# Publish or Perish?

A guide to figuring out what to write and where to publish it

JoVanEvery.ca
Helping You Achieve Your Research Goals

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**How many journal articles do I need to publish? Do I need to write a book? Which journal should I submit to? Why does it matter? Are conference presentations worth anything?**

As an academic your publication record is one of the most important ways that you will be judged. Hiring, tenure, promotion, grants … It seems that almost everything you do depends on your list of publications.

## THE FRUSTRATION

Many academics I meet think that those judgements will be based on the *content* of their publications; that the person or committee judging their work will read the articles and come to an independent assessment of the quality of their research. Many are disappointed to discover that judgements are based solely on the information in their CV. Some are downright angry that their work is judged not by the elegance of their arguments or the quality of their data but by the name of the journal in which it is published.

# WHY DOES THE JOURNAL OR PRESS MATTER?

Your work is assessed on two main criteria: quality and impact.

## *Quality*

**You *don't* want each evaluator of your work to make their own independent judgement.** You want them to accept the standards of your academic community.

If you publish in a peer reviewed journal or with a respected academic press, the quality of your work has already been judged by your peers as meeting the standards expected. Those standards vary somewhat and thus the journal (or press) provides comparators.

Your work has been judged to be of at least the same standard as the work usually published in that journal or by that press. There is no need for the person currently assessing your work to read it, because peers have already done so and they can (and should) accept the judgement of their peers.

This is why articles in peer reviewed journals and monographs published with respected academic presses will be more highly valued than working papers, articles in newer journals (whose reputation is not established), articles in edited collections, and even articles in special issues of well respected journals. An article published in a well respected journal with a low acceptance rate, from an unsolicited submission, is considered to be of high quality for the same reason that a skier who has won an Olympic medal is considered to be better: the competition is tougher.

## *Impact*

*More* important than quality is impact. It doesn't matter how good your work is in the abstract. **Excellent work that does not have an impact on the advancement of knowledge is as worthless as poor quality work.**

It isn't about you. It is about your contribution.

Whose knowledge you are expected to advance varies according to circumstances. Most academics are expected to have an impact on the advancement of academic knowledge,

especially within their own field or discipline. You may also be expected to have an impact on knowledge in cognate disciplines, related fields, interdisciplinary areas, or similar wider academic bodies of knowledge. In some circumstances, you may be expected to have an impact on knowledge outside the academy – on policy or practice in a specific area, or on public knowledge.

## ***How do* They *determine impact?***

Impact is judged based on breadth and esteem. How many people are aware of your work? How many people are influenced by your work? What is the status of people aware of and/or influenced by your work? What is the scope of your impact? Is it primarily local, national, or international? Is it in a narrow field or more general?

These questions are usually answered approximately. The circulation of a journal is a proxy for the breadth and scope of impact. The mandate of a journal will indicate the scope of the field. A specialist journal for a sub-field of a discipline, general disciplinary journal, or interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary journal focused on a particular area  of study will have

different kinds of impact on different areas of knowledge. Similarly, some journals may only circulate within relatively narrow geographic areas, while others will be more widely read internationally.

The status of a journal gives a rough indication of how influential your article might be. The number of people who have cited your work is also an indicator of your influence on debates in your field. Journals will have an impact rating that is based on the average number of citations of articles in the journal. In some disciplines these impact ratings are widely known and used to rank journals.

Citation data might appear to be an objective measure of impact. However, there is a time delay between your work being published and work citing your work being published. And your influence may extend for several years and thus your work will be cited for many years following publication. In addition, citation data is not collected for all kinds of publications. In many humanities disciplines, citations and impact ratings are almost useless as measures of impact because of the importance of publishing in books (monographs and edited collections) whose citations are not in the indexes from which the impact ratings are

compiled. Because of this, more subjective understandings of the impact and ranking of journals are used in most social sciences and humanities disciplines.

Measuring the impact on non-academic knowledge is even more difficult. This is one reason why many universities and academic granting agencies have been slow to fully incorporate knowledge mobilization into their activities.

