

# The ancient art of seducing the reviewer

## El antiguo arte de seducir al revisor

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Picture by Debby Hudson/ Imagen de Picture by Debby HudsonDebby Hudson

*Versión en español más abajo*

**Y**ou have a research study in which you have put a lot of effort: months to design it, months to set it up, months to recruit patients and fix the problems that arose, months to communicate it at congresses, months to write it up... All in all, years. It is time to send it to a scientific journal for publication. It is the moment of seduction.

The decision to accept an article for publication depends on specific individuals, the Editor or Associate Editor and reviewers, based on the reading and analysis of very specific documents: cover letter, article, and responses to reviewers' comments.

Acceptance of the article is a seduction process between the study's principal investigator and the editorial team. The better the article, the more likely it will be accepted, but if the seduction capacity of the principal investigator is too low, there is a risk of rejection.

When designing a research project, the first thing I do is to assess whether the work really has the capacity to help patients. If it does, if it is worthwhile from a patient-centered point of view, I begin the process of seducing the editorial team. The seduction preparations start before the article exists, in the design phase.

The key is empathy, seeing the project from the beginning from the perspective of the potential reviewers and editors.

I design my projects with the values, desires, convictions, soul and even the wickedness of a reviewer 2 in mind. As you know, "reviewer 2" (R2) is the sarcastic way we refer to a reviewer who is especially harsh in his or her assessment. I find myself being watched at all times by reviewer 2, right from the beginning. R2 looks at everything I write, weighs it, criticizes it, laughs at its weaknesses. We start by seducing this imaginary character, R2 must end up admiring our project. Every decision, every step, every sentence in the project goes through the filters of the opinion of my imaginary reviewer 2.

### ***How can we conquer the love of R2? He/she must be impressed with our study:***

- That the research question is relevant.
- That the design allows us to answer that question.
- That there is a logical sample size calculation.
- That the protocol has been published explaining how the study variables are going to be analyzed.
- That the pertinent guidelines have been followed for the writing of the study protocol and, later on, that we have followed guidelines for the reporting of the results.

- That the article is well written, coherent, that the story it tells is well spun, that its different paragraphs and sections flow logically, without silly mistakes, without missing or extra sentences.
- That there is an interesting discussion.
- That the conclusions are not inflated, that we do not exaggerate the scope of our assessment of the results of our study.

As for our ability to seduce, in addition to getting all the above points right, there are two parts of the editorial process in which we must be especially brilliant: the cover letter and the introduction.

The cover letter is the love letter to the Editor. In it we should highlight the importance of the research question and what our study contributes to answer it. Keep in mind that the Editor spends a few minutes to decide whether to send the article to reviewers or to decide the dreaded direct reject, rejection without being reviewed. A first impression is also made about the article: is it worthwhile for the journal, will it bring citations, visibility, will it be of interest to readers? Convince him/her that it is. If we seduce the Editor at this point, we have a good chance of getting the article published.

In my case I give a short introduction in the cover letter to the importance of the disease on which the project is focused, discuss the research question and why it is worth the effort to answer it, then talk about the design of our study highlighting its strengths, and briefly discuss the impact of its findings on the practice of medicine.

Beware of exaggerating the scope of your results, blatant bragging can lead to heartbreak.

This is an example of one of our cover letters, the one from the PAN-PROMISE study published in Gut (Figure 1).

Also the introduction is an important part of seducing reviewers, especially reviewer 2 (reviewers do not usually have access to the cover letter). Whisper in reviewer 2's ear that the research question you have spent years on is worthwhile, patients need it answered, practicing physicians will have an easier job with the study data. State your goal, loud and clear, with pride.

In conclusion, generating interest in reviewers is very important in all academic activities, from publishing an article, to applying for a grant or a prize. Put yourself in the head of the reviewers, imagine what are their conditions, what is the philosophy of the journal, the agency issuing the grant or the institution granting the award. Be imaginative, show the value of your work, confess why you were passionate enough about this research question to invest years in answering it, show the value of your data, the consequences they have, have scientific rigor, write the article well without silly mistakes, revising it a thousand times.

