finding what might be the best journals to submit to and knowing this might even help before writing a manuscript. If you know what journal you are likely to submit your paper to, you can write it to match the intended journal.

The first thing to do when considering submitting a manuscript is to look at the library literature. Spend some time searching for your topic in databases such as *Library Literature*, *LISA*, and *ERIC*. Which journals are publishing articles that are similar to the article you have written or intend to write? As you write your literature review for your manuscript, you should also develop a good understanding of what might be the best places for your manuscript to be submitted to as well.

Another good way to find journals to submit to is to watch for Call-for-Papers e-mails, which tend to circulate on a variety of library listservs. These types of messages are often abbreviated as CFPs. Journal editors will often send a message out to a group they believe may be interested in writing on a topic. The message will include details on what the editor is seeking and what the requirements are for length and timeframe. Responding to these e-mails is a good way to get published as the editors would not be sending out these messages unless they currently lacked submissions. An author who can write a paper in the agreed upon time on the agreed upon topic is almost always going to get an accepted manuscript published.

A further possibility for publication opportunities is from conferences. Many library conferences publish proceedings as a book, as a special issue of a journal, or online. This counts as a publication and has the potential for the author to be read widely in the field. Pay attention to announcements that are seeking presenters for a conference. Is there a paper you have written or are thinking about writing, which would fit the conference theme? Does the conference publish their proceedings? If so, the conference may be a good opportunity for you to both get a speaking and publication credit on your curriculum vita.

Off-campus librarians can publish articles in any library journal. The topics off-campus librarians write about are varied and applicable to the profession as a whole. However, some are more likely to feature articles written by distant education librarians. These include: *Journal of Library and Information Services in Distance Learning*, *Journal of Library Administration*, *The Reference Librarian*, *Computers in Libraries*, *New Review of Libraries and Lifelong Learning*, *Reference and User Services Quarterly*, *Journal of Interlibrary Loan*, *Document Delivery & Information Supply*, and *Reference and User Services Quarterly*. These journals are all worth considering when the topic of a paper is related to distance education and distance librarianship.

Librarians should also not be afraid to submit to publications that are outside of the library field. Distance education librarians have much to offer journals in fields such as education, computer science, and communications, for example. Stueart (1976) claimed that librarians had not properly exploited publishing opportunities in other fields. He believed this was preventing librarians from being able to advance their interests. This is still true today. What better way for librarians to sell their ideas to other professions than by writing for their journals?

For librarians dealing with promotion and tenure, some caution may be in order when publishing outside the library literature. Although most promotion and tenure committees will give full credit to articles published in peer-reviewed journals in other fields, some may not. Geahigan, Nelson, Saunders, and Woods (1981) noted that Purdue University gave librarians less credit for articles published in non-LIS journals. While this policy is a hindrance to librarians trying to engage professionals in other disciplines and is self-defeating to the profession, it may be something with which librarians at some institutions may have to deal.

What to Look for in a Journal

While many journals exist to publish in, they may not all be equal for what the author hopes to accomplish in publishing. There are many questions to consider before submitting an article. For example, is the journal peer-reviewed? Is it indexed and findable by those doing research? Is the journal prestigious and does that matter to the contributor? Who are the journal's readers? How long does it take to get an article published—assuming it is accepted? Is the journal a traditional journal published on paper or is it an e-journal?

Some librarians who are working with a promotion and tenure system may have no choice but to choose a peer-reviewed journal. Otherwise, they may receive no or little credit for publishing an article. If this is the case for you, make sure of this status before submitting. If you are not sure, e-mail the editor and ask. If you are not required to publish in peer-reviewed journals, this may be ignored. There are many excellent and widely read library journals, which are not peer-reviewed and may prove to be better publishing opportunities.

Whether a journal is indexed or not is very important if you want people to actually read and cite your article. Although many read journals as they are published, most articles are found when researchers search *Library Literature*, *LISA*, or *ERIC*. If a journal is not indexed in one or more of these databases, it will be invisible to most researchers. Where a journal is indexed is usually easy to find. If you are interested in publishing in a non-indexed journal, send the editor an e-mail asking why the journal is not indexed. With a little effort, most journals can be indexed if the editor does some work.

