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Opinion

Format-Free Submissions in Psychology-Related Journals

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Abstract: Scientists have a duty to spend their time, and hence public money, in an efficient manner. One particularly wasteful task concerns the formatting of articles submitted to academic journals. Around a decade or so ago some academics began to challenge this inefficiency and a small number of articles have been published advocating for change. There has, however, been little progress, particularly within psychology. In the present article, we advocate for what is sometimes referred to as the *Format-Free Submission*. In order to quantify progression, we also examined a sample (n = 500) of psychology-related journals to determine which offer this. Results showed that only 73 (i.e., 14.6%) have formatting requirements that are relatively flexible for initial submissions. We suggest that the current system within psychology publishing is unethical, in that it wastes a huge amount of taxpayers' money, and that change is needed.

Keywords: format-free submission; publishing; peer-review

1. Formatting Requirements in Manuscript Preparation

Science is funded by the public purse, as well as student tuition fees. In the UK, the latter currently cost over £27k for a three-year program. It is therefore incumbent upon academics to spend this money in a cost-effective manner. A particularly inefficient task concerns the formatting of articles submitted to peer-reviewed journals. Each journal typically has its own formatting requirements that have to be adhered to before an editor will consider the paper for publication. Such requirements occur in virtually all fields of science and academia. Although the majority of psychology-oriented journals have broadly similar requirements for most aspects of papers (e.g., 12 font, double-spaced, title followed by abstract then introduction, etc.), there are often a number of journal-specific requirements that are extremely time-consuming to undertake. It is not, therefore, the need to follow any one particular formatting requirement, or include any particular piece of information, that is so problematic to academics, it is the large *variety of specific rules* for formatting across different journals. For example, the *British Journal of Psychiatry Open*, amongst many others, stipulates that a brief biography of all authors must be included, *Archives of Sexual Behavior* states that the manuscript's title and each figure caption must appear on a separate page with no other information, the *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* stipulates that "*Level 3 heading should be Indented, boldface, lowercase paragraph heading that ends with a period*", and the *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* requires that the title page has a line break near the bottom, after which a statement on any previous presentations of the paper must be included. *Evolutionary Human Sciences* even requires the uploading of an image that can be used as a thumbnail for social media. The current situation is perhaps best summed up by Oh [1] who, whilst calling for a more efficient system, wrote that "The submission process in its current state is tortuous, but we endure it quietly".

It is difficult to imagine what the rationale is for the current state of affairs. One can be forgiven for thinking that it is led by publishers who possess most of the power in

terms of science dissemination. This power enables, for example, *NeuroImage* to charge USD 3450 to publish a paper and the *American Journal of Sociology* to charge GBP 30 to submit, irrespective of whether the article is desk-rejected or goes out to review. Whilst some publishers generate income by offering authors a formatting service, thus potentially providing a rationale, it is not necessarily the case that formatting requirements are driven by publishers. A brief search through a couple of dozen psychology journal websites and submission portals suggests there may be little, if any, relationship between specific publishers and the formatting requirements of their journals. For example, *Cognitive Science* and the *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* are both published by *Wiley*. Whilst the former has very strict formatting rules, the latter does not. This difference is also the case for the *Taylor & Francis* journals *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* and *Cognitive Neuropsychology*. One exception to this within-publisher formatting variance is the requirements of the *American Psychological Association*. All of their journals require strict formatting. Another possible reason for the current situation is that the system is driven by the subcontracted production houses used by many publishers. These are likely to adopt their own standards and processes and thus require researchers and journals to adhere to these.

Some specific requirements do make sense. For example, although unconventional, the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance* stipulates that the year/s in which the data were collected must be included in the *Method* section. This can be viewed within the context of *Open Science* practices. Statements on *conflicts of interest* and funding are also necessary. Similarly, many journals state that each author ORCID identifier must be included. This inclusion can help to ensure that authors are genuine (which sometimes they are not; see the so-called *Grievance Studies Affair* [2]). Furthermore, although many authors are dissatisfied with the current submission process, some have argued that it is not entirely irrational. For example, Toikhin, Panchanathan, Lakens, Vazire, Morgan, and Zollman [3] suggested that the current "publishing inefficiencies can serve a function" (p. 9). The authors stated that the system acts to "disincentivize" academics from submitting low-quality work to the more prestigious high-ranking journals. The argument here is that authors will not be motivated to constantly reformat a manuscript each time it is submitted to a slightly less impactful journal.

Although some will defend the current practice, journals themselves do not usually attempt to justify their strict formatting rules. One exception is the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, which states that "Editorial resources and reviewers' time are limited and should be focused on evaluating the science rather than compliance with guidelines and standards". Not only is this argument somewhat circular (i.e., time spent evaluating compliance when compliance is not necessary), it is weak, in that it misrepresents what we typically look for when evaluating manuscripts. Reviewers are not concerned with, for example, the size of margins and font used. We will often highlight presentation issues in addition to the "science", but these are typically concerned with problems that will need to be corrected in any final published version of an article, rather than with a reviewed version of the paper. For example, a reviewer may feel that text on figures will not be legible, or they may highlight typographical errors. Another odd aspect about the notion that reviewer time is limited is that those reviewers are, of course, the very people that generate manuscripts themselves when disseminating their own work. Any potential time saved by reviewers not having to check for submission requirements is far outweighed by the time lost when they submit themselves.

