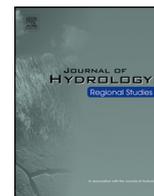


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Journal of Hydrology: Regional Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ejrh

Editorial – Why it is a blessing to be rejected: improving science with quality publications



Seven years ago, Elsevier's Journal of Hydrology: Regional Studies (EJRH) started its life as a companion title to the highly-respected Journal of Hydrology. EJRH publishes original research papers enhancing the science of hydrology and aiming at region-specific problems, past and future conditions, analysis, review and solutions. The journal particularly welcomes research papers that deliver new insights into region-specific hydrological processes and responses to changing conditions, as well as contributions that incorporate interdisciplinarity and translational science. This year EJRH has received its first journal impact factor (JIF) on the Web of Science Journal Citation Reports™ (JCR). With the new JIF (3.645) the journal ranks in 13th position (out of 94) in the "Water Resources" category, an outstanding achievement for a new journal! However, the Editors want to remind authors and readers that it is important to recognize that JIF is just one metric, with its limitations and the risks of over-reliance on such an index (e.g. [Berenbaum, 2019](#)). Therefore, a "bag of metrics" should be used to assess the performance of scientific journals, with each metric focused on different dimensions of scientific impact, and the success of the journal should not be confused with that of individual papers published within. EJRH web page contains a number of complementary metrics (CiteScore, SNIP, SCImago, JIF) that corroborate the high standing of the journal.

The Editors-in-Chief and staff of EJRH follow a thorough screening process of new manuscripts to assess if they are of sufficient high quality for this international scientific journal. Only submissions deemed to have sufficient initial quality in structure and content are sent out for review. In 2019 the Editors rejected almost 70 % of all submitted manuscripts (40 % by desk-rejection). In all cases, the Editors are committed to providing constructive comments to the authors. This type of screening not only improves the journal's reviewer experience and ultimately the quality of the published papers, but also streamlines the review process. The Editors also believe that this approach helps to address the important issue of public "trust in science" discussed later in the Outlook section.

In order to clarify why we reject manuscripts, the Editors present a few of the common issues identified during the screening process that prevent manuscripts from moving forward in the review process. We hope that these comments are useful to prospective authors, and that they ensure the high quality of the papers published in EJRH. We encourage potential authors to read and study the insights that can be drawn from being rejected.

Common reasons for desk rejection by EJRH

a) Lack of, or poorly framed, innovation

The paper will have little chance to be successful in a full review process. The science of the paper is not innovative enough to warrant publication for an international readership of this journal. The manuscript, supported by a thorough and relevant literature review, must clearly identify the novelty of the work presented. We recommend that an explicit "statement of novelty" is included at the end of the introduction section, and when relevant, mention it also in the abstract and conclusions of the paper. The Editors suggest that prospective authors (particularly those who are new to publishing) study very carefully other papers published in this journal to get a better feeling for what is the minimum quality required to be successful.

b) Plagiarism and duplication

As a top journal in its field, EJRH reserves the "right to first publication". Prior publication of part of the work from the authors or plagiarised from others is not acceptable. EJRH employs the industry leader iThenticate software that automatically provides the Editors with a Plagiarism and Duplication score (% of the text from other sources) identified from present and archived materials in the internet. During the screening process the Editors evaluate carefully the score and the duplicated parts of the text, considering

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also the impact of the overlapping with other journals on the new contributions identified in the manuscript. Typically, manuscripts with greater than 20 % duplication, particularly from a small number of sources, are returned to the authors. When the duplicated text is plagiarized in large quantity from other sources this can be considered as a violation of scientific publishing ethics, and the Editors may report it to Elsevier for further action. The same applies if authors attempt to offer material for publication that is very similar to work that they have already published elsewhere.

c) Out of scope – not hydrology, not regional

The paper is out-of-scope for the journal, in essence it is not a 'hydrology' paper. Please carefully review the scope and topics in the journal web page.

