



Publish Your First Paper — 50 Rules

A field guide from Waraq for early-career researchers writing for international journals.

INTRODUCTION

A field guide from Waraq for early-career researchers writing for international journals

SECTION Introduction

Your first paper is the hardest one you will ever write. Not because the science is harder than what comes later, but because you are learning two crafts at once: how to do the research, and how to report it in a form an international journal will accept. Most of the difficulty in the second craft is invisible to you until an editor or a reviewer points it out, usually in language that stings.

This booklet exists to make that invisible craft visible before it costs you six months. It collects 50 rules, grouped into the nine stages of a paper's life: before you write, structure and argument, methods and data, citations and integrity, clarity and language, choosing the journal, submission, surviving peer review, and after acceptance. Each rule is short. Each one is something a journal editor has watched go wrong hundreds of times.

A word on who this is for. Many first-time authors in the Gulf and the wider Arab world are writing in English for journals whose editors and reviewers sit in Europe, North America, or East Asia. You are competing not on the strength of your ideas alone but on how clearly those ideas cross a language and a culture. That is not a disadvantage you carry quietly. It is a specific, learnable set of skills, and several rules here address it directly: how to write plainly in a second language, how to read author guidelines that assume knowledge you were never taught, and how to answer a reviewer whose tone reads as harsh but whose request is reasonable.

Three habits will carry you further than any single rule. First, read before you write: read the journal you are targeting, read three recent papers it published in your area, and read its author guidelines twice. Second, write for one reader who is smart, busy, and skeptical, and who will stop reading the moment the paper stops earning their attention. Third, treat rejection as data, not verdict. A desk rejection in week two is a gift compared to a rejection after four months of review, and even a hard rejection usually tells you something you can fix.

You do not need to memorize these rules. Read them once end to end, then keep the booklet next to you while you draft, submit, and revise. Come back to the peer-review section the day the decision letter arrives, before you reply to anyone. The rules will not write the paper for you. They will stop you from losing the paper you already have.

Let us begin.

SECTION **Part 1 — Before You Write**

Rule 1. Decide what one sentence the paper proves.

Before you open a blank document, write a single declarative sentence that states your finding. Not the topic, the finding: "X reduces Y by 30 percent under condition Z," not "a study of X and Y." If you cannot write that sentence, you are not ready to write the paper, because everything in it — the introduction, the figures, the discussion — exists to support that one claim. Pin the sentence above your desk and delete any paragraph that does not serve it.

Rule 2. Confirm the work is finished before you start writing it up.

Writing a paper around results you are still collecting is how papers die. If you suspect one more experiment or one more robustness check will be needed, run it now, because a reviewer will ask for it and a half-finished analysis will read as one. List every claim you intend to make and, next to each, the specific result that backs it. Any claim without a backing result is either cut or completed before you draft.

Rule 3. Read three recent papers from your target journal in full.

Not the abstracts, the whole papers, published in the last two years, in your subfield. You are reverse-engineering the journal's expectations: how long the introduction runs, how many figures are normal, how methods are reported, how bold the claims are allowed to be. Notice the moves those authors make and the ones they avoid. Your paper should look like it belongs in the same room as those three.

Rule 4. Write the abstract last, but sketch it first.

Draft a rough four-sentence abstract before you write anything else — problem, approach, result, implication — and use it as your compass while you draft. Then throw it away and write the real one after the paper is done, because the finished paper always knows more than the sketch did. The final abstract is the most-read part of your paper and often the only part; editors decide whether to send it out on the abstract alone. Give it the same number of revisions you give your best paragraph.

Rule 5. Map the paper as bullet points before prose.

Write the entire paper as a nested outline first: every section, every subsection, and one bullet per paragraph stating what that paragraph will assert. This is where you find that your argument has a gap, or that two sections say the same thing, or that your results do not actually answer your introduction. Fixing structure in bullets takes an hour; fixing it in finished prose takes a week. Do not start writing sentences until the outline holds together on its own.

Rule 6. Know the difference between a contribution and a task.

