

## Getting published a practical guide- Part II

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## **Abstract**

This second paper aims to guide you on how to organise the structure and content of a manuscript according to a journal's guidelines. A strong manuscript is one written in an accessible, informative, stimulating and engaging style; to achieve this planning has to be developed in stages, underpinned by periods of regular writing and editing activities. Authorship order, approaches to managing time, promoting relevance and interest to the readership, consistency in writing style, and dealing with peer-review feedback are also discussed in this paper and framed around the themes of 'Writing the manuscript' and performing 'quality control activities'.

## Writing the manuscript

Having drawn on your expertise on the topic, agreed the focus of the paper, clarified the potential readership, defined the key messages you will impart and understood the house-style of the target journal, you should be ready to write your paper.

- **How is authorship determined?**

Guidelines on publication ethics aim to promote transparency and integrity and confidence in scientific writing and are clear that the lead author is the person who conceived and designed the project, analysed and interpreted data and drafted the first version of the manuscript. Co-authors are individuals who have contributed to a variety of activities including drafting content, making improvements and approving the final manuscript. Authors and co-authors are also required to proof-read for accuracy and clarity. To avoid conflicts and disputes, which can lead to delays, it is important to establish authorship order when you start writing, and to have this formally agreed by everyone (Albarran and Pontin 2008, Graf *et al* 2007). This should follow the conventions of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE 2017) rather than be based on seniority of team members or institutional traditions.

As highlighted in Table 1, some journals may require that lead authors detail the contribution of each co-author (as a percentage), alongside a declaration that there are no conflicts of interest and the manuscript has not been simultaneously submitted to another journal. Authors and co-authors are ultimately the guarantors for the whole content and, as such, responsible and accountable if there is any evidence of fabrication, falsification or plagiarism.

- **How do I manage my time for writing productively?**

Finding a doable and realistic work plan that can be embedded as part of regular activities is more likely to lead to success. Viewing the overall writing task as a project plan, where core writing activities are reduced to bite-size chunks with a deadline against each, can translate the process of completing the manuscript into a realistic and manageable aim and minimise anxiety. Table 2 provides an example of a 12-week writing schedule (Belcher 2009) enabling

a manuscript to be developed incrementally with specific focused activities to be completed on a weekly basis. Clearly, knowing what you plan to write about will depend on understanding the issues, background reading and the points you wish to convey in a particular section.

Productivity and maximising precious time available can also be achieved by writing not more than 500 words at a time, perhaps with aim of completing a specific section (Holland and Watson 2012). Dedicated writing activity encourages focused thinking; fluency and confidence can be enhanced by doing this on a regular basis. Another technique involves writing for up to 20 minutes and stopping to a pre-set alarm. Once the alarm has gone off, stop for a five minute break and then reset the alarm for another 20 minutes and repeat for three to four cycles, this is a practice adopted from the 'Pomodoro technique' (Cirillo 2006). Both these approaches encourage the concentration of short bursts of writing which promotes the clarity, coherence and accessibility of your work. Finally, after each episode of writing, leave yourself instructions on what aspects you will deal with during the next scheduled period, this promotes continuity of thinking and reminds you of writing tasks to be completed. It is a truism that the more you read, the better you develop your writing voice, and the more you write, the more competent and effective you become in writing. Making writing part of your regular day, regardless of what this involves, does promote confidence. Neal-Boylan (2016) suggests that for novice authors, collaborating with seasoned colleagues and allocating specific sections within the team can also help with maximising expertise and resources.

- **How do I plan the structure and focus writing the content**

Planning an outline structure or using a mind-map is a helpful way to start organising your ideas and making decisions about the balance and shape of the manuscript, as well as clarifying how the originality will be demonstrated. It is important to spend time reflecting on this to ensure that the presentation of ideas and arguments is engaging, focused, informative and convincing, that relevance to the readership self-evident and clear. Achieving an appropriate balance of content is important; assigning a rough word count for each section encourages a more concise, succinct and organised approach to communicating information. A manuscript which over-states the problem under

investigation and has a long critique of existing literature, but is accompanied by a short discussion is likely to compromise the overall balance and be rejected (Genaro 2016, Grove 2016). Whether your manuscript is a qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods study or a systematic review of the literature, the author guidelines of most journals will provide comprehensive advice on the use of conventional headings and reporting methods (see Table 1). Some journals will also give guidance on how to structure other types of manuscripts for example case studies, audits and reflective pieces.

