

Getting Published in *Urban Studies*

Ronan Paddison and Vanessa Watson

Editors, *Urban Studies*

Initial remarks

Getting published in a leading international journal has become (but, also, has long been) the key route through which researchers are able to establish their academic position and communicate with fellow scholars. If anything, the quest for publication has become more sought after, the need to publish greater. The globalisation of knowledge, the international rankings of universities on the basis of their research (and teaching) prowess, the spread of performance measurement of researchers influencing their ability to win research grants – and even in some countries to be eligible to apply for them – and to secure tenure or promotion, have all contributed to emphasising the importance of getting published in key international journals. Each, too, has had the effect of making the quest for publication more competitive. Leading journals are experiencing significant increases in the number of submissions making the task of securing publication for authors more onerous.

These guidance notes offered to prospective authors aiming to publish in the journal are an outcome of the Global South Strategy recently adopted by *Urban Studies*. The strategy aims to assist urban researchers working on and from the global south to achieve publication in the journal. In social science fields, many leading journals are based in global north regions and the majority of their authors also come from these parts of the world. *Urban Studies* is no exception and most successful submissions still come from the global north. The Global South Strategy aims to address this situation. The editors are mindful of the rapidly accelerating importance of urbanisation in the global south and, while uneven, of a growing number of urban researchers from southern countries wanting to reach out to a wider audience as represented in a journal such as *Urban Studies*.

While these guidance notes particularly seek to help urban scholars in the global south publish in the journal, the advice offered has relevance to all those seeking to publish in the journal. While published on the journal's website in English, the advice has also been translated into a number of key languages from which there is a record of submission in recent years. This includes Spanish, Portuguese, French, Arabic, Farsi, Mandarin, Japanese and Russian.

One final prefatory remark – why when there are so many sources on the web as well as in books and journals on 'how to write a successful article' is there need for another one? Our response here is that journals have their house styles, not just of writing but also of the types of articles that they seek to publish. In other words, there is a case for saying that offering guidance on securing publication in a specific journal needs itself to be bespoke.

We begin with a discussion of some basic points, following which we tease out the implications of what being an 'international journal' implies. In the third section we explore the definition of a high quality article. Finally, our focus turns to paper progression, the sequence of events which lead towards final acceptance of a manuscript.

Some Basics

A key starting point and a lesson which even established urban scholars need reminding of is:

Don't write the article first and then look for a journal to which to submit it. Start with choosing the journal most appropriate for the proposed article.

The point may seem obvious, yet nonetheless is critical. There is a plethora of urban journals – each has its own mission statement, house style in the broadest sense, and being sensitive to these while writing is key.

Assuming you want the article to be published in *Urban Studies* the obvious hurdle to be considered is whether

...the article is in scope with the journal's remit.

Careful consideration of this question is required mainly because of the multiple interpretations surrounding urban scholarship and because of the particular preferences a journal such as *Urban Studies* has for publishing.

One obvious criterion is that

...the paper needs to have a substantial urban component.

The point may seem obvious, but often papers are not progressed to the refereeing stage – are rejected in-house by the editors – because, while the subject matter is located within the urban or a particular city, the article is more concerned with (for example) the environmental or educational or other issue which is the prime objective of the research. In such cases, the paper would be more appropriately submitted to an environmental journal or one focusing on urban education issues.

This is a key point which needs particular emphasis. One distinction worth asking is whether or not the subject matter of my paper is not just contextualised *in* the city, but its understanding also involves an engaged discussion about the nature *of* cities. Societal processes frequently take place *in* the city but are not necessarily *of* the city (or cities). An article concerned with an environmental issue or conflict located in an urban area but in which the urban is incidental, the emphasis being on the environmental question, will be outside the scope of *Urban Studies*. The same could be said of numerous articles submitted to the journal that would be more appropriately submitted to an outlet focusing on (for example) urban design or transportation, to quote two of the more common types of inappropriate submission. A useful guide here is to identify how many of the references quoted in the article draw on mainstream urban journals – such as *Urban Studies*, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *Urban Geography* and others – as opposed to the number referring to a particular aspect of the urban field, whether housing economics or transportation or urban design or other.