"We built a system" is a task. "We show that a smaller model, trained this way, matches a larger one" is a contribution. Reviewers reward contributions — new knowledge, a new method that others can use, a result that changes what people believed — not effort. Write down your contribution in the terms a reader in your field would recognize as new, and if you cannot, keep working on the research before you keep working on the paper.

Rule 7. Search the literature until you find the paper that scoops you.

Assume someone has already done something close to your work, and go find them. This is not to discourage you; it is to sharpen your claim, because your real contribution is whatever remains after you account for what already exists. Search by concept, not just by keyword, follow the citations of the closest paper both backward and forward, and read the related-work sections of recent papers to find names you missed. The reviewer who rejects you will have done this search; do it first.

Rule 8. Choose your authorship and order before writing, in writing.

Decide who is an author, who is acknowledged, and in what order, and get everyone to agree before the first draft. Authorship disputes late in a project are bitter and can sink a submission entirely. Most fields have norms — first author does the work, last author leads the lab — and international journals increasingly require a written statement of each author's contribution. Settle it early, record it, and revisit it only if someone's role genuinely changes.

Rule 9. Set up a reference manager on day one.

Use Zotero, Mendeley, or a BibTeX file from the first paper you read, not the week before submission. Every citation you add later should already carry its full metadata — authors, year, venue, DOI — because reconstructing 60 references by hand the night before a deadline produces exactly the errors reviewers notice. A clean reference database also lets you switch citation styles in one click when you change target journals. Start it now, keep it tidy, and never paste a raw URL where a citation belongs.

Rule 10. Budget more time than you think for writing, not the research.

First-time authors routinely spend a year on the research and two weeks on the paper, then wonder why it reads as rushed. A good paper takes many drafts, feedback from co-authors, a language pass, figure remakes, and a formatting round — plan for six to ten weeks of writing after the science is done. Put the submission date on a calendar and work backward, leaving a full week at the end for the formatting and checklist grind that always takes longer than expected. Time pressure at the end is where careless mistakes enter.

SECTION **Part 2 — Structure & Argument**

Rule 11. State your contribution in the first paragraph.

Do not make the editor read three pages to learn what you did. By the end of the first paragraph — at the latest, the first page — the reader should know the problem, why it matters, and what you contribute. Many strong papers list their contributions explicitly as a short bulleted set at the end of the introduction. Assume your reader is impatient and skeptical, and give them a reason to keep going before they decide not to.

Rule 12. Write the introduction as a funnel, not a history lesson.

Open wide with the real-world problem, narrow to the specific gap in current knowledge, then land on your contribution. The classic failure is spending two pages on the history of the field before saying what you did; the reader does not need the field's biography, they need to know why this paper exists. A tested shape is five moves: the problem matters, here is what is known, here is what is missing, here is what we do, here is what we find. Keep it to roughly one page for most journals.

Rule 13. Make every section answer the question the previous one raised.

A paper is a chain of expectations and payoffs. The introduction promises a contribution; the methods must be the methods that deliver it; the results must report exactly the outcomes the methods set up; the discussion must return to the promise and say whether it was kept. When a reviewer says a paper "does not hang together," this chain is broken somewhere. Read your section headings in order and check that they tell the story without the paragraphs in between.

Rule 14. Put one idea in each paragraph, and its point in the first sentence.

The first sentence of a paragraph should state its claim; the rest of the paragraph should support that claim. A reader who skims only your opening sentences should still follow the argument. If a paragraph has two ideas, split it; if two paragraphs have one idea, merge them. This single habit does more for readability than any amount of word-polishing.

Rule 15. Design your figures before you write the results.

Your figures carry the argument; the results text narrates them. Decide which three or four figures tell your story, draft them, and only then write the prose that walks the reader through each one. A reviewer often reads the figures and captions before the body, so each figure must stand alone: a caption that explains what is shown, what the axes are, and what the reader should conclude. If two figures make the same point, cut one.

Rule 16. Write captions that can be read without the text.