## THE GOOD NEWS

The main criterion for judging your research is something that you want to achieve.

Have you ever read an article or a book in your field and thought “If only this person knew about my findings…”? And in your own research, haven’t you drawn on the work of others that you have found in journals and books in your field? Even when you disagree with the main argument of a paper, does it not influence your own thinking and thus advance knowledge in your field? That is impact.

**Advancing knowledge is why you became an academic in the first place.** You *have* important things to contribute to the debates in your discipline, an interdisciplinary field, or other subsection of "academic knowledge". You may *want* to influence knowledge outside the academy, be that policy, practice, or general public debate.

The good news is that you *don't* have to do different things to satisfy the requirements of those who will judge your work. Your career goals – to secure grant funding, to get tenure, to be promoted – are perfectly aligned with your intellectual goal – to advance knowledge. That alignment of goals is what the hiring committee was looking for when they hired you. And it is what you look for when you are selecting potential funders for your research.

## *What this means for you*

Because your goals are aligned, from now on **you can focus on your own intellectual goals**. That's right. You don't need to keep asking yourself how many publications you need to get tenure or whether the grant adjudication committee will think journal A is better than journal B. You don't have to write things because *They* want you to.

You will instead think about whose knowledge *you* want to influence, the best way to do that, and how to influence the broadest relevant audience.

If you are a historian, for example, you will know that historians read books. A historian likes to read a monograph with lots of detail and copious footnotes. Historians also read journal articles. And if you are a historian, you will know what kinds of knowledge are disseminated by journal article and what really needs the longer treatment of a book length manuscript. And you know which presses publish the best work in your field because you read books published by them. You may even get their catalogue sent to you so you can see what is new.

In literary disciplines, considerable knowledge is communicated through editions of literary texts, with introductions and commentary. And through edited collections of critical commentary on particular texts or the work of particular authors. You know which editions you prefer for teaching and for your own research. You know what makes you pick up an edited collection of critical commentary. You also know which kinds of knowledge you seek in journals and which journals consistently have articles you want to read.

Some social scientists will read those last two paragraphs in amazement. It would never occur to them to publish a book. And they have no idea what an “edition” is. Until I started doing this work, I didn’t either. If you are one of those social scientists, you will know that journal articles are the primary means by which knowledge is communicated in your discipline. You read journals yourself. And you publish in them. You will also have a good sense of where the debate you want to contribute to is taking place. Because in order to contribute to it, you have read and engaged with other articles that contribute to it. You know which articles are most cited in that debate and where they were published because they are in the bibliography of your own paper.

Many of you are in disciplines where people publish in different formats – books, edited books, journals. **There is no formula or rule.** To make the decision, you need to focus on your goal. What format bests suits the material you want to communicate? And how can you make the biggest impact on the debates that you want to contribute to?

# THAT DOESN'T *FEEL* LIKE GOOD NEWS

This is a radical suggestion. And I wouldn't be surprised if your heart rate just jumped and you are feeling a bit panicked. You don't need to listen to *Them*? You can make this decision on your own? Am I crazy?

## *Fear*

It is not surprising that the idea of ignoring all the rumours and making decisions based on your own goals is a bit scary. No one has a clear idea how many publications you need and consequently everyone feels like they are never doing enough. On top of that, our culture is increasingly anti-intellectual and workaholic. Being strict about working 8 hours a day, 5 days a week is considered "unprofessional" in some circles. No one loves their job.

No matter how much you are doing, you feel like there is a real risk that you will not get tenure. You've been in an academic environment for so long, you think you don't have the

skills to do anything else. In your worst moments, that story ends with you living in a cardboard box under a bridge.

## *Joy*

But think back. You became an academic because you loved doing research. You loved learning so much that while your high school classmates were buying their first homes and getting promoted, you were still in school. You were excited about ideas. And excited about communicating those ideas to others. How many nights have you stayed up drinking beer with colleagues discussing ideas? Don't you still do that at conferences sometimes? Heck, that kind of free flowing intellectual conversation is probably your definition of a good night out. You should *love* your job.