To meet having a 'substantial urban component' means that the urban content is not incidental but integral to the development of the paper as it is developed.

How to meet the needs of being integral is developed later in highlighting the criteria defining a quality urban paper. To re-emphasise the point, the paper needs to be primarily focused on developing our appreciation and understanding of the city and of urban theories and processes.

A further basic point is:

Familiarise yourself with the journal

Visit the website to gain an appreciation of the journal's mission statement, and trawl recent volumes of the journal to gain an appreciation of the types of articles published and their quality. Trawling should give you the benefit of highlighting articles in the same broad subject area as your own, how the issue was written up successfully, what new debates were opened up, and possibly also the gaps in the literature to which your own contribution can respond. Be aware of key issues such as word length which the editors adhere to strictly.

Having identified *Urban Studies* as the appropriate journal for your article you need to decide which type of article you are choosing to submit under. The journal publishes different types of article, the most numerous of which is

the **standard article** – high quality theoretically informed and engaged articles that may be complemented by empirical case study material, but which can also be essentially conceptual or 'blue skies' papers in nature. Such articles should be no more than 8500 words in length inclusive (that is, including the abstract, references, and Tables and Figures)

Besides the standard or normal article there are also

Critical Commentaries – these provide a forum for debate within the urban academic community. We encourage submissions from authors capable of taking a critical issue relating to the contemporary urban condition and developing a reasoned argument, exposing, inter alia, its nature, its presentation as (policy) discourse, contradictions, and amenity to policy. A Critical Commentary is less likely to offer new research findings as to present a point of view, doing so in a reasoned, powerful and less formal style than is typical for an academic paper. Normally, a Critical Commentary should be between 4000 and 6000 words.

Debates Papers – these are critical review articles that outline and assess current trends and developments in key areas of urban studies, summarising existing literature on cities and regions and *taking it forward* by providing fresh perspectives and insights. Such articles will engage with ongoing debates around specific concepts, trends and urban processes, but offer significant new insights or syntheses, extend urban debates into new areas, or capture an emergent literature around new urban phenomena. Papers should be between 8000 and 10,000 words allowing for sufficient space for rigorous and critical dialogue with existing perspectives and traditions in urban research.

Further information on these types of articles (including published examples of each), together with other essential information, is to be found under the Submissions Guidelines on the journal's website – <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/journal/urban-studies#submission-guidelines>.

What does being an 'international journal' imply?

Urban Studies' international readership has a number of implications for potential authors. Some are more obvious, but nonetheless critical:

Papers need to be of relevance and of interest to an international readership

A paper that is wholly an empirical case study that does not position itself within the wider literature or is not theoretically engaged is unlikely to be of interest.. If such a paper dealt with, for example, new public transport networks in a specific city, and otherwise failed to engage with wider issues raised by it, it would have little appeal to an international readership. Authors should ask themselves 'what value is there for a reader in, say Kansas or Bordeaux or Nairobi, in their reading my paper'.

This implies, in turn, that

...the paper needs to engage with contemporary theoretical or conceptual issues related to the subject area; its argument should be developed critically.

In turn, this puts the emphasis on

...the paper being able to offer new (conceptual or theoretical) insights to the subject area.

a point that can be emphasised through showing how the arguments developed in your paper add to what is already known in the field, and are robust and important.

If the paper is empirically based it will be important to

...show clearly how the methodology used in the data collection and interpretation is robust. Robustness here implies that the data collected has been rigorously assembled detailing in a transparent way how this was undertaken. When analysing the results the rationale for the choice of the method(s) adopted should be discussed and justified. Where the paper employs statistical methods it is important to present the results rigorously and to follow journal policy on statistical significance.

Your paper should give clear expression to the methodology adopted, its justification and show an awareness of its possible limitations. Often, where appropriate, authors devote a section specifically to methodological issues.

The international reach of the journal also has two other implications.