Seduce, and love will follow.

Tienes un estudio de investigación en el que has puesto mucho esfuerzo: meses para diseñarlo, meses para ponerlo en marcha, meses para reclutar los pacientes y arreglar los problemas que iban surgiendo, meses para comunicarlo en congresos, meses para escribirlo... Sumándolo todo, años. Es el momento de enviarlo a una revista científica para su publicación. Es el momento de la seducción.

La decisión de aceptar un artículo para su publicación depende de personas concretas, Editor o Editor asociado y revisores, basada en la lectura y análisis de unos documentos muy concretos: cover letter, artículo y respuestas a los comentarios de los revisores. El que el artículo se acepte es un proceso de seducción entre el investigador principal del estudio y el equipo editorial. Cuanto mejor sea el artículo, mayores probabilidades habrá de que se acepte, pero si la capacidad de seducción del investigador principal es muy baja, se corre el riesgo de rechazo.

A la hora de diseñar un proyecto de investigación, lo primero que hago es valorar si realmente el trabajo tiene la

capacidad real de ayudar a los pacientes. Si es así, si merece la pena desde un punto de vista centrado el paciente, empiezo el proceso de seducción del equipo editorial. Los preparativos de seducción empiezan antes de que exista el artículo, en la fase de diseño. Lo fundamental es la empatía, el ver el proyecto desde el principio desde la perspectiva de los potenciales revisores y editores.

La clave es la empatía, ver el proyecto desde el principio desde la perspectiva de los potenciales revisores y editores.

Yo diseño mis proyectos pensando en los valores, anhelos, convicciones, en el alma e incluso en la maldad de un reviewer 2. Como sabéis, el "reviewer 2" es la forma sarcástica con la que nos referimos a un revisor que es especialmente duro en su valoración. Me veo vigilado en todo momento por el reviewer 2, desde el principio. Mira todo lo que escribo, lo sopesa, lo critica, se ríe de sus debilidades. Empezamos seduciendo a ese personaje imaginario, debe acabar admirado de nuestro proyecto. Cada decisión, cada paso, cada frase en el proyecto pasa por los filtros de la opinión de mi imaginario reviewer 2.

### ¿Cómo podemos conquistar el amor del R2? Debe quedar impresionado con nuestro estudio:

- Que la pregunta de investigación sea relevante.
- Que el diseño permita contestar esa pregunta.
- Que haya un cálculo de tamaño muestral lógico.
- Que se haya publicado el protocolo explicando cómo se van a analizar las variables del estudio.
- Que se hayan seguido las guías pertinentes para la redacción del protocolo del estudio y posteriormente guías para el reporte de los resultados.
- Que el artículo esté bien escrito, coherente, que la historia que cuenta esté bien hilada, que sus diferentes párrafos y secciones fluyan de forma lógica, sin fallos tontos, sin frases que falten o sobren.
- Que haya una discusión interesante.
- Que no estén infladas las conclusiones, que no exageremos en el alcance de nuestra valoración del estudio.

En cuanto a nuestra capacidad de seducción, además de hacer bien todos los puntos anteriores, hay dos partes del proceso editorial en las que debemos ser especialmente brillantes: la cover letter y la introducción.

La cover letter es la carta de amor al Editor. En ella debemos resaltar la importancia de la pregunta de investigación y qué aporta nuestro estudio a contestarla. Ten en cuenta que el Editor dedica unos minutos a decidir si envía a revisar

#### Cover letter

Dear Professor Emad El-Omar, Editor of Gut, please find enclosed a copy of the manuscript entitled "Design and validation of a patient-reported outcome measure scale in acute pancreatitis: the PAN-PROMISE study" for consideration of publication in Gastroenterology.

