

## ***Special Paper***

# **Writing for Academic Publication: Advice Drawn from Experienced International Journal Editors**

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Many researchers understand that publications are a necessary evil that they must negotiate as members of the academy for employment, promotion, and fulfilling research grant requirements. The expectations and requirements for successful submission to academic journals can often be daunting and may seem shrouded in secrecy. This paper looks to clarify the guidelines for getting articles published, outlines approaches to targeting appropriate journals, and improves upon understanding the reviewing and revision process. Drawing largely from a panel discussion featuring international journal editors, the elements of peer reviewing in publications, the scope and purpose of academic periodicals, and various research paper types are covered together with acceptance rates, response times, and APA style conventions. Along with new developments in academic publishing, the editors' advice shared here should help demystify the process for the authors in Asian contexts willing to take up the challenge to submit research papers and articles for publication.

The *publish or perish* decree often attributed to employment entry and career progress (or even survival) in tertiary education quite evidently has varying levels of rigor that it is held to. The declining student population in Japan has reduced the number of university and college instructor positions. More widely across Asia, improved access to postgraduate studies has increased the competition for desirable positions that can make life as an ex-pat or domestic academic more stable. Networking with peers for "social capital" (Cotsworth, 2012), demonstrating accomplishments in part-time work, and keeping up membership in professional development associations can be important subjective factors when applying for jobs in higher education (Miller, 2011). However, even such proactive steps can be shortchanged by the mere count and ranking of one's academic achievements, identified most specifically through publications. Since the number of publications may be merely tallied objectively by general administrators in the prescreening of standard application forms, one of the challenges applicants face is to build their list of published articles. Although books and monographs are positioned at the top of most standard application forms in Japan (and may even be a requirement for a tenure-track university position in American universities), this paper presents advice for publishing in peer-reviewed or refereed journals related to applied linguistics and ELT.

## Background

Evidence of the importance of writing for academic publication can be seen in conferences held recently around Asia, such as the JALT (Japan Association for Language Teaching) College and University Educators SIG ESP Symposium in 2013, *Getting Published in English: Opportunities and Obstacles*; the JACET (Japan Association of College English Teachers) National Convention in 2013, with keynote addresses from Ken Hyland (*Applied Linguistics* co-editor) and Alan Hirvela (*TESOL Quarterly* co-editor); and the Regional Research Symposium at CamTESOL 2014, with workshops on conducting research projects, planning replication studies, mentoring for regional research networks, and doing classroom action research. Academics can also now find many self-help and how-to books on writing for academic publication. Thomson and Kamler (2013) offer an insider's perspective into the secret of academic publication that is theoretically grounded and contains strategies and samples to support authors in the "complex tangle of identity work and text work" (p. 1) that writing for publication presents. In the epilogue of a volume co-edited with Roger Nunn, Adamson (2012) summarizes the approach taken in collecting the perspectives of editors, reviewers, and proofreaders from five regional publications based in Asia. Their investigation into the academic norms, the review procedure, and the positioning of an academic journal in terms of its scope and style of content as well as target readership is highlighted as "a relatively rare enquiry in the field of research into academic publishing which tends to focus much more on the authors experiences, particularly those of non-Anglophone scholars, struggling to publish" (p. 172). In a similar vein this paper strives to bring advice from international journal editors to readers and writers in the Asian context.

The comments presented here were collected largely during a panel session, *Getting Papers Published*, at the 16th World Congress of Applied Linguistics, organized by the International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA) and held in Beijing in 2011. Facilitated by Leo van Lier, then editor of *Modern Language Journal (MLJ)* (who passed away in 2013), the following current or past editors representing well-known peer-reviewed journals shared responses to a list of FAQs (see Appendix) identified by the editors and used as an outline for the session: Allan Bell, *Journal of Sociolinguistics*; Elana Shohamy, *Language Policy*; Diane Belcher, *TESOL Quarterly*; Diane Larsen-Freeman, *Language Learning*; and Regine Hampel, *System*. (Authors seeking specific information about these journals should consult the most current guidelines for each.) With the goal of providing greater transparency and improved awareness, the opening section of this article covers guidelines for publishing in peer-reviewed publications. The second section addresses targeting an appropriate journal and is followed by information on acceptance rates and response times in the reviewing process. The final two sections look at quality of academic writing and current changes in academic publishing.