Journal prestige is another factor in looking at journals. How important is it that an article be published in the most respected publication? There is a hierarchy of titles in the library literature. For example, the *Journal of Academic Librarianship* is more prestigious than *Illinois Libraries*. However, both of these publications are indexed and widely read. If prestige matters, then the author should research this before submitting. The rejection rates of journals are usually public, and journals with lower acceptance rates tend to be more highly regarded than those with higher acceptance rates.

Another question to ask is who the journal's audience is. For example, reference librarians are more likely to read *The Reference Librarian* while library directors are more apt to read the *Journal of Library Administration*. If the article is meant for a certain audience, it will be helpful to submit it to a journal that is read by that audience. However, any article published in an indexed journal will be searchable to the profession as a whole soon after publication. Even if a journal is not the best for your audience, the article is still likely to be found by researchers from that audience in the future.

Journals take different lengths of time to publish articles. Some are quick and may publish an article in six months while others may keep you waiting two years. If an article needs to be published quickly as it may become dated quickly or for tenure reasons, a journal with a fast turn-around time is essential. If you are willing and able to wait years to see an article published in the best journal, then go ahead and do so. However, it can be extremely frustrating to wait that long to see a manuscript in print.

Many journals now are published exclusively online. They often are peer-reviewed and are indexed in library databases. What distinguishes these journals from traditional journals is they are not published in paper. Most in the library profession consider these journals to be good additions to the library literature. However, authors dealing with tenure and promotion considerations may want to make sure their institution's policies (or the views of librarians on the promotion and tenure committee!) do not hold biases against electronic journals. It makes no sense to discriminate against an online journal that is freely available online and can be found and read via search engines. This dissemination method is good for the profession and the author. However, this form of bias does exist at some institutions and authors should be aware of this before submitting to an electronic journal.

Tips for Submitting

After finding and selecting the best journal, it is time to submit the manuscript. There are several steps that can be taken to increase one's chances that a manuscript will be accepted. These include sending a query letter, following the author guidelines, proofreading the manuscript, and being respectful by only submitting a manuscript to one journal at a time.

Sending a query letter to an editor of a journal is often a good idea. If you have a manuscript you would like to submit, e-mail the title and abstract to the editor. Even if you are certain that the manuscript fits the journal, this step can be helpful. Editors can share with authors information on how long the review process is likely to be, what the editors are currently looking for, and other tips on what to do that may help with publication. If the topic of the manuscript is not a tight fit for the journal, a query letter can be used to sell the editor on the manuscript and to engage the editor in dialogue.

Probably the most important piece of advice that submitters should take is to read and follow the contributors' guidelines for the journal. An author ignores these at his or her own peril. If the journal requires APA format, the author had better submit a manuscript, which follows APA style rules. If the journal requires manuscripts to be 15-20 pages in length, the manuscript should be no shorter or longer than 15-20 pages. An easy way to annoy editors and encourage them to reject a manuscript is to ignore or imperfectly follow the author guidelines. If an author has not taken the time to read the author guidelines, why should the editor bother to read the manuscript?

Another important step before submitting a manuscript is to proofread it thoroughly. All manuscripts will have a few minor errors and that is understood. However, these errors should be minimal. A manuscript with multiple spelling, grammar, and formatting problems is going to look unprofessional and seriously irritate the editor and/or referees. Always take the time to proofread. Afterwards, have another person look the paper over. Finally, after waiting a day or two, proofread it again.

Finally, only submit a manuscript to one journal at a time. It is unethical to submit to more than one journal at a time. It takes a great deal of time to get a manuscript reviewed and an editor does not want to learn that your paper has been approved for acceptance somewhere else after doing this work. If you are submitting two different manuscripts based on a similar study or project, you should make both editors aware that a similar but different paper has been submitted elsewhere.

Dealing with Revision Requests and Rejection Letters

After all the work of writing and submitting a manuscript, there is a possibility your article will be rejected or you will be asked to make significant revisions to your work. No matter how good an author is at writing, some manuscripts will not be accepted at the first place they are submitted. The more an author writes, the more often this will happen.

If you get a manuscript back from the editor with the request to rewrite it, do so. This is good news as it indicates that if you follow the advice provided by the editor and/or referees, the manuscript will more than likely be accepted. It is highly unlikely that a manuscript rewritten to the specifications of reviewers' comments will be rejected. For this reason, make sure that the revision makes a good attempt at meeting both the spirit and the letter of the changes that are requested. Take the time to read the comments, revise your manuscript, and then send it back to the editor for what should be an approval.

