Digital Commons®

Journal Essentials: Practical Steps to Better Journals

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Overview

Of all the things you can do to strengthen a new or existing journal, none have as much impact as recruiting plenty of high-quality submissions, speeding time to publication, and gaining new readers. Meeting the following baseline targets should be the first priority of every journal:

Baseline Targets

Articles published	15–20 per year
Time from submission to publication	Less than 3 months
Downloads	5,000 per year

Many editors make the mistake of focusing their first energy on time-consuming details like DOIs, indexing, archival preservation, and copyediting, before meeting these targets. Don't fall into this trap! There's plenty of room to grow from here, and things like indexing and DOIs do add value to a journal once these baselines are met—but these baselines are absolutely essential to the health of any journal. What follows here is a set of practical guidelines for meeting and exceeding these three basic targets.

Step 1: Recruiting Content

A journal editor's most important job is to bring in a steady flow of high-quality papers. Without great content, and plenty of it, you don't have a journal. It takes work, but the good news is that more papers lead to more readers, and more readers lead to more papers.

For a journal's first few years, ***most if not all papers come from editors' direct efforts to recruit submissions*** from within their professional networks. Editors should expect to personally recruit every paper for their first three to four issues (or two years' worth of content). Even many years after launch, a large percentage of papers continue to be those that editors and the editorial board recruit or invite.

Beyond the call for papers: the first thing many new editors want to do is issue a general call for papers; but for a brand new journal, there are better ways to recruit content. A general call for papers from a newly launched journal can send the wrong message—that the journal is struggling, not selective, or unfocused. A call for papers is great for an established journal publishing a special issue on a specific topic; otherwise, focus your energy on old-fashioned recruiting through the editors' professional networks.

Direct Recruiting

No amount of online journal technology can diminish the importance of editors directly recruiting papers from their colleagues and professional networks. The bulk of an editor's job consists of always keeping an eye open for a possible new paper and being ready to ask for submissions.

When you go to a conference and hear an interesting presentation, when someone in your field gets a new grant, when you're having a good conversation with a colleague—all of these are opportunities to ask for submissions. Editors and editorial board members should think of former students, research labs and institutes, conferences, other journals—any group or colleague who is likely to produce papers—and send personal emails or make phone calls inviting submissions.

Enlisting the Board

An active editorial board is a key partner in recruiting content. Typically, a board member is responsible for either submitting or recruiting one paper to the journal every two years. It's wise to set this expectation at the outset and refresh it regularly.

We suggest a conference call with the entire board at least once a year, and editors should touch base with individual board members at every opportunity, for example at conferences. During the annual call, present the state of the journal, describe how many papers you're trying to publish in the next year, and strategize with the board to get concrete commitments for what each can do to help the journal reach that goal.

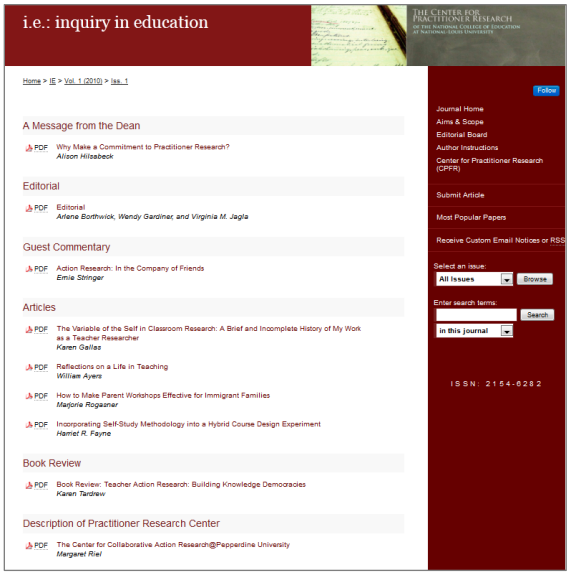
Guest Editors

A guest editor can tap new networks and generate a lot of submissions for a special issue. Scholars tend to respond warmly to the invitation to edit a special issue, since it's a one-time, high-visibility project with a high benefit-cost ratio. Enlisting a board member as your special editor also helps you increase your board's investment in the journal. Special issues merit their own calls for papers and additional publicity in advance of publication, and they typically draw new readers and heightened visibility for the journal when they are published.

