# If You Build It, They Will Come: How to Write and Improve Author Instructions

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The advice of the speakers in the session "Standardizing Author Instructions" conjures up the adage: "If you build it, they will come." That is, if author submission instructions are easy to find, read, and use, the authors will be more willing to submit to your journal over others.

Anna Jester opened the session with a slide containing a roadmap for the session: Jillian Poland would describe 4 principles to govern how author instructions should be written; Chelsea Lee would speak on the process the APA Journals team used for manuscript submission and evaluation and improved usability of the most recent APA Style Manual; and Anna Jester would end the session with a Q&A session.

## Four Principles for Standardizing and Improving Author Instructions

Jillian Poland is a user experience researcher, working with Wiley to assess the experiences their clients have with Wiley's digital products. Her job includes conducting and analyzing surveys, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups with authors, editors, and journal administrators. Poland says that based on survey results, authors strongly prefer that manuscript submission instructions are simple, familiar, and not text-heavy.

Improved submission instructions can reduce administrative burdens at all stages of manuscript processing and decrease overall time from submission to publication. Poland encourages

writing submission instructions such that authors are armed with all the answers they will need up front, from presubmission (e.g., potential authors often begin asking questions even before they have begun a submission) to post-acceptance (e.g., could this problem have been avoided if the author knew the exact requirements presubmission?) and during inter-journal transfer, too. Poland outlined 4 principles to guide the creation, review, editing, and maintenance of an ideal set of author submission instructions.

### 1. Center Authors
First, Poland says, we need to "center authors." To write your instructions with authors in mind, you must know them. Who are they? How do they interact with your online content? What outcome do they get, or want to get, when they are navigating around your author guide? Authors are different from one another, particularly with regards to their publication experiences, so the author instructions should accommodate the needs of new and experienced authors alike. For instance, to highlight what a submitting author should address in their conflict-of-interest disclosures, use bold text to make this requirement easy to find. For less experienced authors, provide a link to a resource that defines conflict-of-interest disclosures and explains how they are used by the journal.

### 2. Use Intuitive Organization
Users will typically start reading submission instructions at the top of the page, so the most critical information should be near the top of the page. You can also include a table of contents to help the authors know what information is included in the instructions. This "inverted pyramid" style of writing should then be complemented by the use of appropriate headers, bolded font, bullet points, or other ways to separate sections and draw attention to the requirements. Poland recommended learning about the inverted pyramid writing style and the concept of information foraging.

### 3. Take Advantage of Industry Standards
Rather than writing from scratch the sometimes-complex requirements involved in manuscript evaluation, Poland encourages the use of previously published, standardized
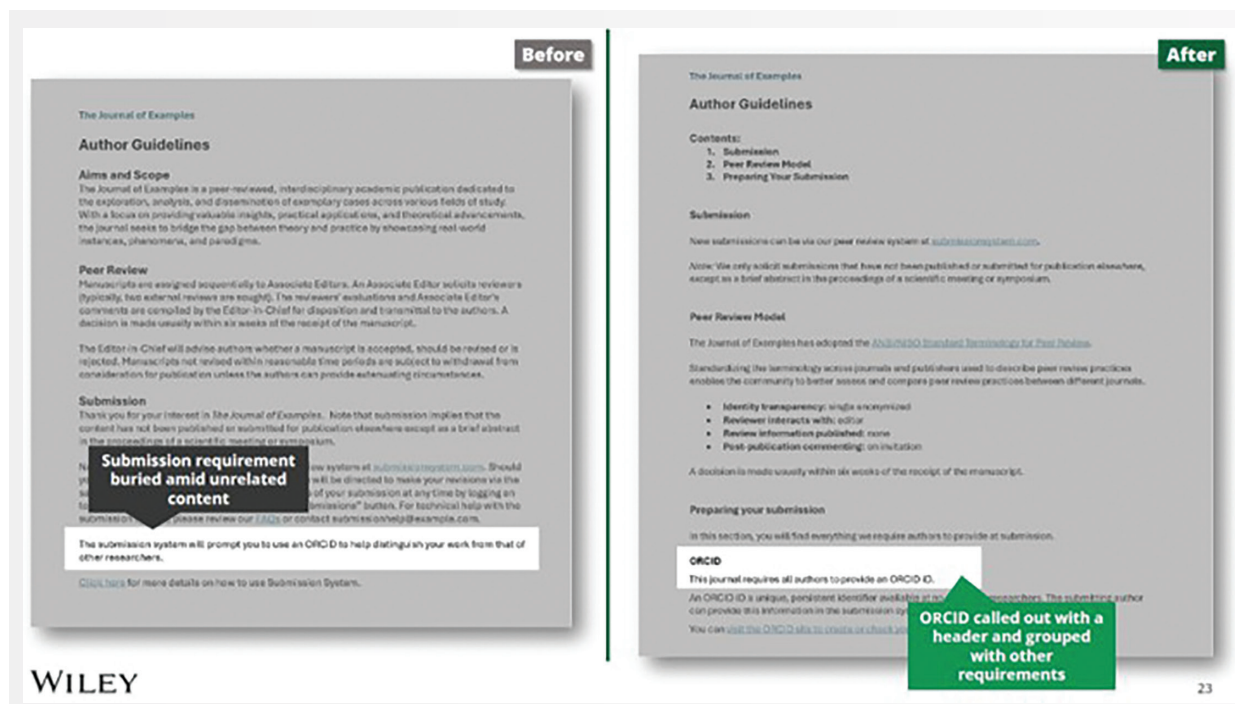
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**Figure.** Before and after exercise resulting in clearer author submission instructions.

language. Examples included using and citing the National Information Standards Organization (NISO) standard terminology[1] to explain peer review or using ORCID's explainer[2] to let authors know why you are requiring an ORCID number at submission.