A good caption states what the figure shows, defines every symbol and abbreviation, gives the sample size or conditions, and tells the reader the takeaway. Reviewers and editors frequently judge a paper by flipping through its figures and captions first. A caption that just says "Results of the experiment" wastes the most-viewed real estate in your paper. Aim for two to four sentences per caption, and never hide a key detail only in the body text.

Rule 17. Keep results and interpretation separate.

In the results section, report what you found: the numbers, the comparisons, the statistics. Save what it means — why it happened, what it implies, how it fits the literature — for the discussion. Mixing the two lets a reviewer suspect you are interpreting your way past a weak result. Discipline here also protects you: a clean results section is hard to argue with, and a clearly separated discussion is where you are allowed to be brave.

Rule 18. Make the discussion return to the promise and name the limitations.

Open the discussion by restating what you found and whether it delivered on the introduction's promise. Then place your result in the literature, state its implications, and — this is not optional — name its limitations honestly.

Reviewers trust authors who disclose weaknesses more than authors who pretend to have none, and a limitation you raise yourself is far less damaging than one a reviewer discovers. End with what the result changes and what should come next.

Rule 19. Cut the paper by 20 percent after the first full draft.

The first complete draft is always too long. Go through it once looking only for what to remove: the paragraph that repeats the introduction, the result that does not support the main claim, the sentence that restates the previous sentence. Shorter papers are read more carefully and rejected less often, and editors of tight-page journals notice padding immediately. If cutting a passage does not weaken the argument, the passage was not carrying the argument.

Rule 20. Title the paper for search, not for cleverness.

Your title is how future readers find you and how a busy editor decides your topic in three seconds. State the finding or the subject in plain, specific words that a searcher would type: the method, the system, the population, the effect. Avoid puns, colons stacked on colons, and vague nouns like "aspects" or "insights." A precise, slightly boring title beats a clever, opaque one every time.

SECTION **Part 3 — Methods & Data**

Rule 21. Write methods so a competent stranger could reproduce the work.

The test for a methods section is simple: could someone in another lab, with your paper and nothing else, repeat what you did and expect the same result? Report every parameter, version, threshold, and choice that would change the outcome. Vagueness here — "data were preprocessed appropriately," "standard settings were used" — is one of the fastest routes to a request for major revisions. When in doubt, put the detail in, and move the bulk to a supplement if space is tight.

Rule 22. Report exactly what you did, not the idealized version.

If you dropped 12 samples, say so and say why. If a run failed and you reran it, report that. Reviewers and, increasingly, replication checks catch the gap between the clean method you wish you had followed and the messy one you actually followed. Reporting the real procedure is not a confession of weakness; it is the difference between science and a sales pitch, and editors treat it that way.

Rule 23. State your sample size and justify it.

Do not report "n = 40" and leave the reader to wonder why 40. Explain how you arrived at the number — a power calculation, a resource limit, a convention in your field — and be honest about which. Underpowered studies that overclaim are a leading cause of rejection in the health and social sciences, and reviewers are trained to check. If your sample is small, own the limitation in the discussion rather than hoping no one counts.

Rule 24. Describe your controls and comparisons before your results.

A result means nothing without the baseline it beats or the control it differs from. Make clear what you compared against and why that comparison is fair: the right baseline, the right control group, the right null. A common reviewer objection is not that your result is wrong but that your comparison is weak — you beat an easy baseline, or your control does not isolate the effect you claim. Choose comparisons a skeptic would accept, and name them plainly.

Rule 25. Pre-register or timestamp your hypotheses where the field expects it.

In clinical, psychological, and increasingly many empirical fields, analyses decided after seeing the data are treated with suspicion. If your field supports pre-registration, use it, and distinguish clearly between confirmatory analyses you planned and exploratory ones you ran afterward. Labeling exploratory findings honestly costs you nothing and protects you from the charge of fishing for significance. An editor who sees this discipline trusts the rest of your paper more.

Rule 26. Make your data and code available, and say where.

Many international journals now require a data availability statement, and reviewers increasingly ask to see code. Deposit your data in a recognized repository, get a DOI, and cite it; put your code on a versioned, archived location, not a personal folder that will vanish. Even where it is not required, "data available on request" is read as "data not really available." Prepare the repository before submission, because assembling it later, under a revision deadline, is where things break.