In addition, while the manuscript might deal with a hydrological topic, it does not meet the 'regional' scope of the journal. Rather, it deals with a local analysis without justification for regional representativity. If the data and analysis are based on a few sites it is critical to establish how the information gathered there is representative and scalable at the regional level. In these cases, we suggest that you find a more appropriate journal to submit your manuscript to.

d) Does not meet the required journal format

The manuscript fails to meet one or more of the specific formatting requirements for this journal. Please review carefully the required journal guidelines (<https://www.elsevier.com/journals/journal-of-hydrology-regional-studies/2214-5818/guide-for-authors>). In particular, please observe the specific structure of the abstract required by the journal with three distinct sections (Study Region, Study Focus, New Hydrological Insights for the Region), the number and length of Highlights, numbered double-line spacing and the use of author names and dates (not numbers) for literature citations within the text. See also below comments about the suggested manuscript structure. Authors are expected to become acquainted with the journal requirements. Required formatting is screened by EJRH staff as part of the submission process and at times authors are asked to resubmit the package when there are major violations. While minor formatting violations are not typically a cause for desk rejection, they can compound with other issues during the initial Editor evaluation as they might uncover a lack of care in the preparation of the work. Please check your manuscript carefully in view of the journal requirements before submitting.

e) Substandard or incorrect manuscript organization for a scientific contribution

The manuscript does not follow the recommended structure for a scientific article. To conform with the scientific format required by the journal, manuscripts should include all the specific sections typical of a research presentation (Introduction, Materials and Methods, Results and Discussion, Conclusions). Further, for an impactful scientific manuscript, the Editors recommend following the “diábolo” outline (Fig. 1). As with the ancient toy, the authors must juggle the “diábolo” to construct a compelling and logical story around their work. Notice how the paper must present a general problem first and then a specific problem within, where research gaps are identified through a careful literature review. Research questions or hypothesis about the gap(s) that the work addresses must be explicitly posed, and the specific objectives of the work must be closely aligned to them. Importantly, the regional study and methods must be properly justified to address the specific objectives. Notice how in the second part the paper expands again, where the results and discussion must be tied back to answering the initial research questions or hypothesis, the specific problem and finally the larger general problem (broader impacts).

The following content is recommended for each of the research manuscript sections:

- Introduction: provide a thorough literature review on the topic, starting from the “General” to the “Specific” problem and identifying clearly the gap in current knowledge that the manuscript addresses. Formulate explicitly your research questions/or hypothesis and the novelty of your work. In the last paragraph state clearly the specific paper objectives.
- Materials and Methods: present the methods with sufficient detail and appropriate references. Typically, this should include also a description of the study area. The study representativity for the specific and general problem must be clearly stated. Methods should be justified and aligned directly with the specific objectives of the paper.
- Results: with the help of high-quality Figures and Tables highlight the most important results related to the original objectives, and in particular the key points that will be used in the Discussion. Do not repeat in the text what is clear in the Figures or Tables but rather highlight or synthesize.
- Discussion: in the context of previous work (with references) discuss how your results corroborate, contradict or provide novel knowledge. Focus the discussion on responding to the original objectives and identify limitations of the work and future research.
- Conclusions: we recommend addressing in at least three separate and brief paragraphs the following: i) main findings and novelty of the paper; ii) limitations of this work and future research; iii) broader impacts (what others in the field or different fields can do with the findings presented in this work).
- Acknowledgements. Include funding sources and any other significant means contributed by other individuals or institutions that are not coauthors of the work.
- Appendix and or Supplementary Materials. Please see comments below on the importance of providing supporting materials for the work presented.