Conference Issues

New journals often have a conference or symposium issue in their first or second year. This is a great way to bring in a number of quality papers at once, and it also helps generate readership from among the conference participants and attendees. Your board can help identify relevant conferences—and conference organizers generally welcome the opportunity to publish their proceedings or selected papers.

New Content Types



Varied content types not only encourage wider participation and more submissions; they also broaden the scope and appeal of your journal, shape its voice and personality, and help make it a lively forum within the discipline. In addition to "research articles" strictly speaking, consider including case studies, commentaries, notes from the field, and book reviews.

Step 2: Streamlining Workflows

Digital Commons editorial management software makes it easy to track the time from an article's submission to its publication. Ideally, the process should take less than three months. If a journal is consistently taking longer than three months to review, respond, get revisions, and publish, it's time to analyze your editorial workflows. Is the journal using Digital Commons to manage submissions, reviews, and revisions? If not, and if no other editorial management system is in place, we recommend scheduling a training call with bepress Consulting Services. But if the publication process is stalling due to delays with editors, reviewers, or authors, consider the following suggestions.

Delays with Editors

Journal editors are usually juggling a number of other professional and academic projects in addition to the journal. Here are a few time-management tips that can help:

- Find a managing editor or editorial assistant to handle most of the administrative duties.
- If the editors are having trouble determining who is responsible for a particular paper, or if they are having long debates about accepting or rejecting a manuscript, designate one coordinating editor whose decision is final. This role can rotate every year.
- Don't get bogged down in formatting and copyediting. Develop a clear style guide for your authors, and enforce those requirements in author revisions. Keep copyediting to a minimum, and consider outsourcing work to freelance professionals if you feel it's absolutely necessary.

Delays with Reviewers

When you send reviewer requests, ask your reviewers to commit to a deadline, and send regular reminders as the deadline approaches. Make sure the journal is using the built-in feature to ask reviewers to commit to a deadline for their review, and the built-in automatic reminders. If reviewers are getting enough reminders but are still failing to turn in reviews, it is probably time to reset expectations with your editorial board and reviewers and ask for them to re-commit to the journal, ideally via a teleconference or in-person meeting. In order to keep a steady supply of reviewers, consider adding all your published authors to your list of available reviewers.

Delays with Authors

Authors, notoriously, can be very slow about revising their manuscripts, and editors can only do so much to speed up this process. However, there are a few simple settings in the Digital Commons editorial management tools that can help.

- If a journal is publishing by issue, one slow author can hold up an entire issue's worth of content. Publishing incrementally allows you to publish each article as it becomes ready.

- Editors can "lock" an article, preventing further changes by authors once a submission has been reviewed, revised, and accepted.

Increasing Readership

Publishing at least 15 to 20 articles per year is a baseline for building a consistent readership. With your article recruitment efforts in full swing and your workflows streamlined for speedy publication, you can now effectively promote the journal and attract new readers.

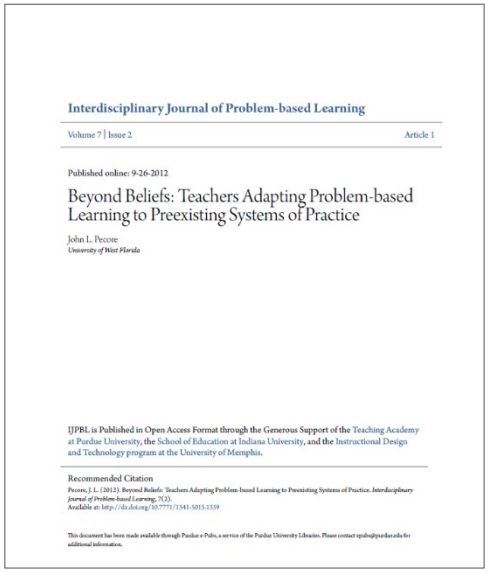
Search Engine Discoverability

A vast majority of readers and researchers will find your articles through web searches, so it's essential to serve up your content so that search engines can find it. Fortunately, Digital Commons has already taken care of the technical aspects of this process: our platform optimizes journal content for discovery through Google, Google Scholar, and other major search engines.