Rule 27. Report the statistics your field expects, in full.

Learn the reporting conventions of your target journal and follow them exactly: effect sizes with confidence intervals, exact p-values rather than " $p < 0.05$," the specific test used and why it was appropriate. Many journals publish a statistical checklist; some assign a dedicated statistical reviewer. A p-value alone, with no effect size and no interval, now reads as incomplete in most quantitative fields. If statistics are not your strength, bring in a co-author who lives in them before submission, not after.

Rule 28. Show the data, not just the summary.

Where the field allows, plot individual data points, not only means and error bars — a scatter or a box plot reveals the spread and the outliers that a bar chart hides. Reviewers have grown wary of summaries that conceal how few points, or how skewed a distribution, sits underneath. Showing the raw shape of your data signals confidence and lets the reader judge the result for themselves. It also protects you: a reviewer who can see the data is less likely to imagine a problem that is not there.

Rule 29. Define every metric before you use it.

If you report accuracy, say accuracy of what, measured how. If you report a rate, give the numerator and the denominator. Ambiguous metrics are a frequent source of reviewer confusion and of results that cannot be compared across papers. Introduce each metric once, precisely, near its first use, and use the same term for the same thing throughout — do not drift between "error," "loss," and "deviation" for one quantity.

Rule 30. Keep a record of every analysis you ran.

Maintain a lab notebook or an analysis log that records what you tried, in what order, and what you found — including the analyses that did not work. When a reviewer asks "did you check for X," you want to answer from a record, not from memory nine months later. This log also protects you against accidental self-deception, where you remember the analysis that worked and forget the ten that did not. It is the cheapest insurance in science.

SECTION **Part 4 — Citations & Integrity**

Rule 31. Cite the work you built on, generously and accurately.

Every method, dataset, and idea you did not invent needs a citation to whoever did. Under-citing reads as ignorance of the field or, worse, as taking credit; both are quick rejections. Cite the original source, not a review that mentions it, and read what you cite closely enough to represent it correctly. Reviewers are often the very people whose work you should be citing, and they notice when they are missing.

Rule 32. Never cite a paper you have not read.

Copying a citation from another paper's reference list propagates errors and, eventually, embarrassment when the source does not say what you claimed.

Read at least the relevant section of everything you cite, and confirm the citation actually supports the sentence it is attached to. "Citation stacking" — a row of five references after a vague claim, none of them checked — is a habit reviewers punish. One accurate citation beats five decorative ones.

Rule 33. Quote and paraphrase within the rules, and check with software.

Reusing sentences from other papers, or from your own earlier work, without quotation and citation is plagiarism, including self-plagiarism. Journals run every submission through similarity-detection software, and a high overlap score triggers a desk rejection or an integrity investigation before a human even reads the science. Paraphrase in your own words and cite the source, or quote it directly with marks. Run your own draft through a similarity checker before submitting so nothing surprises you.

Rule 34. Disclose every conflict of interest and funding source.

State who funded the work and any financial or personal interest that a reader might reasonably think influenced it. Non-disclosure discovered later can retract a paper and damage a career far more than the conflict itself would have. When unsure whether something counts, disclose it; editors would rather have too much information than too little. This is a line you never gain by crossing.

Rule 35. Do not manipulate images or data, even to clarify.

Adjusting brightness across a whole image may be acceptable; erasing a band, splicing lanes, or beautifying a plot is misconduct, and journals now run forensic image checks. The same applies to data: no dropping inconvenient points without disclosure, no rounding that flatters, no selective reporting of the runs that worked. What feels like tidying to a stressed author reads as fabrication to an integrity officer. When you clean anything, document exactly what you did and why.

Rule 36. Report negative and null results honestly.

If a hypothesis failed or an effect vanished, say so plainly rather than burying it or reframing the paper around whatever survived. Selective reporting distorts the literature and, when caught, destroys trust in everything else you wrote. A well-reported null result is publishable and valuable, and editors increasingly seek it out. The instinct to hide a disappointing finding is the instinct to avoid, every time.