## Guidelines for Getting Articles Published

### Submissions to Peer-Reviewed Publications

Since the cardinal rule is to never submit the same paper for consideration to more than one journal, understanding the guidelines, format, and procedures for submissions to a particular journal is imperative. The panel cautioned that editors also work as reviewers and since reviewers may be involved with multiple publications, it is relatively easy to know if a paper is being sent around. The conclusion was clear that authors should not risk the blacklisting that would result from breaking this norm. Furthermore, all of the publications represented in the forum at AILA require authors to sign an agreement that the paper has not been submitted or published elsewhere. For these publications, this requirement then generally excluded submitting papers already published as department working papers (for Japan, an in-house *kiyo*), as well as any drafts published to a website. In many cases, translations of papers already

published in the L1 would not be considered as an original, unpublished work. While invariably there is overlap in an author's writings, the key element sought by the editors is the new contribution a paper makes to the literature, although replication studies in a new context or looking at a different variable could be considered (see Porte, 2012, for a recent edited volume on replication research). With the proliferation of online and self-published output, a simple caveat is that if an author hopes to submit a paper for consideration by a peer-reviewed journal, they should wait until it gets rejected before uploading it to a personal or department website. And even then, only once the author has decided not to submit their paper to another periodical for review should it be uploaded to its final resting place online.

Papers sent to reputable journals and their editorial / review team of experts are blind reviewed, meaning the reviewer is not aware of the name or status of the author. This suggests that, based on the merit of the submission, every author has the same chance to be accepted as their favorite guru. Often the key difference is that writing for academic publication itself is a skill and a genre to be learned and developed through experience and feedback on multiple attempts (see Feak & Swales, 2009, and Swales & Feak, 2009, for an exploration of writing literature reviews and abstracts, respectively). For those authors with more experience with both rejection and acceptance, the option to become a reviewer was suggested as another way to develop one's own writing skills. PhD students (and their advisors) were cautioned against thinking of just submitting a chapter from their dissertation. The editors noted that a submission to a journal should be a stand-alone study or a paper written specifically for publication in a periodical.

### **Style Conventions and Mechanics**

In addition to overall writing quality in terms of organization and development of content, successful submissions for publication, according to the editors, follow the required style for the journal targeted. The websites for academic journals and their parent publishing houses provide a lot of support for the task of writing for publication by covering very specific elements in terms of word count, format, and layout. Van Lier noted that neither editors nor volunteer reviewers have the time for papers where the authors have not followed the submission guidelines. Correct formatting of a manuscript submitted for publication is important as it saves time in peer reviewing and, if the article is accepted, in proofreading. Consequently, papers weak in this area would not even be sent out for review. With examples and resources easily found online or in back issues, there is no justifiable reason for authors to not become acquainted with and subsequently follow the required format and style conventions. Certain journals may include some unique elements of style, but most will largely make use of the format adopted by one of the major style guides. Writing guides such as Lester and Lester Jr. (2010) provide examples of citations and references and the minutiae of punctuating each for the major styles from the American Psychological Association (APA) as well as the Modern Language Association (MLA), the Chicago Manual of Style (CMS), and the Council of Science Editors (CSE) Style Manual.

Many publications in the fields of linguistics, ELT, and SLA have adopted the *American Psychological Association (APA) Publication Manual* as their style guide (see VandenBos, 2010, for the most current features). A checklist on pages 241-243 in the manual draws attention to spacing, margins, sequence, typeface, the abstract, paragraphs, special characters, and more. Given the information and examples available, there is no reason a writer who is looking to have a manuscript published should not put in the time on these initial and finishing touches. It is important to understand that it is the author's responsibility, not the role of copy editors or layout artists, to make the text look like the finished product in print or online. The only impressions that can be taken from a submission that does not attend to the mechanical criteria

of the style sheet are a lack of care, little concern, or the notion that it is someone else's job – stances which will not endear editors or reviewers to your work and the possible merits of its content. Furthermore, in the *APA Publication Manual*, the largely mechanical items listed above only come after the very important (but often overlooked) discussion of the actual types of articles and the structure and content of the various sections of the manuscript (including the verb tense to be used in each).