Editors and journal administrators should complete the process by including concise, focused, and specific descriptive language in the journal's cover text, about page, and aims-and-scope page. Each article should have its own descriptive abstract and include a complete set of metadata. For more detailed recommendations on discoverability and SEO, see the guide Search Engine Optimization: Features and Best Practices.

Branded Cover Pages

Most journal visitors land directly on a published article's PDF, rather than entering through journal's home page or even the article-information page. This is why it's so important that the published PDF include a prominent and inviting link back to the journal's website.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Beyond Beliefs: Teachers Adapting Problem-based Learning to Preexisting Systems of Practice

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Papers on Topics of High Interest

Thanks to regular download reports, editors can immediately see which papers have attracted the most interest. Use this information to recruit more papers in that subject area, by that author, or of that style (if, for example, you identify a trend toward high traffic for shorter practitioner pieces). Some of the most downloaded and cited papers are review papers that offer a general overview of the field, and standards papers that become the definitive source for a particular methodology, software package, or lab device.

Mailing Lists

Digital Commons journals have access to a mailing list tool that editors may use to announce new articles and issues. Your mailing list includes readers who have signed up through the journal's website, and editors and library staff can also upload their own contacts. Some sources for building your mailing list:

- Lists of attendees from conferences in the field
- Email lists from relevant departments and centers
- Member lists from societies and associations
- Authors who have published in comparable journals

Recipients can always unsubscribe, but generally scholars are happy to receive notification of high-quality scholarship in their field as long as it is well-matched to their interests.

Targeted Direct Marketing

Commercial publishers with big marketing teams will send press releases of interesting articles, target specific potential authors with calls for papers, and maintain an assertive presence on listservs, blogs, and social media. Direct marketing is very time-consuming, but journal editors and administrators with more limited resources of time and money can still implement some effective strategies in this area:

- Announce the journal and any special issues to the main listservs in the field
- Contact the relevant scholarly associations and ask them to announce the launch and/or new issues of the journal in their newsletter or listserv
- Agree with a related journal in the field to link to their site in return for a reciprocal link back to your journal from their site
- Make sure the journal is listed in its field's central online clearinghouse or portal for resources.

In-Person Promotion

Editors should be prepared to talk about their journal at any scholarly venue. Mention the journal in your final slide whenever you give a presentation, and include a link in your email signature.

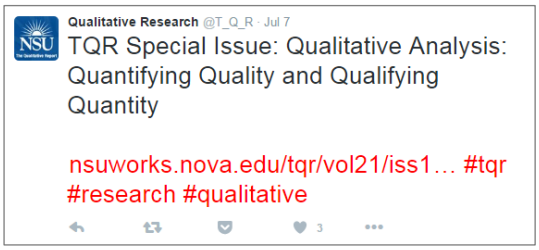
Some editors even put the journal's name and URL on the back of their business cards.

A postcard or half-page flyer is an effective tool for driving new traffic. It's always nice to be able to give people a physical reminder of what the journal's all about and where to find it. Include the journal's URL, a screenshot of its home page, the names and affiliations of the editors, a brief statement of the journal's aims and scope, and possibly the names of a few prominent recent authors or board members.

Exhibiting at a conference is costly, but if you can arrange the funds through grants or other sources, a table in the exhibitors hall, stocked with your flyers and other collateral and staffed by a knowledgeable advocate, can be an effective way to gain readers, reviewers, and submissions.

Social Media

Many scholars use social media sites to help them stay abreast of new research and trends in their discipline. A feed for new titles in the journal is easy to set up and manage on X and other microblogging platforms. Editors, authors, and administrators can also use existing accounts to share upcoming issues and compelling quotes or details from current articles.



Additional social media efforts should be considered for their effectiveness and sustainability. If the editors and board members already have a well-established practice of sharing information via Facebook, LinkedIn, Mendeley, or other sites, posting journal content through these channels may have a strong impact. However, a dedicated Facebook page or a new blog developed only for the journal may take time and energy away from the primary task of developing the journal itself, and is unlikely to bring new readers who couldn't be reached through more direct means.

Within Digital Commons, readers can follow the journal with a click of a button …

… or they may set up personalized saved searches or RSS alerts.