First is that as an Anglophone journal it is important that your paper, as it is submitted, meets a minimal standard of English, particularly in following the rules of (English) grammar and in its sentence construction. If English is not the first language of at least one of the authors, enlisting the

help of a native English-speaker, or other person fluent in the language, to undertake a careful proofing of the paper is advised. It is not going to be in your interest to submit a paper that has deficiencies in its employment of English, assuming that these 'problems' can be attended to once the paper is refereed.

A second implication arising from the international reach of the journal stems from the growing competition to secure publication. The growing number of submissions and the publishing constraints of the journal – even allowing for its monthly publication – means that (as for other leading international journals) papers are frequently rejected. Many are rejected by the editors without being sent to referees where they fail to meet the criteria already discussed – commonly these are that the paper fails to have sufficient urban content and would be more appropriately submitted to another journal, or that it fails to meet the required quality standards, notably one or more of the points emphasised earlier in this section.

Some statistics might be useful at this point. Currently - that is, in the late 2010s - the number of submissions in total each year is over 1000. In total, some 160 or so articles are published. Two points need to be made

- These statistics do emphasise that only a minority of paper submitted finally make it through to publication. This should not of course be a deterrent to submitting – not only are such statistics commonplace to international journals, but the great proportion of the reject papers are rejected early on by the Editor-in-Chief and the other editors for failing to meet the basic criteria discussed here, being in scope, original etc. While disappointing to submitting authors, such rapid rejection enables resubmission to another journal.
- The critical point is that you should be aiming to submit a paper that meets the expectations the journal has of publishable articles.

Submitting a high quality paper

The discussion so far has identified the criteria likely to define a successful submission. These include that the paper should

- Be original, present new perspectives on the subject area
- Be critically engaged through making connections to relevant theoretical, conceptual or methodological debates
- Include a clear methodology (which may be qualitative or quantitative) which shows how your arguments are grounded in robust evidence; this is the case whether you are presenting an empirical case study or survey, or drawing on published discourse, policy shifts or other sources.
- Develop the arguments fluently and with clarity within an overall structure that is coherent
- Present an Abstract which does justice to the content and originality of the discussion
- Offer a title that reflects its content and contribution and is unambiguous (so as to maximise its 'discoverability' on search engines such as Google)

- Meet the basic house rules of paper length, style of presentation, simultaneous submission, and plagiarism including self-plagiarism where you may have published a paper on the topic in another journal.

Other characteristics of a high quality submission are:

- Papers in which the arguments are not just theoretically informed but in which critical theoretical discussion is interwoven, particularly with empirical evidence if presented, to help convey a deep understanding of the issue under question and the debates surrounding it. Besides the text itself, a high level discussion will be reflected in the quality of the references drawing on key articles and other sources closely defined around the issue under scrutiny and being of current importance to urban researchers.
- The introductory section (which may not necessarily be the Introduction per se) should position the subject being explored within the relevant literature and express clearly how the paper offers a new perspective, including (often) a statement of the research questions posed. It is also useful to 'signpost' the sections of the paper as a guide to the reader.
- There is a logical structure to the paper which leads the reader through an understanding of wider (perhaps international) conceptual debates on an issue and how these have been expressed in published works, through the method used by the author to ground new evidence, through the findings or conclusions of this research, and to a clear indication of how this work adds new ideas to the already existing state of debate/s in the field. There is no one standard way to cover all these aspects but the sequencing of sections into a coherent argument should be clear.
- The conclusion, or concluding section, should avoid summarising the findings of the paper and the temptation to suggest that further research is needed. Rather, it should be more reflective, returning to (say) the assumptions underlying the theory and how they can be questioned on the basis of the argument you have developed; and/or reflect on the play of any caveats that need to be drawn around the methodology adopted in the paper. However the conclusion is developed – and it is a key part of any paper – it needs to offer something *new* to the discussion.

What papers will be rejected, by the editors and/or by the referees

Many of the qualities surrounding papers likely to be rejected have already been defined – that it has insufficient urban content, or a failure to clearly position and develop the research question are among the main problems identified.