### **Content and Structure**

Looking in the table of contents (TOC) of the 6th edition of the *APA Publication Manual* (VandenBos, 2010), it is clear that adopting and writing in APA style is far more than just spaces, capitals, and commas (see Apple, 2008, for more dos and don'ts when writing with APA). The six-page TOC includes guidance on tables and figures, the mechanics of style (e.g., punctuation, capitalization, and numbers), the organization of writing (including the levels of headings and writing style, with a section on grammar), and important details on ethical reporting and reducing bias. Chapter 1 in the manual (VandenBos, 2010) looks at various types of writing in the behavioral sciences. Together with empirical studies and their typical IMRD sequence (Introduction, Method, Results, and Discussion), four main types of articles are covered. These include literature reviews, such as meta-analyses or research syntheses; theoretical articles; new or modified methodological approaches; and case studies. In addition, brief reports, replies to previous articles, and book reviews are mentioned. Submitting reviews of teaching materials or academic and professional development titles was suggested by the editors as a useful entry point into writing for academic publishing. Each academic journal may accept and publish a range of article types, such as those highlighted by Belcher of *TESOL Quarterly*: research articles, discussion papers, summaries or reports on research in progress, and teaching or research issues, each with specific features and word counts. It is crucial, therefore, for authors to submit their paper to a journal that publishes in that genre.

### **Selecting an Appropriate Journal**

#### **Journal Scope and Purpose**

In addition to following style guidelines and procedures, targeting an appropriate journal for the article type is a vital step. With access to the Internet, authors can easily review websites listing the aim and scope or positioning of the various journals they might consider suitable for their submission. For example, Bell noted that the *Journal of Sociolinguistics* looks broadly at papers with a social dimension while not being limited to language or teaching. In the opening chapter of his title focused on classroom research, Ellis (2012) explicates the scope of the journal he edits.

*Language Teaching Research* will publish articles related to qualitative or quantitative research in fields of second and foreign language teaching. Articles dealing with the teaching of languages other than English will be welcome. Articles reporting studies of language learning without clear reference to the role of teaching will not be considered. (p. 1)

The editors suggested that, even before writing, authors should think about a particular journal and be familiar with its area of focus and style of writing. Submitting authors should also gain a sense of the content that has been published previously by reading back issues, scanning titles, reviewing abstracts, and searching for key words. One distinguishing feature to be aware of, the panel noted, is whether the journal accepts papers across topics for a more general audience, such as *System*, or if it has a narrower focus requiring additional background knowledge to effectively address the informed readership in that discourse community. At the

submission stage, discourse communities include not only eventual readers but the editor and editorial advisory board, the panel of reviewers, authors who have contributed previously, and those scholars and authorities cited in the paper (Thomson & Kamler, 2013). Taking this into account along with the stated aims and purpose which position the journal will allow an author to understand the expectations and the range of choices and alternatives available. The latest annotated list of applied linguistics and English teaching journals and serials compiled by TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) provides a useful resource to compare various publications and may also serve as a guide to brainstorm possible avenues for publication (see Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 2014 for a link to this resource).

### **Paper Types and Research Designs**

To participate effectively in the academic publishing community, it is important to understand the precise framing for various types of papers and their research designs. The panel did indicate that empirical studies using either quantitative or qualitative methods would be considered and eventually published. It was also noted that mixed methods combinations, which incorporate both quantitative data (e.g., survey responses from students and their numerical grades) and qualitative data (e.g., interview comments from teachers and their lesson plan notes) have become increasingly popular. Authors were cautioned to ensure that complex statistics are accessible to a wide readership including those who are not specialists (see Language Learning & Technology, 2014, for details on how the online refereed journal *Language Learning & Technology* frames the guidelines for quantitative and qualitative research articles). According to the panel, the proportion of quantitative to qualitative articles seen published in the past issues of a journal is largely a reflection of the ratio of submissions received rather than of any editorial preference for a certain type of study. Shohamy noted that in addition to empirical research, *Language Policy* also publishes theoretical papers. Van Lier stated the *MLJ* also accepts conceptual papers but does not publish “survey papers,” which Wagner (2010) summarizes as being different from experimental research in that “the researcher does not manipulate the setting or environment in order to investigate how this affects particular variables or the relationship between variables. . . . Instead the goal of survey research is to get information about learners’ characteristics, beliefs, or attitudes” (p. 23). However, as Brown (2001) notes, survey instruments do allow the researcher to operationalize and measure abstract notions and psychological constructs that cannot be observed directly and therefore may be quite suitable for a journal with guidelines for research design different than *MLJ*’s. Clearly, researchers conducting survey-based studies in classrooms in Asia with convenience samples of captive learners would have to identify the international peer-reviewed journals that are open to reports on such investigations, sampling, and research design. Authors should complete this background work before following the procedures to submit their paper to a publication, completed most commonly now via e-mail or an online form.

