

Winning the Publications Game: The Smart Way to Write Your Paper and Get it Published (4th edition)

Tim Albert. CRC Press (Taylor & Francis Group): Boca Raton, FL, 2016 ISBN-13: 978-1-785-23011-0. Price: £24.99. Pages: 156 (paperback)

From the book title, right through to the concluding “Make sure you celebrate” (publication having been achieved!), this is a book to motivate anyone wishing to publish their research. The book was developed from a course – ‘How to publish a scientific paper’ – that Albert was invited to run over two decades ago. This fourth edition is testament to the success of earlier editions, and to the development of a book from ongoing extensive experience in delivering such a course.

The book, updated to reflect the contemporary electronic publishing context, is light-hearted and very easy to read, albeit clearly based on substantial expertise. Albert’s guidance is structured into 10 stages, and working through these will ensure that before launching his/her writing project, the researcher is clear about his/her goal, and has a realistic understanding of what publishing a paper entails. The first half of the book is focused on ‘knowing yourself’, which also forearms the aspirant author; aiming to maximise the chances of avoidance of the usual ploys she/he might tend to adopt, to postpone a task and/or justify this delay. [NB. It occurred to this reviewer that these steps could be adapted and applied with benefit to other life projects!] The remainder of the book is about the actual writing, and contains a wealth of useful advice, even for experienced authors. Many useful web-links and references are provided.

All this said, it is important to be aware that the book “really focuses on *how to write* a paper rather than describe what the author *should put in* the paper in order to get published”. This constraint, made clear on the back cover, is not unreasonable if wishing to keep the book succinct and straightforward. However, Albert also states that academic writing “is a big marketing game”, and that the “most important component of a scientific paper is not the data. It is you” – which rang alarm bells for this reviewer. No-one would argue against the value of excellent marketing/packaging of a research paper, nor of ensuring that the paper submitted has a very clear message (and that this message is one that is of particular interest to the readership of the recipient journal). However, the researcher should remember that marketing/packaging can only add value to an already *at least adequate* basic product (i.e. ‘product’ here meaning ‘research question + design + data collection + analysis and interpretation/discussion’). Even the best marketing cannot win the ‘game’ for you, if the dice are loaded *against* publication, because the research itself is poor. [From p. 7 onwards there was ongoing confusion, as to whether ‘good paper’ refers to a paper reporting ‘good’ science/research, or one showing ‘good’ marketing (regardless of the quality of the research being reported) – and vice versa for ‘poor’.]

Albert includes a fairly lengthy section titled ‘The truth about scientific articles’. This criticises academic journal publishing; the supposed hijacking of academic publishing to ‘bean-count’ academic activity; the peer review process; and pressures on editors (including mentioning their need for copy to fill the journal) (pp.7–9). This leads in to a recommendation that reads as rather cynical and defeatist, to “Move away from the confusing business of writing a ‘good’ paper ... to the more manageable task of getting it published in a journal of your

choice” (p.10). Perhaps this section was intended to amuse, or make aspirant authors feel better about their lack of publication so far. In my view this critique detracts from the rest of the book by being too long and one-sided. Furthermore, it is irrelevant to the aspiring author that some other researchers might be publishing only to keep their university departments happy, or that it is an ongoing challenge for journals to recruit adequately expert and diligent peer reviewers, or that peer review can be flawed or even self-serving, or that there is evidence of occasional episodes of plagiarism or even fabrication. His/her publishing goal pertains to the system as it is.

Albert’s expressed concerns with academic publishing, none of which are new, do not singly or together justify an abandonment of striving for *good-quality research*. It is a fundamental principle that “organisations and researchers should strive for excellence when conducting research”.¹ However, once the ‘good’ research has been completed, Albert’s book is the guide you need to encourage, and to help ensure the writing process provides the best possible ‘packaging’ and marketing of that research.

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REFERENCE

- 1 UK Research Integrity Office. *Code of Practice for Research*. 2016. <http://ukrio.org/publications/code-of-practice-for-research/2-0-principles/> (accessed 2 Dec 2016).