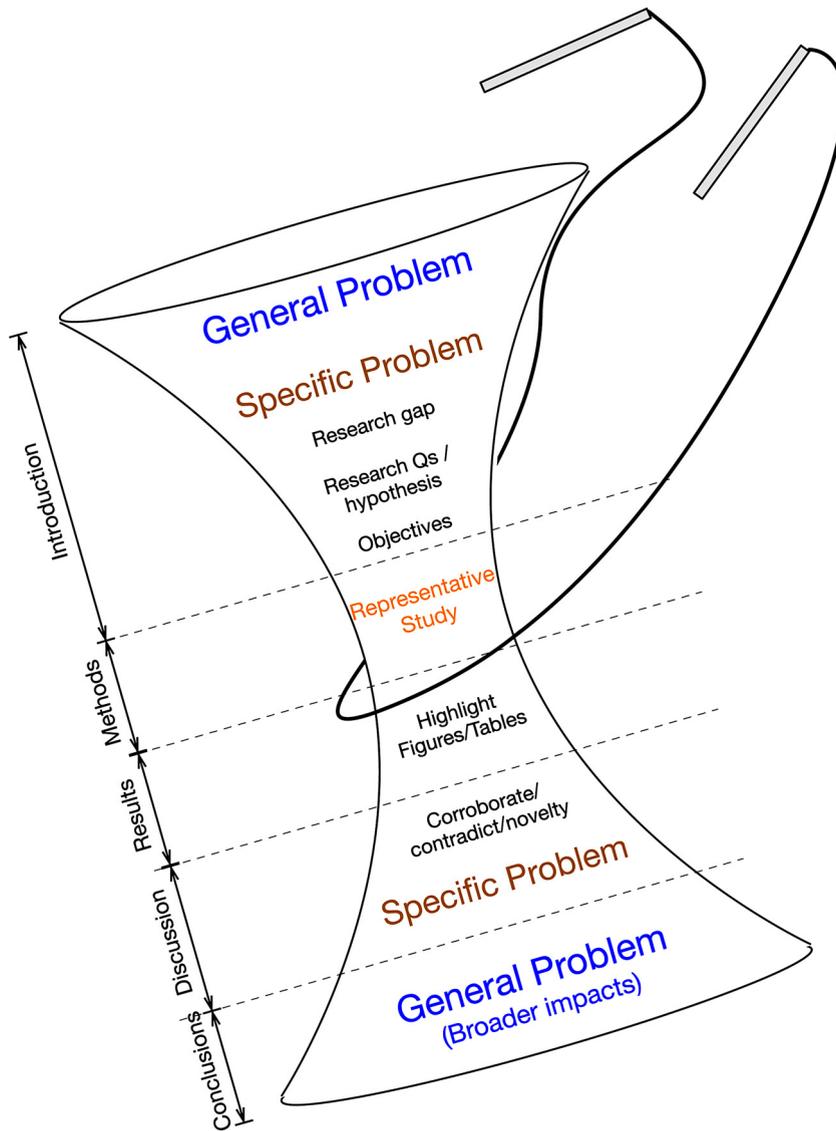


Fig. 1. The “diábolo” (ancient toy). It represents the structure of a good paper: “general problem → specific problem → representative study → specific results → general results (broader impacts)”.

In addition, in order to address the current pressing issues of reproducibility and transparency in science, the Editors recommend that the data and full methods (computer scripts and or code) be made publicly available. The authors must ask themselves the following question: would they or others be able to reproduce the work presented with the tools and data provided with the manuscript? If the answer is no, please prepare the needed materials as part of your submission. The authors should consider that, in addition to the issue of ethical concerns about science reproducibility, published papers that contain tools and data generally receive increased citations over the life of the article!

Elsevier offers *Data in Brief* as a separate publication to submit your data during the initial submission process that is automatically referred to in the main manuscript. Other solutions are also accepted by EJRH.

f) Insufficient period of analysis to support the intent of the manuscript.