If a manuscript is rejected, read the rejection letter carefully. What were the reasons listed for the rejection? In most cases, these will be valid, and reviewing them will actually help make the manuscript better if it is rewritten. If you have questions, ask the editor for clarification.

In some cases, you may be rejected for the wrong reasons. For example, it is possible that the referees misunderstood your research methodology. The author of this paper once had a manuscript rejected based on comments from referees that the study should have used surveys rather than interviews. As the paper was a

qualitative study rather than a quantitative study, this feedback was inappropriate and indicated that both referees were lacking in knowledge of qualitative research methodologies. After discussing this with the editor and making a few revisions highlighting the differences between qualitative and quantitative research in the manuscript, the editor accepted it. If you feel the reviewers made a mistake, contact the editor and discuss it. The manuscript may still not be accepted, but it is worth the effort to find out why, as it may result in a reversal of the decision or give you a better understanding of what is wrong with the manuscript.

Sometimes a manuscript will just not be accepted by an editor. If you feel there is no point contesting this with the editor, thank the editor and move on. Do not send a nasty note back to the editor. Not only is this impolite, but it could sabotage your attempts at getting published in the future. The simple truth is that the library field is not a difficult one in which to get published. If a manuscript is rejected at one place, move on. Find another journal to which you can submit the article. Keep doing this until the manuscript is accepted somewhere. Unless a manuscript is truly awful, it is probably publishable in some venue in the library literature.

Other Ideas

The last twenty years has dramatically changed the landscape for how information is spread around the world. Old models of publishing have been joined with new Web based methods of distribution. Lorenzen (2003) wrote:

The emergence of the World Wide Web has been the largest and most important development for information delivery since the invention of the Gutenberg Press. Gutenberg's machine allowed for the mass distribution of books. This radically changed the landscape as prior to the press most books were literally copied by hand. The World Wide Web is equally as dramatic. Literally, anyone can publish anything now via the Web. (p. 4)

This is true of the library profession as well.

One example of a new method of communications is the e-journal. Another two new methods of communicating within the library profession are blogs and wikis. Both of them allow an author to disseminate her ideas. For example, Jessamyn West has used her blog (<http://www.librarian.net/>) to become well known in the profession. She is read daily by thousands. While these new methods may or may not be as respected as the traditional paper journal literature, they are accessed and read. They can bring a librarian a larger audience than any manuscript published in a traditional source can.

Lloyd (2007) wrote, "Blogs get a lot of press when individual bloggers express their opinions on politics, news of the day, or anything that strikes their fancy and thousands of others quickly jump in to join the conversation" (p. 42). There are now hundreds of librarian generated blogs on the Web. The Open Directory Project (http://www.dmoz.org/Reference/Libraries/Library_and_Information_Science/Weblogs/) lists 313 reviewed LIS blogs as of January 4th, 2008. It is clear that authors writing on blogs in the library profession are being read by their colleagues.

Wikis provide another opportunity. Lamb and Johnson wrote (2007) wrote, "Wikis are collaboratively created Web sites. They involve authors in selecting, evaluating, revising, editing, and publishing information and ideas. A Wiki uses Web-based open-editing tools to provide an easy way for multiple participants to enter, submit, manage, and update Web pages" (p. 57). There are several notable library wikis on the Web, including: the LIS Wiki (http://liswiki.org/wiki/Main_Page); the Library Instruction Wiki (http://instructionwiki.org/Main_Page); and Library Success: A Best Practices Wiki (http://www.libsuccess.org/index.php?title=Main_Page). These Wikis give librarians an opportunity to share their knowledge in a collaborative environment. Writing a library Wiki will not earn credit for tenure or promotion, but it will allow the librarian's knowledge to be spread around the world in a way a print journal never will be able to do.

Conclusion

Off-campus librarians have a lot to offer the library profession. Their trailblazing activities are of interest to others and one of the best ways to do this is to write for publication in the library field. There are a variety of options for this from writing book reviews to writing books. However, the most likely route for the majority of librarians is to write articles for journals. With the careful selection of the right publishing venue and by submitting correctly, off-campus librarians can make a big impact in the library literature.

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