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*Winning the Publications Game: How to Write a Scientific
Paper without Neglecting Your Patients (review)*

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recognize what needs to be done and how to explain the necessity to the author.

A book on academic publishing that is so cheap will break no bank. *The Subversive Copy Editor* is well written, informative, and entertaining, and I enjoyed reading it. I won't make a general recommendation for it only because its general interest drops off a little toward the end. But anyone who is or wants to be a copy editor should enjoy *SCE*, as will many academic editors and authors.

Tim Albert. *Winning the Publications Game: How to Write a Scientific Paper without Neglecting Your Patients*, 3rd ed.

Oxford: Radcliffe Publishing, 2009. Pp. xiii, 114. Paper: ISBN 978-184619-247-0, UK£21.99.

Reviewed by STEPHEN K. DONOVAN

To my knowledge, Tim Albert is the first author to state the obvious truth that academic publishing is, indeed, a game. The rules are set by the mandarins, directors, HoDs, or whatever their current appellation. They set those magic targets to which we must aspire—this year, it may be a particular number of peer-reviewed papers in journals that appear in a particular citation index. The emphasis is not on pushing back the frontiers of knowledge but on publishing the right number of papers and being seen in the right journals. Is there any academic who doesn't recognize this as a recipe for festering mediocrity?

I wonder if managers ever contemplate how their pronouncements, driven by misconceptions about the value of the citation indices of journals and the like, are influencing not academia but academics' attitudes toward publishing? It is hardly unknown for a manager to demand, say, three papers per staff member per year in journals on some named citation index. So instead of writing one substantial paper that would stand as a significant contribution to knowledge or thought, the staff member instead dissects it, and three shorter papers are submitted that are much less likely to be noticed or to have a significant shelf life. Same game, but scoring a series of separate runs rather than a grand slam in order to satisfy an artificial academic goal.

If academic publishing is a game, there must be rules; but, more importantly, there must be ways to play the game that let you win, including ‘cheating,’ as in the above example. But it is the non-cheating way to play that is the subject of Albert’s book. What a shame Albert isn’t a baseball fan—the ten chapters of this slender and highly readable volume could so easily have been arranged as nine innings with a seventh-inning stretch. But Albert is a good strategist, whatever game he may be playing.

Chapter 1, ‘Know the Game,’ is a gem, explaining just what academic publishing is and what it isn’t. The purpose of *Winning the Publications Game* (hereafter *WPG*) is not to lecture the inexperienced academic author on the methodologies of writing—there are plenty of books on this already—but instead to consider the methodologies of publishing, a somewhat different proposition. Albert urges authors ‘to stop thinking of academic papers as a way of assessing individual worth, and more part of a commercial publishing system’ (8). He provides an excellent figure (3) that links common problems faced by academic authors with the methodologies explained in different chapters. (For example, if you find writing slow and painful, go to chapter 6.) Albert takes this theme further in chapter 2 by persuading readers to understand their personal reasons for writing and to determine their publishing goals (14).

Chapter 3 leads the reader from the environment of research to that of writing, what Albert calls ‘setting the brief.’ The *brief* is the putative paper’s message, market, length, deadline, and authorship. Again, some of the figures are excellent, summarizing relevant ideas. Particularly important is the recommendation to include just one message per article (20). This goal can best be attained via a process of slow rumination; don’t rush it and a tight message can be condensed to a brief sentence. Matching the message to the market is also a key behaviour. Simply put, the key is to know your message and determine which journal is most likely to accept it. Readers should thank Albert for including a whole page on ‘Guidance to Authors’ (24) and giving some priceless advice: read the ‘instructions to authors’ of your target journal, then read the journal itself. The two are not uncommonly more or less discrepant. All this is done by ignoring that piece of nonsense, the impact factor. As Albert rightly notes (27), ‘The question is not “Where would I like to get published?” but “Who is likely to publish me?”’

The real nitty-gritty starts in chapter 6, 'Writing the First Draft,' and not before time. We are almost halfway through the book, and only now, admittedly after much careful preparation, do we start to write a paper. I agree with Albert—'the actual writing . . . should be fun' (51). I enjoy my writing, but not everyone does. Are academics turned off by writing because they see it as just another exam, asks Albert? Well, it isn't. There is no time limit to writing a journal article, and the first draft is just that. Moving from a draft to a publishable submission takes time, but once the draft exists, the nature of writing changes. The draft is the hard part of writing, if you like, but once it is completed, the game changes to that of editing our own work. First you draft, then you massage. Don't let fear of writing a first draft be a barrier. Write at your own speed and in your own style.

Albert is right in recognizing that most of us lead busy lives and don't have much time for writing. Use what small aliquots of time you have, even if each is measurable only in fractions of an hour. Waiting at a bus stop for five minutes last week, I made notes about a sticky part of a paper that I was drafting but whose progress was dragging. The draft is now finished because of that brief writing period. But use the time—write, don't look at the page. It can be edited later.

Chapter 7, 'Rewrite Your Draft,' is the longest section of *WPG*, and rightly so. The skill of fine-tuning a manuscript is in the rewriting, not the drafting. Albert starts with the subheading 'Now comes the pain . . .' for a task that I usually enjoy. For me, the pain, if any, is in writing the first draft. The trick in rewriting is not to relax too much. Be honest with yourself and do not try to save too much of what you have written that is weak; that is, you must be a truly critical editor of your own work before it is submitted for publication. Sadly, Albert's many good suggestions for rewriting will not, I fear, find as many receptive minds as some other chapters.

Albert's recipe for success is to break the big job into smaller jobs, each of which is self-contained and less daunting than the complete paper of which it will form a part. At the beginning, the complete paper in navel contemplation will rear up before the author, a novice or perhaps just lacking confidence, like the Great Wall of China. Albert turns building the Great Wall into a series of Lego kits, and all is well. Even this book review was drafted as several separate paragraphs on Post-It notes, then ordered and typed up.

Albert makes one obvious mistake that will frighten away some academics who would benefit from reading *WPG* when he makes the subtitle address medics. I am a geologist, yet I gained much from reading this book with its alleged medical bias. If an author writes a book that explains the nuts and bolts of some task, whether mundane or complex, but then qualifies it by claiming that it applies only to a restricted group, then the book will fail to reach all of the potential market. A book like *WPG* works across the breadth of academia, not just for the wavers of tongue depressors. If I wrote a book titled *Practical Vicar Strangling for Dyslexic Postmen*, it would undoubtedly contain information of relevance to anyone who wanted to persecute a padre. As in any study, there are basic skills and there are those that, presumably, only the dyslexic purveyors of mail would find relevant; but those basic skills are 90 per cent of the story, and they are important for all those who might be interested. Even if practical tips on stuffing the victim into a postman's sack and concealing it under postcards from Tunisia may not be generally applicable, the underlying principles for concealing evidence are undeniable. Better to call the book *Vicar Strangling* and thus reach a wider audience. The same is true of *Winning the Publications Game*; academics in any field will find much of direct relevance to their writing program between its covers.

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Publishing Pedagogies for the Doctorate and Beyond

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Reviewed by STEVEN E. GUMP

In a piece published in this journal last year, Allan Pasco asks—and answers—the question, ‘Should graduate students publish?’¹ For graduate