Planning the possible headings of your manuscript (see table 3, left hand column) can aid in determining areas that must be addressed and for developing coherence and logical flow. As a way to start sketching your ideas use the headings in Table 3, and write two or three sentences for each to help you outline and decide on content. Accessing previous papers from the target journal will you an indication of the preferred style. The content needs to engage with the readership through its relevance, accessibility and the way discussion builds up into a rational, intelligent and articulate argument. The right hand column provides a description of items that might be included, depending on the type of paper being developed, this is particularly relevant if this includes reporting of a service improvement, an audit of practice, or a piece of research. The suggestions are offered as guidance and as pointers to begin thinking about what you want to say, and how you will achieve this to promote interest.

- Writing style

There is a notion among those new to writing that they need 'to develop an academic voice or style' to get successfully published. The reality is that good writing is clear, simple, accessible, interesting, engaging and stimulating. Make the topic of discussion relevant and significant to your readers and hook their interest by explaining the nature of the problem. Present evidence to show the scale and size of those affected and stress gaps in knowledge, skills and practice. Draw on current and international sources to show that the subject is contemporary and has significance beyond the United Kingdom. This might be particularly important if you are seeking to publish in an international or European journal. Overall, as Belcher (2009) highlights, authors must demonstrate intellectual development, rigour and critical reasoning in the analysis of sources and data and in communicating the implications

for readers. Keeping a notebook with thoughts and ideas as you are planning and writing can be useful for storing points for discussion and analytical insights.

The process of reading will often provoke an emotional response in your reader (Scholes and Albarran 2014) and therefore it is important that in organising your material that it should flow well, be logical, inform, and is sense making. If your aim or purpose is unclear or the writing appears unimaginative, unfocused and pretentious this will dishearten your intended readership. As outlined in part I, undertaking preparatory work, clarity of purpose, a defined target audience, journal and take-away message are pivotal to determining the style and sophistication of language. Importantly, consistency with vocabulary choice is advised, this means that if using the term 'nurse' or 'patient' apply these throughout and do not use 'healthcare staff', 'front-line workers' and either 'service users' or 'clients' interchangeably. Likewise, be mindful to steer clear of jargon and colloquialisms and avoid labelling patients by their condition and with outdated terms such 'geriatric patients' or 'bed-blockers'. Explaining abbreviations and specific terms is also relevant; although worldwide online access to journals is common, terms like NICE (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence), 'NHS Trusts' and 'Band 6 nurse' will mean very little to professionals outside the UK (Albarran and Pontin 2008). Attending to these minor issues will make your paper more accessible for a wider audience. Sub-headings can be invaluable in sign-posting the introduction of new sections and should be used in a balanced way (and in keeping with the journal's style guidance). Keeping sentences short and using punctuation appropriately is an effective way to communicate, ensuring readers remain interested as you persuasively construct and build your ideas and arguments.

## **Quality Control activity**

Once the first draft is complete essential quality control checks must be performed. Going through your manuscript carefully and reading it out-loud is valuable in identifying poor grammar, punctuation, passages of repetition and inelegant phraseology (Albarran and Pontin 2008). Editing, revising, refining and reducing irrelevant material or badly written text are important quality control processes; they enhance accessibility, readability and clarity, and ensure that the content is both congruent with the journals' aspirations and readership needs. If you are in a team, all co-authors must contribute to these processes

including improvements in relation to content, accuracy and the writing style of the draft. Their role as authors in this activity is essential. It is also good practice to invite a potential end-user who may be a member of the journal's target audience to review your work; getting their perspective may illuminate short-comings in terms of application of theory or in addressing the needs of the readership. Finally, you may wish to engage the services of experts - academics, researchers, clinicians or managers - and seek their input on clarity of meaning, accuracy of data or interpretation of theory, and the extent to which the manuscript presents a coherent and informed contribution.