**The crazy thing is that the positive joy at discovering new things and telling the world about them has been replaced with fear.**

Perfectly reasonable fear in the circumstances. But fear is not conducive to getting anything written, as you may have discovered. And it is certainly not conducive to sending whatever you have written off to a journal or press for publication.

I want you to consider whether you want to go through the next however many years of your life being afraid and feeling inadequate or not.

Because if you take my advice and it works, **there is the potential for joy as well as success**. Writing isn't easy. But you will have times when you are writing about something and you are excited about the ideas. Times when you will be eager to get this paper finished so that you can say this thing you are so excited about to all those people who need to hear it. Times when you are excited about an upcoming conference because it will give you the opportunity to sit in the bar over a beer or two talking about ideas to other people who are equally passionate about them for hours and hours.

Despite the fact that the whole world seems to think it is impossible to earn a decent living while doing something you love, you have this possibility right in front of you. Attractive,

isn't it? Possibly even how you thought it would be. I want to help you make that possibility a reality.

## *What if my intellectual goals aren't good enough?*

I truly believe that if you focus on your intellectual goals, you will be fine. More than fine. But only if you focus on your *real* intellectual goals. The ones you had before you convinced yourself that they were crazy.

I need to qualify my optimism about the fact that your goals and the goals of whoever is judging you are perfectly aligned. Because one of the consequences of fear of failure is that we move the bar.

When we are afraid that we won't measure up, we start out by blaming ourselves. We get angry with ourselves for not being organized enough to get this research done and published. We start to wonder whether we are really as smart as we think we are. Whether we really have any knowledge at all, much less knowledge worth communicating to others.

We start to think we don't have anything to say at all. Or maybe just one or two little things. Nothing like enough to satisfy those crazy demands *They* have.

Because it doesn't feel good to blame ourselves, we then turn the blame to *Them*. The demands are unreasonable. External funding would compromise our intellectual freedom. No one reads journals anyway. Presses are more concerned with selling lots of books than with ideas.

Fear of failure turns us away from our intellectual goals. And we work on small things that we communicate to small numbers of safe colleagues at a few conferences. We write one or two articles and submit them to small journals with limited circulation. I'll be the first to agree that you won't get tenure, or promotion, or a grant, with that kind of goal.

The people who judge you expect a lot of you. But you expected a lot of yourself when you started on that journey. And those goals will lead to success.

## *Reclaiming audacious intellectual goals*

What got you excited about research in the first place? What have you stayed up late talking about with academic friends? What have you bored your partner to tears with? What is the intellectual idea that you are most scared to put out there because you would be devastated if people dismiss it? What most annoys you about the articles and books you read in your area? What conversations do you have in your head with their authors?

**The biggest emotional issue facing you is to reclaim your audacious intellectual goals.**

Your intellectual goals *can* be limited to your own discipline or area, they are no less audacious for that. It is absolutely fine to have an academic career that is focused on advancing knowledge in one area. Many successful academics never communicate beyond the walls of the ivory tower. Many academics have little or nothing to do with interdisciplinary research. That is not going to change much in your lifetime.

On the other hand, many young academics and graduate students *do* want to change the world. And they have the audacity to believe that knowledge and research have something important to contribute to that change. And some academics want to do research differently. Or write about research differently. They *want* to experiment with form or method.

These kinds of goals seem to be the first to fall. Probably because they are scarier to contemplate. We have no idea how to do that and our advisors are unlikely to know either. It *will* feel uncomfortable to write differently. You might feel like you are submitting or presenting substandard work. People around you might confirm those fears because stating those fears as if they were facts helps them deal with their fears. Remember, that is their stuff, not yours.

Reclaiming audacious intellectual goals, whether purely academic or changing the world, is hard work. And totally terrifying.

You may need to seek out new mentors. People who will take this long term project seriously. Perhaps academics who have succeeded in achieving the kind of goal you have

set yourself (even in a small way). Perhaps people working in the area you want to contribute to who can help you learn how things work in that community and figure out how you might communicate your ideas and knowledge. Even with pretty traditional goals, **you want to make sure that you are seeking advice from people that are supporting your intellectual goals and not increasing your fears**.