The time period included in the analysis is not representative and insufficient to capture the important (seasonal, annual, long-term) dynamics of the investigated region. There is no clear justification of why these data are representative of the temporal variability in the region. Compare the data period with the long-term climate in the area. Is this a normal, dry/wet year? Is it representative of land use and other drivers? Why would the conclusions from this short period be relevant to the long-term behaviour of this system?

g) Poor methods to support the intent of the manuscript

The Methods section is insufficient to support the intended objectives of the manuscript. The methods are either too simplistic, lack sufficient details, or are not well justified in the context of other established or competing approaches. To give an example, our journal receives many manuscripts dealing with climate change impact analysis. Manuscripts that involve only one or few climate models and do not apply downscaling for impact analysis at scales finer than the climate model resolution, or impact analysis on extremes based on mean seasonal climate changes, are not acceptable.

In other cases, the manuscript is a straightforward application of established protocols or methods to a new location, without identifying a novel and clear research question or hypothesis for the study. The straightforward application of existing tools to a new location or setting, without new hydrological insights is not sufficiently novel for this journal. In the research context, a data analysis or modelling tool must be justified and judiciously selected to address specific research objectives.

h) Computer modelling: Simple model application without a research objective, or use of unverified model

The paper deals with the application of an existing computer model to a new location, without identifying a novel and clear research question or hypothesis for the study. The straightforward application of a tool (model) to a new location or setting, is not in itself of sufficient novelty for this journal. In the research context, a computer model is a method, and as with any research method it must be justified and judiciously selected among other alternatives to address the specific research objectives. Further, the simulation results must be discussed to address specifically the research objectives of the paper and not just the goodness-of-fit of the model in the specific setting.

Sometimes, the issue is that the model used in the manuscript is insufficiently supported. Since models can never be ‘verified’ or ‘validated’ in the absolute sense, but only ‘confirmed’ or ‘corroborated’ for particular applications (Oreskes et al., 1994), to arrive at meaningful and consequential simulation results, it is critical that the model is rigorously calibrated and corroborated with independent data sets following best practices. Without providing this information it is not possible to trust the model results in the presented context.

i) Language – need for English technical editing

The use of English vocabulary and grammar is at times poor and insufficient for publication in a high-tier international journal like EJRH. The manuscript must be carefully edited by a native English technical editor. Elsevier and other organizations offer such services and the authors are encouraged to engage them when needed to ensure that language is not detrimental to an otherwise interesting scientific work.

Outlook

With the above-described reasons for desk review by the editors, we encourage authors to strive for submitting high quality papers that present critical science; avoid plagiarism or repackaging of their own work with minimal extension; and avoid publishing work prematurely. This goes with a kind word of advice to young and inexperienced authors: with several small mistakes (in language, format, layout, structure, etc.) the manuscript will be less attractive to reviewers, who more likely might recommend rejection rather than a major revision. Consider the reviewer ‘annoyance’ meter! - once it goes past a certain point even small additional problems in either the science or presentation are likely to end up in failure or rejection.

As stated before, the main goal of our journal is to publish papers that provide novel hydrological insights and significant advances of the regional hydrological science. We also welcome review papers that link and synthesize the outcomes of different regional case studies of the same hydrological problem, and develop ideas, theories and further research emerging from, but not pertaining specifically, to these studies. The new findings should be supported by datasets representative for the regional conditions and that account for the long-term natural variability, sound data analysis, and/or confirmed models. With that policy, we aim to promote excellence in science and a healthy debate between authors, reviewers and editors. At the same time, we are open to be critically reviewed such that we can improve and correct our review standards and procedure. Hence, we encourage constructive comments and suggestions of authors and reviewers. Oreskes (2019) in discussing ‘Should we trust science?’ argued that “The key point is that the basis for our trust is not in scientists – as wise or upright individuals – but in science as a social process that rigorously vets claims.” Others (Benessia et al., 2016) have identified this problem as “worrying fault-lines” and a “crisis in science” that can limit application of current science for policy. Being rigorous in the quality of the science of your publication is what we ask you, being rigorous in the review is what we, editors and reviewers, aim for. Maintaining the scientific trust is what we continue to strive for!

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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