

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

Demystifying Publishing during the PhD: Navigating Challenges and Opportunities

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Publishing during your PhD can be both rewarding and challenging. On the one hand, writing and publishing papers can be a beneficial and particularly important aspect of your time as a PhD student. Not only does it allow you to share your work with a wider audience, but also it can help establish your reputation in your field and may lead to future opportunities such as academic positions or funding. On the other hand, publishing can be an intimidating challenge that adds an additional layer of pressure and workload to an already demanding program and therefore requires a huge amount of dedication and resilience.

Considering the theme of this Critical Perspectives section, this essay tries to “demystify” the double-edged sword of publishing while working toward a PhD. In particular, it covers three aspects: First, it presents the major challenges of publishing during your PhD. Then, it highlights the advantages and upsides of the publishing process for PhD students. The third section offers tips and recommendations on how to approach the challenge of publishing papers during your PhD.¹

The Intimidating Challenge of Publishing during Your PhD

Without any doubt, the expectation to publish polished, cutting-edge journal articles during your PhD can be a challenging and daunting experience.

First, you are competing with researchers who have years of experience and established reputations in their field, and—all at a sudden—you are expected to produce the same kind of papers that you have only read as a student up until now. Moreover, thoughtless or cruel feedback that you might receive during the review process can demoralize you, putting you off writing for a long time. This can be particularly true for PhD students, who may perceive that they are not up to par with more experienced researchers.

Second, for many PhD students, the publishing process and the expectations surrounding it are new and unfamiliar experiences. One of the main challenges is getting an accurate overview of the guidelines and expectations of different journals. Many journals have their individual submission guidelines for the types of articles they accept and their formatting requirements. In addition, journals have different expectations for the level of novelty and impact of the work that they accept, and it can be overwhelming to try to determine which journals are the best fit for your work (see Franceschet, Krook, and Wolbrecht 2023).

Lastly, understanding the review process of scientific journals presents another daunting challenge. Learning how to interpret and respond to the feedback of reviewers can be difficult and intense if you are new to the publishing process (see Sundström 2023).

Overall, publishing during your PhD is an intimidating, overwhelming, and time-consuming experience for *everybody* who encounters this process for the first time. It is important to be aware of these challenges and find ways to manage them effectively. Therefore, the following two sections highlight the many advantages of publishing papers as a PhD student and present tips and recommendations on how to approach publication.

The Advantages of Publishing during Your PhD

Above all, having one or more successful publications while completing your PhD can be extremely advantageous when you enter the academic job market. Publications are frequently seen as the most important “currency” in academia and have become almost indispensable when it comes to evaluating candidates for post doctoral or assistant professor positions. Publishing during your PhD therefore demonstrates that you have academic potential and the knowledge and skills needed to contribute to your field. By taking advantage of this opportunity early in your career, you are positioning yourself to achieve success later on (Horta and Santos 2016).

Another benefit of publishing during your PhD is increased visibility. By publishing your work, you have the opportunity to make your name and work known to the research community in your specific field, as other researchers can become aware of the contributions you are making. This can be extremely helpful in building up networks and opening doors to future opportunities, such as collaborations or invitations to present at conferences and workshops (Horta and Santos 2016).

Beyond establishing your name as a serious researcher and increasing your chances on the job market, publishing as a PhD student also provides the opportunity to open yourself up to peer review and scholarly exchange. By receiving feedback from experienced reviewers, you can learn more about the strengths and weaknesses of your research and get to know alternative perspectives and insights that you would not have thought of before (see also Montoya 2023; Sundström 2023). This can be immensely beneficial for developing and refining the direction of your research (or your dissertation). It also

teaches you a great deal about the expectations and standards of your field and can help ensure that your work is of the highest quality. Moreover, the review process helps you to develop your writing skills and your ability to communicate your research effectively.

How to Face the Challenge of Publishing during Your PhD

Getting to know and adapting to the academic publication process is a lengthy and arduous task. In this section, I present five recommendations that should help you in approaching your first publication(s): (1) normalizing rejections; (2) coauthoring; (3) understanding that the more you write, the easier it is to do; (4) starting early; and (5) thinking hard about where to publish.

While it can be frustrating and disheartening to receive a rejection after submitting your paper to a journal, it is important to remember that rejection is a normal and expected part of the academic process. It happens to *everyone!* With journal acceptance rates averaging around 10%, rejection is in fact the most likely outcome of the publishing process. Of course, it can be hard not to take these rejections personally, but it is important to remember that this does not mean that you or your work are inadequate—instead, it should be seen as simply a step in the publication journey (always remember: it happens to *everyone!*). Your work may not have been a good fit for a particular journal, or it may have been rejected because of factors outside your control.

It is also completely understandable that rejections put you down for a couple of days or weeks. But afterward, you should try to get as much feedback as possible on why your work was not accepted. Almost all journals will provide reviewers' comments along with the rejection, and these comments can be valuable in helping you understand what changes you need to make to your work. Many papers are accepted for publication after multiple rounds of revision, and it is absolutely common to submit work to multiple journals before it is accepted. With time and persistence, you will be able to find a home for your work (Johnson 2011).

