

Editorial

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Writing for Scientific and Medical Journals - Mastering the Art

Writing a scientific or medical article after successful completion of study can often be a difficult task for some researchers. It is imperative that their findings are conveyed to readers at large in the best precise and effective manner. Thus, as a writer, if your article is disorganized or unclear, be assured that most readers will not read it. If you wish to succeed in publishing in a journal, you should take great pains to make the writing clear. The more effort you put into your writing, the easier is the reading.

Firstly, assemble your thoughts about the aim of your research, all previously published body of work in the related subject and your results. If you have these together then half your battle is won. Now, it is only the style of your writing that matters. Remember, clarity in your writing is paramount. One helpful hint to bear in mind is this: we speak more sequentially compared to when we write. So, if you are stuck with the syntax of a sentence, speak it out, write it out, and then put in the right words.

Journals have subheadings to guide authors to write in an orderly fashion. Other than that, authors can also keep in mind these six questions: what, why, when, how, where and who. If you have addressed these six questions in your article, then you would have covered most aspects of your topic.

Write a complete first draft in the format of the journal that you wish to send to.¹ Read thoroughly the 'Instructions to Authors' and look carefully at a published article (same genre) in that journal, to see the preferred style. It is imperative that you do this at the onset as journals are sticky on the format; English (British/American), number of figures, format of references etc. Following to the format increases the chances of your submission being accepted. Leave your first draft aside for a few days. Review and make changes as necessary. Review and keep improving.

Ask a fellow author to read and incorporate suggestions, additions, deletion etc. Others spot at a glance our simple errors. It is better for you to be 'brutal' at this stage of writing, rather than see passages of your article being expunged by reviewers/editors later, or worse the article being rejected. A tip. Whilst writing, keep a small notebook handy to jot down ideas. Nice ideas and sentences come to us when we least expect.

When writing, have a dictionary and thesaurus open. Keep in mind the type of reader you are targeting as this will help you choose the right words. Always be simple avoiding pomposity. Shorter sentences are usually better. Repeat a word if that is the appropriate one. You are not writing a work of literature. In medical articles we avoid emotive words like horrendous injury (massive), phenomenon (important), gentleman (male) etc. Like fashion, some words, come into vogue and are replaced by others or eventually become archaic. Currently some words doing the rounds are challenging (difficult), high index of suspicion (aware), literature (reports, publications) and as well as (also). Try to replace these with another appropriate word.

It is better to write the easiest part of your article first (methodology, results), as seeing some words completed helps. Use the past tense (reported speech) as you have completed your study. At this point, plan how best to present your results as images tables, graphs, charts. Avoid including raw data in tables. Do not repeat results that is already shown in tables in the text but include important findings and interpretations.

Abstracts should contain the gist of your paper. You must include results, interpretations, and conclusions in the abstract. This is because many non-expert readers will only read your abstract (or in index). Only those in your specialised field will read details. In your conclusion reply to the aim, the novelty of your finding(s) and offer

suggestions for future research. State the limitations of your study. Ensure that the abstract, introduction, and conclusions all touch the same theme. If you claim to be the first to report of a particular finding, do a thorough search of the literature. Title should be done last, and it doesn't have to read sensational!

A word about plagiarism. Try not to lift (cut paste) sentences from other publications. Pick the key ideas and rewrite them. Naturally, some phrases and words cannot be avoided.

Problems in tenses (for non-English writers) occur usually in the introduction discussion and conclusion. A general guide is to use the past tense when reporting completed work, and present tense at other times. Use direct speech (used often in early research reports) to make writing brief and clear: we were able to show that..... our findings show.... our patient... etc. Be clear what the word the (definite article) refers to. To improve your written English, read closely well written articles, and write more.

Clinical postgraduate dissertations (and many others) nowadays require students to write a paper for journals as a requirement for graduating. Be especially mindful when converting research proposals, thesis, dissertations into journal articles.

A last word. Always write with keeping your readers in mind. After all it is for them to read. Also, give the reviewers/editors less or no opportunity to reject your article.

REFERENCE

1. Lekhraj Rampal, Liew Boon Seng, Pakeer Oothuman, Philip Rajan, Sherina Mohd Sidik, Victor Chee Wai and Baharudin Abdullah. From The MJM Editor's Desk: Common errors authors make in submission to the Medical Journal of Malaysia. Vpl.75:323-324.

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