Acute pancreatitis (AP) is a frequent disease. A third of patients with AP have a moderate-to-severe disease, which is associated to morbidity and increased risk of mortality. Currently, there is no specific treatment that has been proven to prevent or improve the clinical course of those patients, but a better understanding of the pathophysiology of AP in the last decades<sup>1,2</sup> is leading to new promising molecules. Unfortunately, clinically important events in AP like mortality or persistent organ failure are so infrequent that it is unfeasible to use them as primary outcomes in clinical trials. Other endpoints are also suboptimal so new outcome variables are needed. Furthermore, the patient, the center of the healthcare effort, has not been involved in the design of endpoints in AP before.

We have developed a Patient-Reported Outcome (PROM) scale based on the opinion of patients, professionals involved in managing AP and an expert panel with some of the most important researchers in pancreatology, to be used as an endpoint in clinical trials, and to be a useful tool to quantify patient wellbeing in clinical practice. This PROM has been validated in an international multicenter prospective cohort study.

We have chosen to send this article to Gut, a leading journal in the field of digestive diseases, for several reasons:

1. This article represents a novelty, is expected to have impact and has strength of design
2. This is the first PROM designed for acute pancreatitis, furthermore there are few PROMs for acute diseases, so it will be an interesting experience for the development of new instruments in similar circumstances. No other articles have considered before the opinion of patients to develop new endpoints for research in AP.
3. Including the opinion of patients in clinical research is currently a social and scientific priority and has intrinsic importance, so we expect that both pharma industry and independent researchers in AP will be interested in including the PAN-PROMISE scale as a primary or secondary outcome; that will probably lead to citation of this manuscript in high quality studies (i.e. randomized controlled trials).
4. The scale has been validated in an international multicenter prospective cohort study involving 29 centers, 15 countries and 524 patients specifically designed for this purpose, which was a remarkable achievement that was performed without funding, as collaborators were engaged by the potential usefulness of the scale.
5. PAN-PROMISE is very easy to perform (it is fulfilled by the patient, it takes up to 1 minute), it is a quantitative scale which makes feasible to test the effect of new interventions on patient wellbeing with small samples of patients, so it's attractive for researchers.

Figure 1 / Figura 1.

el artículo a los revisores o decide el temido direct reject, rechazo sin ser revisado. También se hace una primera impresión sobre el artículo: ¿merece la pena para la revista? ¿le aportará citas, visibilidad, será de interés para los lectores? Convéncele de que sí. Si seducimos al Editor en este punto, tenemos muchas posibilidades de conseguir la publicación.

En mi caso hago en la cover letter una pequeña introducción a la importancia de la enfermedad en la que se centra el proyecto, hablo de la pregunta de investigación y de por qué merece la pena dedicar un esfuerzo a contestarla, después hablo del diseño de nuestro estudio resaltando sus puntos más fuertes, y discuto brevemente el impacto de sus hallazgos en la práctica de la medicina.

Cuidado con exagerar el alcance de tus resultados, fanfarronear descaradamente puede conducir al desamor.

Este es un ejemplo de una de nuestras cover letters, la del estudio PAN-PROMISE publicado en Gut (Figura 1).

También la introducción es una parte importante para seducir a los revisores, en especial al reviewer 2 (los revisores no suelen tener acceso a la cover letter). Susurra al oído

del revisor 2 que la pregunta de investigación a la que has dedicado años merece la pena, los pacientes necesitan que se responda, los médicos que practican la medicina tendrán su trabajo más fácil con los datos del estudio. Formula tu objetivo, alto y claro, con orgullo.

En conclusión, el generar interés en los evaluadores es muy importante en todas las actividades académicas, desde publicar un artículo, pedir una beca u optar a un premio. Ponte en la cabeza de los evaluadores, imagina cuáles son sus condicionantes, qué filosofía tiene la revista, la agencia que emite la beca o la institución que otorga el premio. Ten imaginación, enseña el valor de tu trabajo, confiesa por qué te apasionó esta pregunta de investigación lo suficiente para invertir años en contestarla, pon en valor tus datos, las consecuencias que tienen, ten rigor científico, escribe bien el artículo sin fallos tontos, revisándolo mil veces.

Seduce, y surgirá el amor.