### **Targeting Higher-Ranked Journals**

Although publishing in prestigious journals may not be specifically required for positions or promotion in every academic context in Asia (see Stapleton, 2011, for a discussion of academic requirements in different contexts), some authors may be seeking to target higher-ranked journals in their field. Rankings can be reflected by the academic pedigree and publication experience of the editorial board and reviewers as well as through the journal’s acceptance rates. A quick scan of which publications are cited frequently in other works in a particular discipline can also provide a general idea of the leading sources. Additionally, indices such as the *impact factor* can provide a more objective profile of a journal’s position in the academic community. The impact factor is a ranking system used to compare journals in a particular field based upon the number of times an article is cited during the previous two years. As examples,

the current impact factors, available on the individual websites for each of the periodicals represented in the 2011 AILA forum, are as follows: *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 1.729; *Language Learning*, 1.433; *Modern Language Journal*, 1.181; *TESOL Quarterly*, 1.000; *System*, 0.889; and *Language Policy*, 0.581, with the larger numbers representing more frequently cited articles. Well-recognized and oft-cited regional periodicals also offer an opportunity to be published in a respected, blind reviewed publication. *RELC Journal*, published on behalf of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO) Regional Language Centre, for example, ranks in the top 150 out of almost 600 journals in language and linguistics.

## Reviewing and Revision Process

### Improving Transparency

One of the main purposes the editors had for holding a session at the AILA Conference was to demystify some of the process for reviewing and revisions in academic publication. Efforts made to share this information more broadly should help authors to prepare better quality submissions for the reviewers and thereby improve the efficiency and turnaround time of the editorial process. Van Lier noted that submission rates at *MLJ* have skyrocketed with the number of *good papers* having more than doubled during his time as editor. Van Lier also commented that as a result of this influx, the number of papers rejected in-house by his editorial team without ever being sent out to a reviewer has increased from 20-25% to around 65%. The two major reasons van Lier stated for papers being rejected are:

1. The paper or research does not make a significant, new contribution to the field for the readership of that journal.
2. The research design is flawed or not solid.

In addition to due diligence by the editors as the first wave of gatekeeping, a principal notion for going with in-house rejections was to avoid irritating the pool of volunteer reviewers by sending them a paper with no chance of getting through to publication. Nevertheless, the goal of van Lier as *MLJ* editor was still to provide the authors of even those papers with no chance of publication a paragraph or two of feedback. These comments would suggest that the effort put in by the author before submitting can influence not only the chance of acceptance but also the quality of the feedback returned with the rejection, which could provide very useful insight into revising the paper for submission elsewhere.

### Acceptance Rates

On the matter of acceptance rates, the editors were quite frank in pointing out the standard for top journals in applied linguistics and ELT to be under 10%, with the typical range, including *TESOL Quarterly*, at 5-7%. Since its scope is not limited to papers on teaching and learning English, *MLJ* acceptance rates run as low as 1-2% for its ESL / EFL manuscripts. Shohamy stated from her experience with journals in English for specific purposes that acceptance rates can be as high as 20%. One very enlightening factoid picked out from single-digit rejection rates is the simple math that if a journal publishes 24 papers in a year and their acceptance rate is 8%, then they must review around 300 submissions annually. For an editor or reviewer, managing that quantity of papers each year may seem like a task few would be ready to take on. But as a researcher / practitioner / author looking to submit for publication, that number may fall far short of the imagined total that the top journals receive. Ken Hyland, co-editor of *Applied Linguistics*, identified recently the number of papers reviewed annually for that journal to be around 350, with about 10% going through to publication (personal communication, February 23, 2013). With a clear understanding of these figures, hopeful authors can have a better sense whether publishing in a top-tier, internationally peer-reviewed publication is reasonably within

their reach. Of course success in making it into the short list of papers sent out for review still hinges on the quality of the submission.

