How to Publish Academic Papers

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Introduction

- Brian Roe, who is one of the co-editors of the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* (AJAE), could not make it to this session, so he asked me to sub for him instead.
- How and why am I qualified to do so? Let's see:
  - Associate editor at the *AJAE*
  - Associate editor at *Food Policy*
  - 2007 AAEA Outstanding Doctoral Dissertation Award
  - 2011 AAEA Outstanding AJAE Article Award (for a paper written with then-grad student Zack Brown)
  - 2014 AAEA Quality of Research Discovery (for a paper written with Chris Barrett and David Just)
- More importantly, *I have been rejected more than anybody else I know*–up until recently, my "hit rate" (revise-and-resubmits per submission) was 28.2 percent.

How to Publish Academic Papers

- Very easy: Almost any academic paper you ever write can be published.
- Indeed, not a week goes by without my getting solicited to publish my work in some international journal of dubious quality–typically in exchange for money.
- But, in that case, much like Groucho Marx, I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member.

How to Publish Academic Papers

- So presumably, the question the organizers were really interested in having answer is this:
- "How to Publish Academic Papers in Good Journals"
- Let's get to it.

A Good Idea

- The first thing you need is a good idea.
- As an associate editor at two journals (and as a frequent reviewer for all sorts of journals), what I see way too much of are papers of the form "[Uninteresting Research Question]: A Semi-Nonparametric Investigation," or "[Uninteresting Research Question]: Evidence from [Developing Country]."
- But like my friend and erstwhile colleague Tim Beatty is fond of saying: $0\times$ (Fancy technique or estimator equals) $= 0$.

What Is a Good Idea?

- What's a good idea? Generally, a paper contains an interesting idea if the following conditions are satisfied:

1. It asks question that has not been asked before in the literature.
2. Said question is a Big Question.
3. If it asks a question that has been asked before, it better (i) answer it almost perfectly, and (ii) that question better be a Big Question.

What Is a Good Idea?

- No one will want to publish a replication study in which you use data from a different country or a fancier estimator. And no one will want to publish your original study of some phenomenon of limited interest—a lesson I learned the hard way with my job-market paper, which took ten years to publish from inception to acceptance at *Land Economics*, after trying at six other journals.
- Generally, the quality of your paper is determined by the following formula:

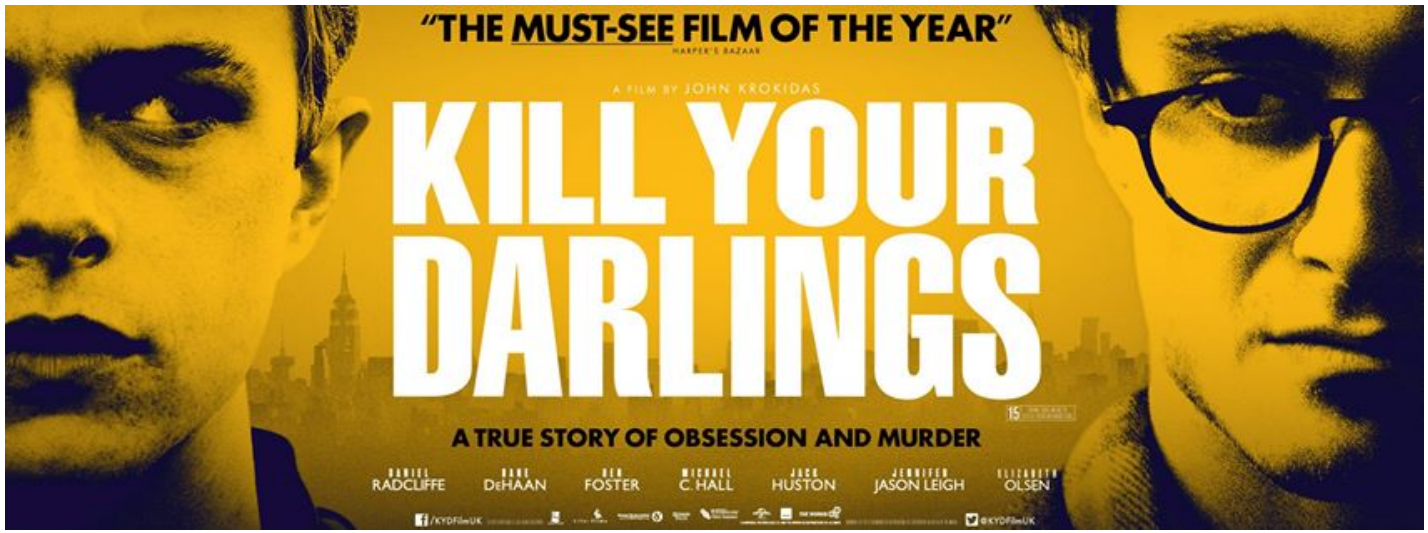
$$\text{Quality} = \min\{\text{Question}, \text{Novelty}, \text{Execution}\} \tag{1}$$

Good Salesmanship

- A good idea is a good start, but even the best ideas are mute. So your success in publishing your work in good journals depend in no small part on how well you can sell your ideas.
- For all this talk of how what we are doing is social science, know this: What we are doing is more art than science.
- As such, your abstract and introduction (and, to a lesser extent, your title) are where the fate of your papers gets decided.

Good Salesmanship

- For most of my papers, and without any exaggeration, I must have rewritten the introduction at least 100 times. I suggest you rewrite the introduction every time you look at your paper. And don't be afraid to kill your darlings, as William Faulkner would have it.



