

Accelerating Peer Review: Ten Tips for Swift Publication

BLAIR ORR¹, AND INA VANDEBROEK²

¹ Treasurer, Society for Ethnobotany, St. Louis, MO, USA

² Department of Life Sciences and Caribbean Centre for Research in Bioscience, Faculty of Science and Technology, The University of the West Indies Mona, Kingston 7, West Indies, Jamaica

*Corresponding author; e-mail: ina.vandebroek@uwimona.edu.jm

Every author would like a speedy acceptance of their submission. Prospective authors may even compare the average time from submission to publication of particular journals. What is wrong with this approach? It is not the average time that matters to you, it is the time spent on the review process for *your* paper. The question to ask instead is: How do I make my paper one that navigates through this process quickly?

Economic Botany has a wide time range from submission to publication. Papers that go through swiftly are those that follow all the instructions for authors diligently, demonstrate their importance and novelty, and have clear and comprehensible scientific writing.

Here are ten recommendations to make your paper sail smoothly through the peer-review process.

1. **Determine if your paper is a good fit.** The [guidelines \(instructions for authors\)](#) for *Economic Botany* describe the type of papers the journal accepts, and those that it does not accept. A major reason for rejection is that although your manuscript is interesting, it is not central to the mission of *Economic Botany*. Ask yourself if *Economic Botany* has recently published papers that are generally like yours? If you peruse recent issues of the journal, you will quickly notice that its central topic is people and plants (or nature and culture) and that the journal focuses on problem solving and/or hypothesis testing in ethnobotany and economic botany. The guidelines also underscore the importance of an ethnographic component in your research. Have you read or cited papers from *Economic Botany* in your own manuscript? If you answer yes to both questions, you are probably selecting the right journal.
2. **Consult and follow the guidelines for authors.** We can not stress this enough. *Economic Botany* has a specific format for the structure of papers and for the formatting of in-text citations and references. Read through each of the [guidelines](#) and follow them diligently. Failure to adhere to the guidelines is a primary source of delay from submission to publication. In particular, some prospective authors fail to apply the correct formatting to in-text references and the bibliography at the end of their manuscript, even when explicitly reminded during pre-review revision. Manuscripts cannot be sent out for peer review until references are properly formatted. It is up to authors to avoid this common delay.
3. **Justify novelty and innovation.** Have you clearly shown how the topic of your paper contributes to the broader field of study in ethnobotany or economic botany, and which new advances

it makes to the literature? It is important to state this explicitly in the introduction and to highlight the gaps in the literature that your paper is addressing. If you conduct a thorough literature review prior to writing your paper, it does not just show that you know the field, it allows you to synthesize what is known and then show the importance of your own research within the field. How are you adding to and refining the fields of ethnobotany or economic botany? Explaining this makes it easier for reviewers to assess the novelty of your manuscript. The easier it is for reviewers, the more likely it is that the review will be prompt and that the paper will not need multiple revisions.

4. **Formulate research questions or a hypothesis.** Have you clearly stated your research objectives and are you formulating research questions (or a hypothesis) that your paper will address? What exactly will you show in your paper? Be as specific as possible. Reviewers look for this in the paper and then check to see if you have met the research objectives you have set for yourself. These research objectives should flow logically through your manuscript from the introduction to the discussion of how you are contributing to the field. At the end of the paper, you want to clearly show that you have met your objectives as a take home message in the conclusion.
5. **Be thorough in materials and methods.** Are you providing all the necessary details in materials and methods? Each study should be reproducible. Reviewers and readers of your paper need to be able to clearly follow and understand all the specific steps that you have taken during research. Here, the general rule is that “more is better.” Do not forget to provide an overview table with demographic information of the participants you interviewed. This table fits better in materials and methods than in the results section.
6. **Use sensitive language.** For ethnobotanical data, it is more culturally sensitive to state you “observed” than to say you “discovered.” Local people discover, outsiders observe. Instead of “This [knowledge, cultural practice] has not been documented before” write instead “This [knowledge, cultural practice] has not been documented in the scientific literature before.” Verbal transmission of knowledge by local communities is also documentation. Ethnobotanists and allied scientists should avoid positioning themselves as the discoverers and documentors of traditional knowledge. Other terms that merit caution include but are not limited to (1) informants (use participants instead). You did not extract information; people whom you have interviewed have consented to participate in your research; (2) males and females (use men and women instead); (2) “old” and “young” people. Most people do not like to be classified as “old” or “young”; (3) the same is true for “illiterate,” “poor,” and other terms that may come across as insensitive or derogatory. The term “peasant” has negative connotations in some geographies. Sara Koopman, an assistant professor in peace and conflict studies at Kent State University, writes a blog called Spanish for Social Change (<http://www.spanishforsocialchange.com/>) that focuses on social justice terminology for translators and interpreters. She suggests that the Spanish word “campesino” should be used rather than “peasant.” Prospective authors should be mindful about their use of terminology and reflect on its potential impacts beyond their own culture, class, race, gender, country, or other determinants (see also McClatchey 2005).
7. **Go beyond plant lists.** Does your manuscript provide additional analysis of research data other than descriptive lists of plant and/or plant uses? The journal guidelines state that “papers that are