### **Response Times**

After meeting the guidelines for a targeted publication and being accepted for review, it can then be a matter of waiting for feedback from reviewers. Many authors, depending on the number of works they have already completed or might have in the pipeline, have had the experience of waiting in a state ranging from somewhat anxious to downright desperate on receiving feedback on their submission. Across the panel, the editors indicated that it would take 3-6 months for them to get feedback returned from their reviewers and possibly longer if a reviewer is busy or somewhat delinquent. It should also be noted that periodicals such as these send each submission to at least two reviewers, and even three in the case of *TESOL Quarterly*. The lengthy time frame is a reality associated first with the largely volunteer basis that academic publishing in applied linguistics runs on and second, on the breadth and scope of background positioning expected in papers in this field. Related to this time lag, Krashen (2011), in the conclusion to his paper for the International Symposium on English Teaching in Taiwan, called for shorter papers with less extensive literature reviews and more direct prose than that favored by the humanities, with no need to repeat findings in long conclusions with speculated implications. These suggestions would shorten the time to prepare, review, and publish papers, and even make more space in journals, while also making it easier for junior scholars to prepare papers for publication. While an innovative proposition, it does not yet seem to have taken much foothold in the publishing community. Part of the reason for this could be the disciplinary ideology in the social sciences and the academic identity of its members, who identify themselves and are identified through the language they use (Hyland, 2012), particularly in the forum of published academic discourse.

In terms of the time frame from submission to publication, most of the editors proposed an average of a year or two, depending on the quality of the initial submission, the degree of minor to major revisions expected, and the author's turnaround time in getting the revisions back in for editing. In academic publishing, there is little indication that the time frame for the process will be or can be shortened. A more common occurrence is a backlog of submitted or accepted papers that may cause further delays. Examples reported at the forum include that 200 papers were in for review at *System* and that *Language Learning* has published an extra issue every 2 years. This is likely not good news for authors waiting for accepted papers to be published, however, it was stated that very timely papers of exceptional quality are able to jump the queue. In any event, getting a paper to publication is clearly a lengthy process that requires advance planning and consideration of the lead time needed to secure publications in time for job hunting, promotion, or covering output requirements for research grants.

### **Quality in Academic Writing for Publication**

One of the obvious functions of the editorial process is to maintain the quality standards of the publication and the content it provides to its readers. As mentioned, primary reasons for rejection include the lack of a novel contribution to the field, poor research design, or inattention to the submission guidelines. Novice writers or those writing in their second language can feel reassured by the editors' comments that if (a) the study has merit and (b) the guidelines and format were followed, then weaknesses in grammar, punctuation, or paragraph structuring were not stated as reasons for initial rejection. The responsibility to get the paper ready for submission does however rest with the author and requires meeting the standards of academic language for publication. Therefore, it was clearly stated that authors writing in their second language should have their academic writing checked by a proficient writer familiar with discourse in their field. Reviewers and editors could then act as peers and mentors to

advise authors on revisions to papers that have already addressed basic language concerns. Larsen-Freeman recounted that in her time as editor for *Language Learning*, more papers from native speakers were rejected than from second, foreign, or other language users. The essential math behind that statement was simply that more papers were received from native speakers and subsequently a higher percentage of the papers published (and rejected) came from that group. She did state, encouragingly, to the largely non-native-English-speaker audience at the forum, that it is important to *participate* by submitting articles. (To assist new authors in improving their academic writing quality, in addition to a series of webcasts [e.g., *Introduction to Scholarly Publishing* and *How to Get Published*] [Elsevier Publishing Connect, n.d.], Elsevier, which publishes *System*, offers an English language editing service with fees quoted online at <http://webshop.elsevier.com/languageediting/>.)

