Choosing a strong research question and producing an excellent paper: what I wish I knew years earlier

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Writing an effective and interesting manuscript is as essential to the process of getting your work published as is performing the research itself. However, many authors lessen their chances of creating a great paper by failing to approach the process of manuscript preparation in a sufficiently well thought-out manner. As the editor-in-chief of The FEBS Journal (as well as an active research group leader), I see numerous manuscripts, on a weekly basis, which contain very basic flaws that seriously undermine the impact and presentation of the science within. It is also surprising how frequently authors expect editors and referees to search for the message contained within their paper, rather than making this explicit from the title and abstract. Here, I will discuss some of the 'dos' and 'don'ts' of manuscript preparation and the process of editorial evaluation of scientific manuscripts. I will also suggest an approach to manuscript preparation that I use in my own research, which helps to produce more highly 'polished' research papers and increase the chance of getting your work published in a relatively painless manner.