How to Write a Publishable Paper as a Class Project

This web site shows how to write a publishable article by beginning with the replication of a previously published article. Following the advice here constitutes an important assignment for my class, **Advanced Quantitative Research Methodology**. After fine tuning these suggestions over 20 years, I published the 2006 version as:

- *Gary King* **Publication, Publication,** *PS: Political Science and Politics, Vol. XXXIX, No. 1 (January, 2006), 119-125 (Abstract:* **HTML** *| Article:* **PDF***)*

Continuing updates to this article can be found here:

1. When trying to replicate an article, carefully read all footnotes, appendices, tables, captions, web appendices, etc. Also, check previous or subsequent articles from the same author on the same or related subjects for better documentation.
2. Before you contact an author, check his or her web site, Dataverse, the ICPSR Publications Related Archive, and the journal's web site to see if replication materials are available. If you need to contact the author of the original article, consolidate your requests into as few emails as possible.
3. To increase the probability that your paper will eventually be published, its usually better to choose an article from a better journal. The way these things work, if you find something important and do a good job researching and writing your paper, you will have a chance at publication in that journal. If your submission is rejected for whatever reason, odds are you have to go down one level in the hierarchy of journals. Its thus best to start with some of the best journals. Of course, some terrific -- and influential -- articles are not in the most visible journals, so this is a consideration but hardly a rule.
4. Although throughout the process you will (i.e,. should) do whatever you can to avoid a conflictual relationship with the authors of the article you replicate, for class please eliminate the possibility altogether for those with whom you have ongoing professional relationships, such as faculty on your committee or in your department. Since there are so many other options out there, its easy to avoid even potential conflicts like these by making wise choices now. This will also help you ensure during the research that your decision making is not influenced by anything but producing the best work.
5. This is probably the first paper you are writing that is not about you: Explaining how hard you worked, that you included everything the professor asked for, and how smart you are are now all irrelevant distractions. Your goal instead is to construct a paper that makes people want to read it. Your title, abstract, and paper each must focus on what others will learn if they devote the time to read it. You must answer "Whose mind are you going to change about what?", such as by starting the abstract with "In this paper, we demonstrate that...".
6. **Additional points just for the project in my class**:
1. You are required to ask for my advice on the article you are considering replicating (whether you take the advice is up to you!). That means you should stop by my office with your coauthor and copies of the article you are considering (no, you don't need an appointment), or send me a PDF and CC your coauthor. **Please don't forget**: the article should be

published within the last few years, from a good journal, and use methods we have or will talk about in class, or at about the same level of sophistication.

2. Since we will give the first draft of your replication, data, and code to another student in the class to replicate your replication, you must use R for this part of the paper (it wouldn't be fair to ask another student to learn new software that our TFs don't support just for that purpose). For other parts of your work, or for extending it, you're welcome to use whatever tools you desire. Remember, you also don't need to replicate every part of the article you choose; just the part you (and not necessarily the author of the original article) can justify as important for the paper you will write from this.

3. Choose an article with data that you are allowed to share publicly, without any restriction. If the data are private, you may be able to get permission to share it (without any restriction), but if you don't have this permission, please choose a different article to replicate.

4. Your paper must use some methods at least as advanced as those we learned in this class; that means that if you choose an article with less advanced methods (such as only linear regression), your paper will only work as a class project if you have a more advanced method that makes sense to use and if it produces sufficiently worthwhile results that justifies itself. Since introducing a new method into a paper when it doesn't make a difference doesn't make for a good paper, you are at somewhat more risk for the class project if you choose an article that uses relatively simple statistical procedures. Its not necessarily the wrong choice, since if the author is using simple procedures and you have better ones, you might be able to extract more information.

5. Choose a reasonable sample size: (i) Do not choose an article with too massive a data set. Larger data sets can of course be more informative, but if they overwhelm the computational resources you have available you may need to spend a disproportionate amount of your time overcoming these problems. (ii) Do not choose an article with too "uninformative" (which usually but not always means too "small") a sample size. A crude rule of thumb is that if the number of observations is not at least 10 or 100 times the number of pages, you should at least think twice about whether you will be able to find information the original author missed.

6. After you have your results and before you start to write the paper, prepare an abstract of 150 words or less and email it to the class list. We will all comment on it and try to help you improve it, and thereby the paper. After you've finished the analysis, you have borne most of the costs of the research project, and so it is at precisely this time when you can sometimes most easily have a big impact on improving the final product. After receiving comments from the list, come by my office (together with your coauthor) and we'll talk through your ideas and results and see if we can make the paper even better.

7. Prepare the paper double-spaced with at least 1 inch margins all around and in **12 point font**. (I realize that you can see it in smaller fonts, but that's not necessarily true for your reviewers.) Print on one side of the paper only (the opposite side should be blank). Overall, make the style of the paper look like those professors write. For examples, see my **preprints**.

8. Do not choose an article unless you fully understand its argument, methods, theory, and substance.

9. Please read "Publication, Publication" and this update carefully and check it repeatedly. Please try to avoid us having to refer you back to this material when we give you final comments on your paper.

Suggestions for other instructors who might wish to use this assignment in your classes. The key to remember is that students are rarely good at coming up with a big publishable idea, or sometimes even an answerable question, on their own. They will eventually, but this is essentially their first real effort. To increase the probability that this experience will be a success:

1. Meet with them collectively or in small groups to help them construct their arguments, decide what avenues to pursue, and construct a winning argument. Its ok for you (or your teaching assistants) to give them the key idea in their paper if they're doing the hard work of replication and analysis.
2. Keep them focused on satisfying each and every item on the list. Encourage them to read it over multiple times while they are preparing, while they are writing, and before they turn it in.
3. Before turning in anything, require them to have another student verify that they meet each item in the checklist in "Publication, Publication." Missing these is way too common and much easier to see in someone else's work than your own.
4. Use the exchange of abstracts (preferably on an email list or forum so everyone else can see at the same time) as a way to help them with their overall pitch, and organization of their paper and its main point.
5. You can't emphasize enough how rigorously organized and concise their paper must be. The section headings alone ought to convey the entire message of the paper. Same for the title, for the abstract, and for the introduction.