## 4. Keep the Text Simple

Poland encourages writing the submission instructions at an 8th grade level, a standard recommended by many media organizations. Use simple words, do not use nested sentences with a lot of punctuation, and use line breaks, bullet points, and multiple, short paragraphs to make the content easy to scan. Academics are busy, and in the world of international scholarship, many speak English as a second language. Writing simple instructions benefits everyone.

The Figure shows a slide capture from Poland's presentation that illustrates these 4 principles applied to the transformation of a draft author guidelines page.

## Using Psychology to Improve Authors' Lives

Chelsea Lee presented 2 topics related to how the APA has worked to improve their submitting authors' experience. Lee discussed the process the APA undertook to revise the 6th edition of APA Style[3] for formatting written works (not just for journal submissions) and also provided some general examples of how the APA Journal Article Reporting Standards (APA-JARS)[4] are employed to improve the submission, peer review, editing, and transfer process for articles submitted to an APA journal. Of the 89 journals published by the APA, all but one require that submitting authors adhere to APA Style when preparing their manuscripts (the exception requires it only after acceptance).

APA Style JARS are meant to help authors, reviewers, and editors know how a submission should be crafted, making submission, review, and decision-making as simple as possible. APA Journals staff are working to streamline the steps that follow. Staff ask the most essential questions of authors at initial submission, which pertain to topics such as funding source, duplicate submissions, data transparency, ethics board review, copyright, and the use of generative artificial intelligence, in addition to any article-type specific questions (e.g., for comments, editorials, research articles, or registered reports). Only if the article is accepted will additional requirements be enforced. If the article is desk-rejected, staff will suggest a more appropriate APA journal and, with the author's consent, transfer the manuscript for them; it is largely

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about making the publication process even easier and more manageable for authors.

Lee then described how authors' feedback was used to revise the 6th edition APA Style Manual and publish the 7th edition in 2020. Through user surveys, the APA Style team identified 3 areas needing improvement: 1) the information authors wanted to find was hard to find; 2) the guidance given on how to follow APA Style was too complicated; and 3) implementation of the guidance was not adequately obvious.

To make information easier to find, the APA Style team implemented several changes. The team increased the number of distinct sections within the style guide, improved the search index, unified the online and print user experience by editing the website and print guide so that they align better with each other, and made the print version of the APA Style manual tabbed and spiral-bound. All these changes were proposed, implemented, and tested with the help of a hired accessibility consultant and various task forces and committees.

To simplify the guidance and make it easier for authors to meet the requirements, the guidance in the 7th edition of the APA Style Manual now has fewer exceptions and makes formats for references, in-text citations, and figures and tables more uniform. More templates and examples are now provided to make implementation of the guidance easier as well. Lee emphasized that because there are varied types of research reports and other submissions a journal receives, examples should be provided not only for the complicated cases but also for the most-often encountered cases such as those used by students.

Overall, Lee advises journal staff to be intentional, be mindful, and re-evaluate regularly: tend to submitters' needs by being consistent and communicating with brief and explicit directions; test-drive your guidance and show examples; listen to all feedback, both solicited and unsolicited; and zoom out and back in again on your instructions often, continually evaluating them from the perspective of various potential users.

## Q&A Session

Questions from the audience included: how to work with editors and other society leadership, in particular when a society publishes multiple journals, to come to agreement on submission requirements; what type of feedback to solicit from users; and whether to use artificial intelligence (AI) tools to improve an author guide.

Conversations among editors, society staff, and publications staff should be commonplace to achieve a unified approach. The panelists and audience members involved in the discussion agreed that the conversation can indeed be difficult. Poland suggests identifying a steward of the submission instructions among the publications staff who would host regular conversations with editors, publishers, authors, and other staff; provide templates for new journals joining a society's portfolio; and to provide for regular re-evaluation of published submission instructions.

Poland and Lee spoke to questions related to solicited feedback from users. Lee mentioned that when redesigning the APA Style website, the team recorded volunteers using the website to accomplish specific tasks to better understand the actual usage of published instructions and refine them accordingly. Poland used a similar approach and suggested 1 to 1.5 hours of a volunteer's time to test-drive submission instructions.

Lastly, Lee and Poland spoke to an audience member's question about the use of AI tools in preparing author instructions. Both panelists said that although some AI tools could simplify language structure and vocabulary, output from these tools were not ultimately used, in part because the AI tool generated incorrect information.

## References and Links

1. https://www.niso.org/standards-committees/peer-review-terminology
2. https://info.orcid.org/what-is-orcid/
3. https://apastyle.apa.org/
4. https://apastyle.apa.org/jars