The *Journal of European Psychology Students* also makes the efficiency argument in defending their strict formatting rules. In an official blog associated with the journal, they state that "at JEPS we often get the question: why do we even have to adhere to those guidelines?" The answer offered is that it "allows for the Reviewers to concentrate on the content without being distracted by unfamiliar and irregular formatting and reporting styles". Rather oddly, the blog gives the example of how submitting authors need to ensure their hyphens are used correctly: "not only do you have to check whether a term needs a hyphen or a blank space will suffice, you also have to think about the different types

of hyphens". Whilst the *published* version of the article needs the correct type of hyphen, no reviewer has ever been "distracted" by an incorrect hyphen. Even if this does happen occasionally, it is a momentary effect of no consequence. The journal seems to be more concerned with a trivial aspect of the review process than with the millions, if not billions, of dollars lost in time formatting (see below). Budd [4] also points out that the increasing popularity of preprint articles illustrates that strict formatting is not of concern to readers.

In terms of reviewing, strict formatting rules are also not always the most efficient way of setting out a manuscript. For example, a submission that includes the common requirement in which figures need to be placed on separate pages at the very back of the manuscript is far more difficult to follow than figures placed at appropriate locations within the body of the article. Indeed, published versions of articles do not place figures after the reference section, for a good reason. Similarly, a manuscript that has line numbers beginning with "1" at the top of *every* page, another common requirement, is more difficult to review than a manuscript that has line numbers which continue sequentially throughout the entire document. In the former, the reviewer, when describing desired changes, needs to find the current page number in addition to the line number.

2. A Movement for Change

Around a decade or so ago, some academics began to oppose this inefficiency, and a small number of articles were published advocating for change. For example, in a paper entitled, "The high resource impact of reformatting requirements for scientific papers", Jiang, Lerrigo, Ullah, Alagappan, Asch, Goodman, and Sinha [5] surveyed over 200 authors and found that only 12% expressed satisfaction with the submission process. Jiang et al. also found that reformatting manuscripts led to a submission delay of over three months in 20% of papers. A number of authors have estimated the costs associated with formatting, both in terms of time and money. With respect to hours, LeBlanc, Barnes, Saunders, Tremblay, and Chaput [6] surveyed 372 researchers from 41 countries and found that each spent approximately 14 h per manuscript formatting. This figure of course took into account the (sometimes multiple) re-formatting required when an article is submitted to a different journal following rejection. Given the average number of manuscripts handled by participants in the sample, this equated to 52 h per researcher per year, or USD 1908 when the authors included salary costs. When all researcher time is fully-costed, Jiang et al. estimated that the total global cost was more than 1.1 billion dollars per year. Although Clotworthy et al. [7], in a similar financial analysis, argued that costs were in the hundreds of millions (i.e., 230 million) rather than billions, both figures illustrate the inefficiencies of the system. As with Jiang et al., Clotworthy et al. also gathered stakeholder opinions. The authors interviewed researchers, senior journal editors, and editors-in-chief, with the aim of generating suggestions for a more efficient system. Clotworthy et al. identified two possible solutions. One was for journals to adopt universal guidelines for all biomedical journals. The other was to remove specific requirements for initial submissions; journals could request strict formatting only after acceptance.

Some progress was made with this movement for change, at least initially. In 2013, *Elsevier Connect*, the publisher's online magazine for research communities, presented a feature by Fennel and Gill [8], who described Elsevier's commitment to what the publisher refers to as *Your Paper, Your Way*. As a result, a number of their journals offer so-called *Format-Free Submission*. For example, the *Journal of Economic Psychology* currently states that "There are no strict formatting requirements, but all manuscripts must contain the essential elements needed to convey your manuscript". Similarly, the *Journal of Research in Personality* states that "We now differentiate between the requirements for new and revised submissions". Here, the strict formatting requirements do not need to be applied to new submissions. Of course, there has to be some format, and a number of authors (Teixeira da Silva, [9], Zon, et al. [10]) have suggested a universal manuscript format. After the *Elsevier* pilot had been initiated (during 2011–12), Fennel and Gill surveyed the editors involved. Feedback from the 33 respondents was very positive. For example, nearly all

agreed that the *Your Paper, Your Way* instructions were clear and easy to follow. The authors also surveyed 77 reviewers of papers submitted via *Your Paper, Your Way* and 88 control reviewers who evaluated papers placed in the more common labour-intensive format. Fennel and Gill found no significant differences in reviewer satisfaction. These data thus refute the assertion that reviewers are distracted by formatting that does not follow a journal's requirements.