And it would be perfectly reasonable if you decided that in addition to whatever help I can give you, you need to enlist the help of a therapist, start doing some yoga, book a regular massage, or some other thing (or combination of things) to help you through the difficult emotional work that might be involved. In fact, I encourage you to figure out what kind of emotional support you need and start lining that up.

But first lets turn to some practical issues. Because I sometimes find that if I have something concrete to do, I can calm the emotional stuff down for a while. And then my practical achievements help me convince my scared, inadequate self that maybe I don't need to be quite so scared. If that doesn't work for you, feel free to come back to this section whenever you are ready.

# DOING THE WORK

First of all, remember that you have 20 or 30 years to achieve all of your intellectual goals. Practically, you only need to focus on your immediate goal. **When you sit down to write, you can narrow your focus to this one contribution.** What do I want to tell people about? Who do I want to tell? and What is the best way to do that?

## *What to write?*

It is all well and good to focus on one contribution at a time but which one? Somehow you need to establish some priorities.

Your intellectual goals will relate to career goals. You might feel safer waiting until you have tenure to try some of your more audacious experiments in form, for example. You don't have to, but if you want to, that's fine. As long as you don't drop that particular goal completely.

So, for example, early in your career you might concentrate on establishing your place within the academic debates within your discipline. You might then find that you have important things to contribute to debates in cognate disciplines or interdisciplinary areas. Or you might want to communicate your knowledge to a particular section of the general public or to specific policy makers or practitioners.

Or you might feel more at home in an interdisciplinary area where other people are also writing in experimental ways. You might concentrate on that first and when you have a few publications under your belt, you might try to bring your ideas to a relevant debate within a specific discipline.

When you are establishing your priorities, it makes sense to consider some of the ways that you will be judged. Get good information about what is required for tenure if that is on the horizon. Learn more about how the relevant granting agency adjudicates applications.

Don’t panic. Your goals *are* well aligned with their goals. But keep them in mind when you decide on the order in which you do things or the balance between different types of output.

Your publishing priorities will shift throughout your career in non-linear ways. The important thing to remember is that you don't need to achieve all of your audacious goals right now. Or even in the next 10 years. **You have plenty of time**.

## *A publishing plan*

All of your concerns about the bigger picture can be contained in a publishing plan**.**

This is where you keep all the information about your goals and what you need to do to achieve them so that they don't accidentally disappear while you are focusing on the one thing you are doing right now.

**Your plan is just for you.** It does not need to conform to anyone else's ideas of what a good plan looks like. Your plan can include information about debates you want to contribute to, where they are taking place, and any additional work you might need to do to be able to participate credibly in those debates.

You need to be able to use it to guide your decisions. **No one else needs to see it** unless you want them to. And you certainly shouldn't show it to anyone who might laugh at how audacious your goals are. Only people who are willing to support your crazy plan should get to see it.

A plan does not need to be linear unless you think best that way. Many academics are creative people and think in non-linear ways. You might have your plan on a big sheet of paper on the wall. You can use colour. You can write things in pencil that you aren't sure of so you don't feel committed to doing them. You can circle things. You can draw arrows. You can use mind-mapping software. This is *your* plan.

Your plan will include

- the things you have to say
- the debates you want to contribute to
- information about where those debates are happening (publications, conferences, etc)

- the kind of people participating in those debates (academics in your discipline, other academics, policy makers, general public, practitioners, etc.)
- ideas of how and where to communicate the things you have to say
- a rough timeline or priorities

It is a dynamic plan. You will add to it. And cross things off.

If you are resisting being really audacious in your goals, that's fine.  Let it be for a bit. Write a plan based on your current goals. Your audacity muscles might be a bit stiff. Stretch yourself but don't stretch so far you tear something. Be gentle to start with.