Rule 37. Use AI writing tools within the journal's stated policy, and disclose.

Most international journals now have explicit rules: AI tools may assist with language but cannot be listed as authors, and their use often must be disclosed in the methods or acknowledgments. Never let a language model invent citations or generate results, and check every sentence it touches for claims you cannot personally defend. Read your target journal's AI policy before you use any such tool, because the rules differ and are changing. When in doubt, disclose the tool and how you used it.

Rule 38. Get written permission before reusing figures or text.

If you reproduce a figure, table, or long passage from another publication, you usually need the copyright holder's permission and a credit line, even for your own previously published work. Publishers can and do delay or pull papers over unlicensed reuse. Obtain permissions early — they can take weeks — and keep the confirmation. When in doubt, redraw the figure yourself from the underlying data and cite the source.

Rule 39. Keep your raw data for years, organized and findable.

Journals and institutions can ask for original data long after publication, sometimes to resolve a question about a single figure. Store raw files, analysis scripts, and a note on how they connect, in a location that will outlive your current laptop. The author who cannot produce their data when asked looks, from the outside, indistinguishable from one who fabricated it. Organize it now, while you still remember what each file means.

Rule 40. Treat correction as normal, not as failure.

If you find an error after publication, contact the journal and correct the record — most publish a correction without drama, and doing so protects your reputation rather than harming it. Scientists who correct their own mistakes are trusted more, not less. The dangerous path is hoping no one notices, because someone eventually does, and a hidden error discovered by others is far worse than an honest one you disclosed. Integrity is a practice, not a one-time gate at submission.

SECTION **Part 5 — Clarity & Language**

Rule 41. Write short sentences that carry one idea each.

A sentence over about 25 words usually hides a second sentence inside it. Split long sentences, cut the subordinate clauses that do not earn their place, and let each sentence make one move. This matters more, not less, when English is your second language: short, direct sentences are harder to get wrong and easier for an international reader to follow. Clarity is not simplicity of thought; it is generosity toward the reader.

Rule 42. Prefer the specific word and the active voice.

Write "we measured" rather than "measurements were undertaken," and "the drug lowered blood pressure by 12 mmHg" rather than "an effect on cardiovascular parameters was observed." The active voice names who did what, and specific numbers replace vague adjectives. Some methods sections use the passive by convention, which is fine, but do not hide behind it everywhere. Vague, hedged, passive prose is the house style of papers that have little to say.

Rule 43. Cut hedging and inflation to their honest level.

Two failures live at opposite ends. Over-hedging — "it might possibly be suggested that there could perhaps be a tendency" — buries your claim under qualifiers until the reader cannot tell what you believe. Over-claiming — "this proves," "for the first time ever," "a breakthrough" — invites a reviewer to prove you wrong. State exactly what your evidence supports, no more and no less, and let the result carry its own weight without adjectives.

Rule 44. Define every abbreviation once and then use it.

Spell out each term the first time, follow it with the abbreviation in parentheses, and use the abbreviation consistently thereafter. Do not introduce an abbreviation you use only twice; the reader has to remember it for no saving. A paper dense with undefined acronyms forces the reader to hunt backward, and a reader who is hunting is a reader who is annoyed. Keep a running list and check that the abstract, which stands alone, defines its own.

Rule 45. Have a fluent colleague or editor read it before submission.

If English is not your first language, a language pass is not optional — it is the difference between a reviewer engaging with your science and a reviewer struggling through your grammar. Ask a fluent colleague, use a professional editing service, or trade proofreading with a peer, but get another set of eyes on every sentence. Editors do desk-reject papers for language alone when the writing is hard enough to read, and they say so in the rejection. Fix the language before the science is judged, not after.

SECTION **Part 6 — Choosing the Journal**

Rule 46. Match the journal to the paper's real contribution, not your hopes.