Despite this welcome development a decade or so ago, the vast majority of journals do not offer *Format-Free Submission* or something equivalent. The move towards a more efficient submission process has not gained much traction. Indeed, in sampling a few dozen, Jiang et al. [5] estimated that only 4% offer the service. Even at *Elsevier*, who in 2013 announced that they would offer *Format-Free Submission* to all of their journals, uptake by their editorial boards has been mixed, at best.

3. An Assessment of Progress within Psychology

In order to precisely determine what progress has so far been made within psychology, the present authors determined the proportion of psychology-related journals that currently offer *Format-Free Submission*. Importantly, ascertaining the precise figure can be used in future to determine progress. In December 2022, we obtained a comprehensive list of psychology-related peer-reviewed journals using the SCImago indexing system (which uses the *Scopus* database). The filter "Psychology" was applied to the system's *Subject Area* and then "All Subject Categories" applied to include all sub-fields (e.g., experimental, cognitive, clinical, applied). "All regions" and the latest available dataset was also applied. This returned a total of 1355 journals. SCImago enables the results of a search to be downloaded as a single Excel file. We then used the "RANDBETWEEN" Excel function to assign each journal a random number, then Sorted according to these numbers, and then took the first 500. Between December 2022 and June 2023, we accessed each website and/or manuscript submission portal for all 500, to determine whether the journal offers *Format-Free Submission* or something similar. Five websites stated that the journal is no longer published, and these were replaced by randomly selecting five more journals from the 1355 pool. A further two required users to register with the journal in order to access information about submission and another five could not be located. These were also replaced.

We found that 73, i.e., 14.6%, offer something akin to the *Format-Free Submission*. Some journals explicitly use the phrase *Format-Free Submission*, whilst others simply state that they accept "any reasonable format" or words to that effect. Interestingly, a number of journals state that they offer *Format-Free Submission* but stipulate a large number of specific requirements, which make the notion redundant. For example, *Infant Mental Health* state that the abstract must include the country in which the research was conducted. These were classified as not offering the service. Furthermore, given the amount of time that changing referencing format can take, we classified one journal that claimed they employ *Format-Free Submission* as not offering the service because they require APA style.

In sum, the present analysis shows that psychology is much like all other academic fields. The vast majority of journals require time-consuming journal-specific formatting requirements.

4. A Solution to the Status Quo

As others have done before (e.g., [11,12]), the present authors suggest that the field of psychology needs to employ a standard manuscript format. A likely example would include all the essential components that enable a manuscript to be efficiently processed and evaluated. For instance, *Arial*, *Calibri*, or *Times New Roman* font, sized approximately 12, double-spaced throughout, appropriate margins, and document-length sequential line numbering could all be included in one single file. In terms of structure, a title page, (including authors, institutions, key words, main text word count, and address for correspondence), abstract, introduction, methods, results, discussion, references, funding, disclosure of interests, acknowledgments, author contributions, and data availability statement (if relevant),

could all occur in that order. Multiple experiment papers would of course vary, such that an introduction and discussion for each experiment could be included, together with a general discussion. Discussion amongst relevant stakeholders could determine which information we all, as users, feel is required. To encourage change, published papers could also state that "This article was published under the principles of Format-Free submission". A number of journals (e.g., *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness* and *School Psychology*) state that "This journal supports Open Science Badges". Efficiency should also be supported.

There will, of course, be situations in which any universal template will not suffice. Understandably, different journals do have different *general* requirements, which will necessarily lead to different formatting requirements. For example, many state that manuscripts must be anonymised, such that all reference to author identities be excluded. This is not always a simple case of omitting names from the front page of a manuscript. Some journals require that any self-referencing author names located in the main body of the text must be replaced by "Author" (e.g., "Author, 2016"). Sometimes, therefore, there would be the need for deviations from any standard format. This, however, would be nowhere near as odious as the current system. One can also imagine that AI will soon be able to assist with formatting.

At the individual level, there are three things one can do:

1. As reviewers, we all have a limited amount of time to perform this important task. Not all requests to evaluate a manuscript can be accepted. Reviewers could prioritise articles submitted to journals that offer *Format-Free Submission*. When a potential reviewer declines a request, a link commonly directs the user to a box where the reviewer is invited to give a reason for rejection (and a suggestion for an alternative reviewer). Here, reviewers could state that they are prioritising journals that offer *Format-Free Submission* and then cite an article advocating for change (e.g., [1,5]).
2. As far as possible, only submit to *Format-Free Submission* journals.
3. Remind other academics about the inefficiency of the current system, i.e., the time lost and waste of public money, and that they might want to adopt the first two suggestions.

5. Conclusions

The past few years has seen a number of significant changes in how we as psychologists go about our business. This has included, amongst many others, open science practices and how we should most appropriately analyse data. The present authors suggest that urgent change is also needed to the requirements imposed on the formatting of submitted manuscripts. The current system is unethical, in that it is an incredible waste of taxpayers' money.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, G.G.C.; methodology, G.G.C.; formal analysis, G.G.C. and S.S.; data curation, G.G.C. and S.S.; writing—original draft preparation, G.G.C.; writing—review and editing, S.S. and E.B.; supervision, G.G.C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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