- essentially lists of useful plants from some part of the world are ordinarily not considered for publication.” They also state that “a descriptive paper will require an analysis of the context of use of plants.” This does not imply that *Economic Botany* only accepts studies that carry out quantitative analyses (see also recommendation 8). A thorough qualitative analysis of your results, drawing on established theory as a foundation and highlighting how your study contributes to expanding or challenging this theory (or building new theory), will also bring important insights. Are you explaining your results properly in the discussion, drawing on the local context to make extrapolations that are useful to a global audience? A great contextual analysis of your data will draw in many readers and increase citation of your paper. **Also make sure to use correct, up-to-date scientific plant names.** Check your plant names with a reputable source. Three such online sources are Encyclopedia of Life (EOL), Plants of the World Online (POWO), or World Flora Online (WFO).
8. **Are ethnobotanical indices really necessary?** Do you find yourself indiscriminately using ethnobotanical indices? There already exists a proliferation of papers from different geographies in the literature that use ethnobotanical indices without justifying which new and compelling methodological and/or theoretical contributions these indices are making. Often, these are descriptive studies in which indices highlight (more) culturally important plants (or plant uses) among a list of culturally important plants, followed by a generic conclusion that “these plants (or plant uses) merit conservation.” Are you able to justify the need for, and novelty contributions of, these indices? If your answer is “not really,” then avoid using indices.
 9. **Practice good scientific writing.** Many papers get shuffled back and forth among editors, reviewers, and authors if the writing is unclear or grammatically incorrect. If you do not have a fluent command of the English language, find somebody who does and is willing to copy edit your work, ideally a colleague or someone who is skilled with science writing in your discipline. Poor writing is another primary source of delay from submission to publication. Reviewers or editors may like your key ideas, but may comment that the ideas are not expressed well in the paper. When this happens, your paper may be accepted, but undergo repeated major revisions requests. Repeated revisions are a time-consuming endeavor for everyone involved, including authors.
 10. **Write for a broad audience.** Have you reflected on how your results may contribute to research around the world, scaling up your paper’s relevance beyond the local context? Recommendation three asked you to specifically state the contribution you are making, and reaching a broad audience is one reason to do this. Make sure to position your paper in the global literature and to give some thought on how an audience consisting of those who are not experts in your particular topic will receive the importance of your results. Avoid using highly technical language, and do not fill your paper with acronyms. One or two acronyms are acceptable, provided they do not hinder the readability of your paper. Also, do not invent new acronyms for terms with already published acronyms. This just creates confusion. Finally, pay attention to detail, but gently take the reader by the hand to follow your paper’s main storyline. At the same time,

make sure your story is supported by solid research data.

There are several detailed and useful guides to writing great papers out there, including Schimel (2011), who covers the ten suggestions and includes exercises and examples to improve your writing. Abbadia (2022) and Arthur (2020) provide quick overviews on the basics of writing a good scientific manuscript. The Fred Meijer Center for Writing (n.d.) has a well-organized overview of scientific writing that includes a set of useful prompts at the end of the document. Dhillon (2021) gives advice on how to write a good review of a journal article. Reading this may help you understand how the review process works, and what reviewers are looking for as they read your paper. Writing manuscripts in scientific English can be daunting if English is not your first language. Shock et al. (2016) cover some aspects of writing manuscripts in English.

Following these ten recommendations, the remaining piece of advice is: Remember to enjoy the process of writing. Remind yourself that what matters is not the current state of your manuscript, but where you envision it to be going. Writing a good paper takes time. Allow yourself that time, while you gather your thoughts, carefully build a storyline that is supported by the data, discuss your ideas with colleagues, and re-work several drafts before you submit. At the end, do not forget to go through these ten recommendations again as a checklist. When we receive your manuscript, we use the same checklist. If everything is fine, your submission will promptly enter peer review.

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