Once these processes have been completed, Webb (2007) and Genaro (2016) recommend ensuring that the manuscript is formatted according to the journal's guidelines. This will involve attending to clarity in the title, choosing key terms and words that reflect the essence of your manuscript, checking that the abstract and main body follow recommended house-style, the referencing style is congruent with the journal's guidance, and that the layout and labelling of tables and figures conform to the advice provided. Evidence of data fabrication, falsification and plagiarism are examples professional misconduct, it is therefore important to that the integrity of the content stands up to peer-review scrutiny. These finishing touches are vital to assuring that your manuscript does not get rejected for failing to comply or invited to resubmit because the clinical summary, or relevance to practice were omitted.

### **How do I submit and what happens next?**

Once you have conducted the final checks, collected professional qualifications, job titles and contact details of all co-authors, you will need to register and create an account with the target journal. This process will vary slightly for different journals, but will usually begin by uploading the title of the manuscript and details of all authors. Some journals may require the abstract, key terms/words, main body, references, figures and tables, and letter to the editor as separate items. In other instances, you may be required to copy and paste the abstract, main body and other elements into dedicated boxes. When all key information has been uploaded, a PDF file will be created with a reference number which will be assigned to your manuscript. You will need this for future correspondence and to track the progress of your manuscript. This version of your manuscript will have usually all personal

details of the author(s) removed to facilitate blind-peer-review, but this varies from journal to journal. All co-authors may receive an email with the reference number of the manuscript.

On receiving the manuscript, a preliminary review will be conducted by the editor(s) and based on the content two or more subject and/or methodology experts in the subject area will be appointed to assess the quality of your manuscript according to the journal's criteria. Where it is evident that the submission does not conform to journal's guidelines or if the content does not align with its scope and aims, it will be declined immediately.

Reviewers will be given a period of six to eight weeks to assess the merits of your manuscript, in terms of whether it offers a novel contribution, is well developed, informative, balanced, current and relevant and the extent to which it relates to the journal's aims and audience. Based on their assessment, reviewers will advise the editor as follows:

- Accept the paper without any changes
- Minor changes are necessary
- Major changes are necessary
- The paper is unsuitable for many reasons and should be rejected.

Written feedback will be provided in the case of minor and major changes and if rejection is the final decision. An outcome to resubmit for either minor or major changes should be viewed as positive and, although the feedback may appear daunting at first sight, do not be discouraged. The feedback is intended to strengthen the overall quality of the manuscript and comments are there to guide you to make specific aspects succinct, unambiguous and accurate.

For more objective appreciation of the feedback, return to it after a short break. List all the points raised and provide an explanation on how you have addressed these, referencing the page number in the text; this for example this might include either adding references, condensing and clarifying a paragraph, toning down the strength of the recommendations or performing further statistical analysis on the data. You may be instructed to highlight changes made within the revised manuscript in red or by using 'track changes' in Microsoft



Word. Avoid delaying responding to reviewers' comments as, over time, enthusiasm and momentum may decline making revisions more onerous in terms of effort. Engage co-authors or seek experienced colleagues in supporting you with this activity.

An outcome of 'accept' will result in email correspondence from the publishers outlining the next stages, including submitting a copyright form which must be completed and returned. In due course you will receive the proof of your paper formatted in the journal's house style; there may be some minor amendments such as alterations by the copy editor to improve the grammar, but there may also be some questions about content or referencing which need correcting. Once you have addressed the queries and returned the proof, you will receive an electronic version which will also be available on the journal's web-pages. At this stage, the online version can be cited by using the unique reference DOI, but it will not have an issue or volume; this will happen once it appears in print. In the event that your manuscript is declined, do not give up, make the necessary changes based on feedback received, re-format if necessary, and submit to your second choice journal (Clark and Thompson 2016).

## **Conclusion**

This series of two papers has provided an introduction on how to plan and develop a writing strategy that will lead to publication in a target journal. The discussion has focused on three key stages including undertaking preparatory background work, the writing phase and conducting quality control activities. Within each stage, practical tips and guidance have been provided to enable novice authors increase their confidence and skills in developing a realistic, sustainable and achievable writing project plan, with the aim of delivering a successful outcome of being published.

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