### Ongoing Changes in Academic Publishing

#### Digital Object Identifier (DOI) System

The editors also took time to outline some of the developments in the field of academic publishing. Changes in publishing do not only affect authors and submissions but also readers and their interaction when searching for and accessing content. Gardner and Inger (n.d.) have conducted research focused on three main forms of reader behavior with respect to online journals, including “citation searching, core journal browsing, and subject searching” (p. 8). Of particular interest to authors are innovations such as the digital object identifier (DOI) system of the International DOI Foundation (IDF) whose website, <http://www.doi.org/>, offers links to handbooks, FAQs, and factsheets. In brief, the DOI provides “a generic framework for managing identification of content over digital networks” (International DOI Foundation [IDF], 2013, 1.2 History). In practice, a DOI is “a unique alphanumeric string assigned by a registration agency . . . to identify content and provide a persistent link to its location on the Internet” (VandenBos, 2010, p. 189). This system for managing intellectual property and information on digital networks is coordinated by the IDF, which was formed in 1997 as a joint initiative of trade associations in the publishing industry (IDF, 2013, 1.2 History). Wiley-Blackwell, which houses *MLJ*, *TESOL Quarterly*, *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, and *Language Learning*, uses its EarlyView online system to enable readers to cite and access information via DOI from full-text, peer-reviewed, copy-edited articles as soon as they are accepted ahead of hard copy printed editions. Springer, which publishes *Language Policy*, has its own Online First system where, although no volume or page numbers are given until the article is published in print, the article is considered accepted and able to be cited and searched for online by DOI.

#### Predatory Publishing

While many people look at the term open-access with quite favorable reactions, Beall (2012) brings up the topic of *predatory publishing*, where solicitations are made for authors to submit an article promising a very rapid turnaround but which involves the author paying to have their paper published. Brown and Cook (2013) looked at seven e-mail solicitations by such publishers and found a set of common characteristics, including: (a) appeal to legitimacy with ISSN (International Standard Serial Number) / indexes, (b) mention of peer review, (c) inner-circle country affiliation (e.g., the United States, Canada, or United Kingdom), (d) multidisciplinary scope, and (e) a very fast turnaround. They also noted several cautionary red flags in the e-mail messages in terms of obscure editorial roles and affiliations, language errors, flattery, and open invitations to become a reviewer. Hidden in the e-mail texts, webpage tabs, or links was the issue of fees charged to the author to be published. Clearly technology and improved reach and access may not always be used in a positive or reputable way. Yet authors doing due diligence and avoiding any panic to publish urgently should be able to effectively avoid such unscrupulous options. Beall maintains a readily accessible monthly blog listing



potentially predatory publishers at <http://scholarlyoa.com/publishers/>.

### **In Parting**

Drawing from a panel discussion with international journal editors on getting published in applied linguistics and ELT held at the AILA 2011 World Congress in Beijing, this paper has looked at general guidelines for academic submissions to peer-reviewed journals. The hurdles, time lags, rejection rates, and other challenges notwithstanding, the experienced editors who hosted the forum did say that they want authors to submit their papers. The editors also stated that while rejection is painful, they too had all experienced it (and still are!) and that having an article declined is a natural part of the professional development process. Wise words of counsel included understanding that acceptance with no revisions of a first submission very rarely happens, even for experienced researchers and authors. Rejection should therefore not be taken personally or too negatively, since in the blind review process, the person deciding to reject the submission does not know if it belongs to a beginning researcher or a leading figure in the field. Furthermore, the feedback given in reviews can provide an opportunity for growth and offer some direction toward improving the paper to resubmit it elsewhere. In addition to changes through technology, the recent growth in the number of authors active in language teaching and learning studies has been matched by an increase in the number of publications available – with all of these looking for papers to publish. In summary, the task of academic publishing for language teachers and researchers comes down to authors and editors finding a match of article quality and context in a mutually, co-created process of professional, yet highly subjective practice.

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## **Appendix**

### **FAQ – Publishing in Applied Linguistics Journals – AILA, Beijing, 2011**

1. How do I select an appropriate journal for my paper?
2. Procedures for submitting a paper. Are there guidelines?
3. Can I submit to more than one journal?
4. Can I submit a chapter from my dissertation?
5. How long will it take before getting feedback?
6. What is the average time from submission to publication?
7. What are the average acceptance rates?
8. How does the reviewing and revision process work?
9. What if my draft paper is published on my website, or in departmental working papers?
10. What do I do if my academic writing skills are not very good?
11. What are the policies regarding duplication and plagiarism?
12. Please explain the EarlyView system and the online DOI date.