Read the aims and scope of your target journal and ask honestly whether your paper is the kind of thing it publishes — the same topic, the same level of novelty, the same methods. Aiming three tiers above your result wastes months on a certain desk rejection; aiming far below undersells work that deserves a wider audience. Look at what the journal actually printed in the last year, not at its name or its impact factor. The right journal is the one whose recent papers your work would sit beside naturally.

Rule 47. Read the author guidelines twice and follow them exactly.

Author guidelines are a contract, and editors enforce them before they read your science. Note the word and figure limits, the required sections, the reference style, the structured-abstract format, the ethics and data statements, and the submission file types. A paper that ignores the guidelines — wrong length, missing statement, wrong reference format — signals carelessness and gets returned or desk-rejected without review. Make a checklist from the guidelines and tick every item before you submit.

Rule 48. Avoid predatory and low-quality journals deliberately.

If a journal emails you flattering invitations, promises review in 72 hours, charges a fee but shows no real editing, or is not indexed where your field's reputable journals are indexed, walk away. Publishing in a predatory venue can permanently mark your record and is not recognized for degrees, grants, or hiring in serious institutions. Check indexing in the databases your field trusts, look up the editorial board, and confirm the journal is listed in recognized directories. A paper in no journal is better than a paper in a fake one.

SECTION **Part 7 — Submission**

Rule 49. Write a cover letter that makes the editor's decision easy.

The cover letter is your one direct message to the editor, and its job is to answer, in three short paragraphs, why this paper fits this journal now. State the contribution in plain terms, say why it matters to the journal's readers, and confirm the work is original and not under review elsewhere. Suggest suitable reviewers if the journal invites it, and name anyone with a genuine conflict who should be excluded. Address it to the actual editor, spell their name correctly, and keep it to one page.

Rule 50. Run the full submission checklist before you press submit.

The final hour is where good papers pick up avoidable wounds. Confirm the manuscript matches the word and figure limits, the references are in the required style with no broken entries, every figure is cited in order and uploaded at the required resolution, the ethics, funding, data, and author-contribution statements are present, and the file is anonymized if the journal uses blind review. Check that the submitting author's details, the ORCID iDs, and the co-author list are all correct. Then read the paper once more, start to finish, out loud if you can, before you send it into the world.

SECTION Closing Note

You have reached the end of the rules, which means you now know more about publishing than most first-time authors learn until their third rejection. Use that knowledge lightly. The rules are a scaffold, not a cage; every experienced author breaks some of them on purpose, but they break them knowing what they are trading away. Learn the rules first, then earn the right to bend them.

A few things worth remembering when the process gets hard. Rejection is the normal state of a paper, not a judgment on you — even the strongest researchers are rejected constantly, and the difference between them and everyone else is that they revise and resubmit rather than give up. Read every decision letter for what it teaches, wait a day before you reply so the sting fades, and answer reviewers as colleagues who are, on their better days, trying to make your paper stronger. Reviewer 2 is not your enemy; Reviewer 2 is a busy, unpaid expert who found a real problem and phrased it badly.

Remember also that publishing is a skill that compounds. Your second paper will be faster than your first, your fifth faster than your second, because the invisible craft becomes visible and then becomes habit. The hours you spend now learning to write a clean methods section, to read author guidelines closely, to answer a reviewer without defensiveness — those hours pay you back for the rest of your career. Nothing you learn here is wasted on a single paper.

And keep some perspective about what you are doing. You are adding a small, honest, permanent piece to the record of what humans know. That is worth doing carefully, worth doing with integrity, and worth doing even when the process is slow and the reviewers are harsh and the language is not your first. The world has more room for careful work than it sometimes seems from inside a rejection letter.

Write the one sentence your paper proves. Then go prove it.

SECTION **About Waraq**

Waraq reviews your manuscript against your target journal's own rules — its author guidelines, formatting requirements, reference style, and structural expectations — and returns real Microsoft Word tracked changes you can accept or reject one by one. Every change is cited to the specific rule or guideline it comes from, so you always know why an edit was suggested and can defend it to a co-author or an editor. It is the pre-submission read you wish a senior colleague had time to give you, delivered in the format you already work in. Send us the paper before you send it to the journal.