“My Deadline Is What?!”

Why Publishers Need Your Materials so Early

Carol M. Ford

For anyone who has ever written “on deadline,” you know how difficult it can be to meet on your target date of submission. Life often has this funny way of simply getting in the way. Whether it’s work, family, the laundry, the dishes, Emily’s piano recital, catching up with an old school pal, or that can’t-miss episode of Lost, “something” always manages to sneak in and steal away those precious moments of time you had set aside to write. By 11:00 p.m., you’re just barely awake enough to raid the half-empty container of chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream before crashing into bed, knowing you have to do it all over again tomorrow. The “Write Column for Newsletter” item on your to-do list gets moved from Tuesday to Wednesday, and you mumble half aloud, half to yourself as you drift off to sleep, “One more day won’t matter. The editor can just drop it in. How much time does the publisher really need, anyway?”

By the time next Monday rolls around, you have managed to write your column, and you send it proudly off to the editor, expecting it to run as is, with no changes. Much to your shock and dismay, your editor does not respond favorably. The newsletter went to print, and your column wasn’t included. “How can this be?” you ask, irritated that you have sacrificed your time and energy for nothing. “An April 1st deadline for the May/June issue is just ridiculous! And today is only April 27th!”

Frustrated and angry, you resign yourself to the belief that the publisher’s deadlines are much too rigid for manuscript submission. After all, newspapers and other print items publish daily. Why does this publisher require such an early deadline?

The Publication Process: From Soup to Nuts

Publishing deadlines across the country and around the world vary depending on each individual publisher. Some publishers are in operation only during normal business hours, while others have shifts that work around the clock. Newspapers and weeklies, for example, usually have 24-hour staff; therefore, they are able to publish up-to-the minute news and items of current interest. They also have certain staff dedicated to working on one publication only; in other words, 100% of their time is devoted to one particular publication. This is the nature of those media, and it is quite different from scholarly journals, periodicals, magazines, and newsletters that are published monthly or bi-monthly. Often, editorial and art staff employed at such publishing firms must divide their time between several publications, and to meet every publication’s particular deadline, production schedules are created to allow plenty of lead time.

Regardless of the type of publication, deadlines set forth by the publisher must be respected. If an author does not adhere to the deadlines, it could mean a delay in publication or the publisher’s decision to pull the author’s manuscript from the lineup. This article provides a brief overview of the publication process for peer-reviewed journals and newsletters, giving a “behind the scenes” look at why those early deadlines are so important.

Blind Peer Review

The editor and editorial staff of scholarly publications typically request the first draft of a manuscript to be submitted at least six months prior to an intended issue. These manuscripts are sent out to colleagues considered to be experts in the field of the manuscript’s topic, and they review the manuscript content for accuracy. In addition, these reviewers can offer suggestions to strengthen the manuscript grammatically and structurally. This is a blind review, and the identities of reviewers and authors are kept confidential. Reviewers typically have three to four weeks to complete the review and return the manuscript to the editor with comments.

Comments from reviewers, as well as the editor’s own suggestions, are compiled by the editor and sent to the author. A revision of the manuscript will likely be requested. If you are an aspiring author, don’t panic! Nearly every manuscript submitted will have at least one revision request. Authors should keep in mind that these suggested changes are meant to enhance the published article. It is never fun to have your work critiqued; however, this revision stage is for the benefit of the author to help make the article as dynamic as possible. Pay attention to what the editor and reviewers have to say, and do your best to submit the revision by the date specified.

Layout and Design/Page Proofs

After the manuscript has been accepted for publication, it will be slated for a particular issue. The author may not hear from the publisher for several months. That does not mean the publisher has forgotten about the manuscript; rather, it means that no further work can be done on the manuscript until it gets closer to the issue’s deadline. It is acceptable to contact the publisher to check on your manuscript. It is also important to communicate any times of the year you may be away while your manuscript is active so the publisher knows where you can be reached.

The manuscript will generally be edited twice, once by the editor and once by the managing editor, prior to layout and design. There may or may not be author queries during this time. The manuscript will then be formatted, and the author will see a proof of his or her article to approve or make last-minute changes, which should be kept to a minimum. It is most impor-
tant for the author to review the page proofs carefully and in a timely manner.

Turn-around time for page proof corrections can vary depending on the publisher. The editor and managing editor will also proof and re-read the formatted article. Authors’ corrections are collected by the managing editor, reviewed by both the editor and managing editor, and incorporated into the formatted article. Authors should not resubmit a Word document of a revised manuscript in lieu of highlighted corrections on the proof; at this late stage in the process, the publisher is unable to return to the early stages of manuscript development and begin the process over again. Failure to respond to author queries and page proof requests in the timeframe given can result in delay of publication or having the article pulled.

**Imposition**

When a publication enters the imposition stage, all author queries and edits should be complete. At this stage, editorial content and advertisements are “married” into the final publication. If an article has been delayed, it can wreak havoc, causing the entire issue to sit in limbo for the duration. It may also result in late publication and distribution.

Working with both editorial and advertising staff, the art department will construct the issue, ensuring that everything fits together perfectly. A set of page proofs encompassing the entire publication is created, and the editor and advertising and editorial staff review the issue one last time before it is sent to the printer. The art department uploads the issue to the printer via a secure Web site, and the printer sends a blueline – the printer’s version of a final proof – to the publisher as one final check before printing begins.

**What Does this Mean for Me As an Author?**

Generally, the process from raw manuscript to published issue for a peer-reviewed, scholarly publication takes approximately six months or longer from start to finish. Many factors are involved, including the quantity and quality of manuscripts, as well as the cooperation from key players – the editor; reviewers; editorial, art, and advertising staff; and most importantly, the author. When all work in tandem, the final issue and the articles therein have the potential to make the author and publisher proud. It only takes one, however, to step out of sync with the others to bottleneck the process and cause disarray.

As the author, you are in control. While you will most likely be faced with revision requests and article queries, your quick and direct attention to your editor and publisher will get your article published. Remember, they are working for you, not against you. By complying with the tricks of the publishing trade, you can place yourself in the position to learn, become an established author, and continue your successful journey down the publishing road for years to come.

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