Based on the submissions made to the journal which are not considered suitable to be sent to referees the most common problems identified are

- Papers that are wholly empirical, probably based around a particular case study in which the discussion fails to position the problem in wider debates and literature;

- Papers that while positioning themselves in the literature and ideas fail to return to these later in the paper to emphasise the new contributions the paper makes;
- Papers that are overly-descriptive and fail to analyse and, thus, critically discuss the issue;
- Papers that are largely literature reviews and do not add sufficient new insights;
- Papers that fail the international readership ‘test’ of being of sufficient interest and importance to the wider urban research community in all parts of the world.

Paper Progression: from submission to publication

This section outlines the steps which the journal takes from the point of paper submission onwards.

- All submitted articles are first read by the editor-in-chief who decides if the paper is within the journal scope, offers sufficiently new ideas and is of a general quality to be potentially publishable.
- If this is the case the paper will be allocated to one of the journal editors to consider sending out for review.
- If an editor feels that a paper is likely to only attract negative reviews, but it still has potential, the editor may advise the author on how to re-write it and ask for the author to ‘withdraw and re-submit’.
- You should learn soon after submission – within one or two weeks – whether your paper has passed this first hurdle of being potentially suitable for publication and that it will be refereed (or, more unusually, that the paper needs re-writing.)
- Papers are sent out to three potential reviewers (or two in the case of Critical Commentaries). It may take editors a while to secure willing reviewers and to wait for their feedback. However, referees work within a given timetable for submitting their comments and most are diligent in keeping to it.
- Once feedback from reviewers is in, it is considered and synthesised by the editor, and papers are classified as ‘accept’ or needing ‘minor revision’, ‘major revision’, ‘revise and resubmit’ or ‘reject’. It is very rare for papers to be classified after first submission as accept or minor revision. Even top scholars are likely to get first submissions categorized as major revision or revise and resubmit. In effect, more than 90% of the papers refereed and finally published required either major revision or to be revised and resubmitted.
- At this stage – and providing, of course that refereeing and editorial judgment has not led to a rejection of the paper – there is reason to be pleased with the progress of your article! Allowing for the fact that nearly every article needs some revision, the chance of your paper being published has become greater -revising the paper satisfactorily should become the priority.
- You will be given a time-limit (six months) within which to re-submit your article. An important step to take with the re-submitted article is to show clearly how you have responded to each of the issues or problems raised by reviewers. The best way to do this is to construct a table with reviewer comments listed in boxes in the left column of the table and an indication of how you have responded in the right column. You may of course disagree with reviewer comments in which case it is important to explain why this is the

case. You should also submit a revised paper with changes indicated in track change or highlighted in some way.

- Resubmitted papers will be sent back to the original reviewers to review again, and to again classify under one of the above categories. Again, this may take a while. It is not unusual for revised papers to still require major changes. It is possible for papers to be rejected after resubmission. In particular, if a paper is still classified as 'revise and resubmit after the second round it will in all probability be rejected.
- Hopefully your paper will finally be accepted, at which point it is handed over to the journal's publishing service to format. You will be sent proofs of your paper to check for final errors.
- On acceptance of your article, you will be asked to sign a contributor's agreement form in which you assign copyright to the journal. You may not publish the final published version of your article on a public website.
- Your paper is first published online and only several months later will appear in print copy. In the meantime, you will be invited to write a blog which summarizes the key insights of your paper. A blog can raise interest in your paper and encourage more downloads for reading and for citation, hence it is a worthwhile exercise to undertake. The journal also uses Twitter to promote accepted papers (or in the case of Chinese papers, WeChat).

Some Brief Conclusions

Preparing a paper for publication in an international journal can be a long and hard journey. Authors are often inclined to give up on the way. However, responding to reviewer comments and reworking a paper can be an important learning exercise for any author and invariably a well-reviewed paper ends up much stronger than when it started.

From the perspective of the Urban Studies journal there is great benefit to be had from geographically expanding the pool of submitting authors, and from developing urban studies debates based on research and conceptual development from a much wider range of contexts than is usually the case. This can only strengthen and elevate scholarship in the urban field.

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