Good Salesmanship

How do you write an introduction? In the second-year qualifying paper seminar I teach at Minnesota, I refer students to Keith Head's introduction formula, which works very well, and according to which your introduction should go through the following steps:

1. Hook: This is where you motivate your work as broadly as possible
2. Question: This is where you clearly state your research question and explain how you answer it
3. Antecedents: One-paragraph mini literature review
4. Value Added: Your contributions, and why this deserves to be published
5. Roadmap: "The remainder of this paper is organized as follows ..."

Good Salesmanship

- If you don't follow that formula, don't be surprised if your manuscripts are desk rejected or if you receive nasty referee reports. The way introductions are structured in economics is a social norm. You don't need to read Ellickson's *Order without Law* to know what happens to people who don't follow social norms.
- I just submitted two referee reports. One of them had an introduction that meandered over five pages and would not get to the point of the paper until the last paragraph.
- Is it formulaic? You bet. But so is the way most hit songs are written, and so is the way most blockbuster movies are directed. Publications are the coin of the realm, and your goal is to get published. If you need an outlet for your creative writing, scholarly journals are not it.

A Good Execution

- After having (i) a good idea that you (ii) sell effectively, what you need is a solid execution. In other words, you need to provide a credible answer to the research question you set out to answer.
- This is neither the time nor the place to lecture you about identification, but for most of us in agricultural and applied economics, this means having a credible research design. Put another way, this means that your paper must have a reasonable shot at making a causal claim.
- If not, then you really better be looking at a Big Question, and you better be honest about your lack of identification.

A Good Execution

- Briefly, a good execution uses the right data and the right methods to answer the research question you set out to answer.
- What those are is obviously dependent on your research question. But if there is one thing that editors and reviewers particularly do not want to see, it's technique for technique's sake, or people who hide a poor execution behind a fancy technique or a fancy estimator.
- We all have a PhD in economics or applied economics, and if we are serving as editors and reviewers, it's because we've all passed our micro and econometrics courses. You're not fooling anyone with technical flashiness.

A Good Execution

- One last word on execution: Don't be afraid to admit to the limitations of your approach–showing your work's weaknesses makes you look smart, to a point.
- Don't be afraid to run all the robustness checks you can think of. Only a minute fraction of our estimation results get published. When submitting, it is a good idea to prepare an appendix that is not for publication (or for online publication) in which you show your reviewers that your results hold under a wide variety of alternate specifications.
- Preparing such a document will in and of itself will serve as a signal that your results are credible– that you haven't cherrypicked them.

Accurate Conclusions

- Finally, your paper has to have a conclusion. This is where you synthesize what you have done, discuss the implications of your research, and explain how future research could build on your findings.
- Perhaps the worst mistake you can make here is to draw conclusions that are not supported by your findings, or to extrapolate on the basis of weak evidence.
- For example, if your estimates are not causally identified, do not use causal language. Rather, say your findings show *an association* between your explanatory variable and your dependent variable, and explain how they *suggest* that there is a relationship between the two.

Why Do Papers Get Rejected?

- Now that I have told you how to get published, I should also tell you how to minimize your risks of rejection by discussing what gets rejected.
- I reject about 80 percent of submissions assigned to me at *Food Policy*. Often, a paper gets rejected because it is a "determinants" paper: the authors regressed some dependent variable on some controls, made up stories about what's significant, and called it research.
- In other cases, authors use a poor research design. Say, they use a Heckman selection model without telling me what the exclusion restriction is, or the variable they use for their exclusion restriction is obviously endogenous to the outcome they are interested in.

Why Do Papers Get Rejected?

- Papers also get rejected because of a poor fit with the journal. For example, I recently desk rejected a paper that was about trade and the environment, and which barely mentioned food (a fellow associate editor complained that she never got such softball decisions to make after I shared it with her).
- Papers also get rejected because they are of limited interest. Say, they focus on the marketing behavior of tomato-growing households in three villages in Burkina Faso.
- If a title or an abstract contains obvious typos, it makes me more likely to scrutinize the paper more closely, which makes it easier for me to find reasons to reject. Proofread your papers, and get them professionally copy-edited if you are not a native speaker of English.

Why Do Papers Get Rejected?

- Papers also get rejected because they get submitted to the wrong journals. If your bibliography is full of references to the *AJAE*, your paper is likely not a good fit at *Econometrica*.
- And then, of course, papers get rejected because reviewers recommend rejection. If this doesn't happen to you more than 50 percent of the time, you're submitting to journals that are ranked too low.
- The way to deal with those is simple. If you think your reviewers "misunderstood" what you were doing, your salesmanship was lacking. It is entirely on you to express yourself clearly.

Why Do Papers Get Rejected?

- If both reviewers agree on something, address it. Or do the same if a reviewer identifies an important flaw. The rest is noise.
- When you get a rejection, it stings. And the sting of rejection will never completely go away.
- When you get rejected, incorporate what you can from the reviewers' comments, and move on to the next journal. Whether this means going up or down the rankings is entirely dependent on whether you have improved the paper as a consequence of rejection.

Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good Papers?

- That said, even if you do everything right, you will still get rejected every once in a while. Some reviewers are just bitter, unhappy people, and some editors (who really should know better) fail to see through those.
- Last fall, a coauthor and I got a rejection in which one of the reviewers likened our work to a high-school term paper, no less, and the other recommended rejection because we estimated linear probability models (LPMs) instead of probits—even though we had a long discussion explaining why LPM was the right choice in that case.
- That said, don't argue with editors, unless there was an obvious mistake. Most authors who contests editorial decisions are like student who grade grub.

Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good Papers?

- When that happens, take some time to complain to your friends and colleagues–and then move on.
- As Churchill might have put it, the peer-review process is the worst system we can think of, except for all the other systems that have been tried.