One way to ease your entry into the publishing process is to coauthor your first paper with your PhD supervisor or another more senior colleague. Not only will they be able to help you craft a compelling piece of work that meets the standards and expectations of a scientific paper, but they may also provide insights on how best to present your ideas and arguments. Furthermore, working alongside an expert in the field allows you to gain valuable knowledge about what works when it comes to effective academic writing, helping you avoid common mistakes that could otherwise lead to rejection. Coauthoring a paper can also help divide the workload and make the process of writing and preparing a paper for submission more manageable. Perhaps even more important, you can share the responsibility (and anger) in case of a rejection of the paper.

If you have an interesting idea for a paper, do not hesitate to approach more senior colleagues working on similar topics to discuss your concept and to brainstorm opportunities for a collaboration. You can either contact colleagues

at your own department or university (which might feel less intimidating), or you can talk to other researchers at conferences or during workshops. If you decide to work together on a paper, however, you should make sure to agree on a clear division of labor (i.e., who is responsible for which sections of the paper) and to set up a firm timeline for your project (e.g., regular meetings, deadline for drafts).

Relatedly, you should always keep in mind that publishing during a PhD is a process of trial and error, as you learn about the expectations and standards of your field and develop your skills as a researcher and writer. It is normal to make mistakes when you are first starting out in the publishing process. But the more you write, the easier it will become and the more comfortable you will be with the overall publishing process. With each submission, you will learn more about what works and what does not, and you will become more skilled at crafting a strong submission. Many universities offer specialized courses on academic writing, which can be a valuable support during the process of writing your first academic publication (see Anlar and Phillips 2023 for more suggestions for departments and institutions on supporting students).

When planning to publish during your PhD, it is important to start early and not wait too long to write and submit your first paper for publication. The review process can be quite slow, and it usually takes several months until you get a first decision on your manuscript. Revising your paper in case of a “revise and resubmit” decision as well as the second round of reviews can take another couple of months. Overall, it is common that it takes more than a year from first submission to the publication of a paper. You should keep this timeline in mind if you want to have at least one publication at the end of your PhD. It can be very helpful to outline a clear road map for your publication, including firm target dates by which certain sections of the paper should be written, as well as a specific deadline for the first full draft of the manuscript. Here, presenting your manuscript at workshops, colloquia, or conferences not only gives you the opportunity to receive valuable feedback, but also sets fixed deadlines when the paper must be written. This often creates the “right amount” of pressure to get your work done and to write a first draft of your paper.

However, it is also important to set realistic goals for your publication efforts and to keep in mind that different fields have different expectations. In some fields, it may be more common to publish multiple articles, while in others, a single published paper may be sufficient (Hatch and Skipper 2016).

A decisive factor to consider when setting your publication goals is the importance of quality over quantity. Sometimes it may be better to publish a small number of papers that involve an important research question, a rigorous research design, and extensive and time-consuming data collection and analysis than a large number of lower-quality papers with a negligible contribution to the literature. This is not only because such theoretically and empirically rigorous papers are more likely to be accepted for publication, but also because they will have a greater impact on your field and can be more valuable when you are seeking academic positions or funding.

It should also be mentioned that your capability to publish strongly depends on the type of dissertation that you are writing. An article-based dissertation, usually consisting of three to four papers, provides the huge upside that you can work on your thesis and publish at the same time. Publishing while working on a monograph for your PhD, by contrast, is much harder because writing the book will be your primary focus and you will not have much time to work on additional papers. Nevertheless, after you have finished your thesis, it is still possible to publish single chapters of your monograph as stand-alone research papers.

Lastly, one crucial aspect to consider when planning to publish during the PhD concerns which outlet to choose for your publication (see Johnson 2011). First, you should consider how closely the scope and focus of the journal aligns with your own research. Look at the websites of the journals to see what topics and research approaches they are looking for. Additionally, you can also check to see which journals you have cited the most in your paper. Usually, this is a fairly good indicator for the outlets that you should consider submitting your work to.

Relatedly, it is important to think about whether you should aim for the top journals of the profession (e.g., *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*) or submit your work to more specialized field journals (e.g., *Politics & Gender*, *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*). Top journals are highly respected and have a wide readership, and publishing in these journals can be a significant achievement. However, these journals are also highly competitive, and it can be difficult to get your work accepted for publication. In addition, the review process can be more time-consuming and rigorous, and it may take longer to get your work published. Field journals, on the other hand, may not have the same level of prestige as top journals, but they can still offer an excellent opportunity to get published and build up experience within the field. You can be sure that your work will be of interest to the journal's readership and that it will be reviewed by experts in your field.

Moreover, you should keep an eye out for calls for special issues. Special issues often have a very specific focus or theme, which can help you to reach a more targeted audience and increase the chances of your work being accepted for publication. Special issues can also be a good opportunity to connect with other researchers who are interested in similar research topics.

Conclusion: Challenges and Opportunities of Publishing during Your PhD

Publishing during your PhD is a challenging but rewarding experience. It can be a long and difficult process, often requiring tenacity, focus, and a thick skin to persevere through rejections. If successful, however, it can help you stand out from other candidates on the job market, make your name and your work known to the research community in your field, build up important networks with your

colleagues, and provide you with invaluable feedback that can help improve your skills as an academic.

Note

1. The essay is based on my personal observations as well as numerous talks and discussions with colleagues in the social sciences. Always keep in mind that expectations and norms differ from context to context.

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