Most of us find that as we write and research, we discover new things to say all the time. We go off in new directions. Maybe initially we don't think we have a book in us and then once we've been writing about a particular set of ideas for while, we realize that there is a very coherent book there after all. So you can add new things. And if going in that new direction means abandoning some other possibilities, you can cross those things off. You

don’t have to achieve everything in your plan, you just don’t want to forget about the possibilities.

And you can put big scary goals in there without committing yourself to doing them at all. You might wake up one day, look at one of those big scary goals and wonder why you thought it was so big and scary when it is just this medium-sized, somewhat daunting but totally achievable goal after all.

**The important thing about your plan is that it helps you make decisions.** You can relate your immediate task to your goals. You can decide what to do next based on the bigger picture. You can consider things like balance between contributing to debates in your discipline and in other areas. If you think that you want to publish a book but also publish a lot of articles, you can see how those various products might relate to each other.

And in the short term, sometimes you just need to pick one thing and start writing. You can worry about how it fits later.

## *Where to publish?*

It is one thing to sit down and write something. It is quite another to send it off to a potential publisher. If you are going to contribute to the debates and have the maximum impact on those debates, you need to think carefully about where you will send a particular contribution. Your thoughts on that can go in your plan.

Start by setting aside any lingering doubts about how good you are. **If you knew your article would be accepted wherever you sent it, where you would send this particular contribution?** Now list two other options that would also reach the right audience.

What you have created is a ranked list of 3 possible publishers for your contribution. Write it in your plan, with little numbers beside each possibility.

When you think the article might be good enough, start to think about little things like whether you have referred to key contributions to the debate that have appeared in your first choice journal. Is the style consistent with what they publish? Make some minor changes.

Have a trusted colleague read it over and provide constructive criticism. Have a research assistant proofread it and check the references. Then take a deep breath and send it to your first choice publisher. Move on to another piece of writing.

If you are really worried about having sent it there, don't tell anyone. Do you know where all your colleagues have articles under review? I thought not.

The worst case scenario is that you will be rejected. In that case, you will receive reviewers comments that will help you improve your contribution. And you already have a plan for where you will send it next.

The most likely scenario is that you will receive a "revise and resubmit" decision. With reviewers comments and (hopefully) guidance from the editor as to which revisions they would most like to see made.

In either case, you will make time to consider the comments. You will then make your own decisions about revisions, revise the article, and send the revised copy off again.

Remember, your goal is not to get published quickly but to reach the audience whose knowledge you want to advance.

## *Finding time to write*

Reclaiming the joy of research and of communicating your knowledge to others will make it easier to give research priority in your working week. **You will *want* to sit down to think and write.** And more of your research time will be spent thinking and writing about your research questions because less of it will be spent worrying if you are doing the right things or if you are even good enough to be doing this job.

That said, some of us work better with deadlines. Submitting unsolicited articles to peer reviewed journals might get you recognition and impact but it won't get you a writing deadline. Your plan can include deadlines you set for yourself.

If you need someone to hold you accountable, you can work with a colleague or friend using e-mail, a monthly dinner, or some other means to check in with each other about

progress. Join a writing group. Or start one. You have motivation. Deadlines should be the easy part.

## NEED MORE HELP?

If you like my approach to writing and publishing, I might be able to help you further. Subscribe to the blog at JoVanEvery.ca, for weekly posts about these and other issues relevant to your research career. If you want help developing a writing and publishing plan, you can book an individual consultation. If some soft deadlines would help, I run writing groups that meet 4 times a year to share successes and struggles, and provide a bit of accountability. Further information about both options can be found here.

I also offer webinars and e-books about research grants. The webinar, Research Grant Success may be particularly helpful in developing a publishing plan that will support a future grant application.

If the ideas I've presented here make you feel anxious and uncomfortable, you might find Havi Brooks' Emergency Calming Techniques helpful. Her techniques aren't for everyone, but they might be what you need to get in a better frame of mind to deal with the fear and self-doubt and get some writing done. Havi also has some techniques for Dissolving Procrastination, which I have used and found helpful. If you want to find out more about Havi, she blogs at The Fluent Self.