Article

Writing academic papers: a guide for prospective authors

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As a journal Editor, I examine many papers and work alongside authors to maximize the likelihood of publication. During the course of this activity, several issues concerning writing for publication have emerged. In this article, I will use these experiences to help novice writers to prepare their work for publication. I will also draw on my personal experience as an author of academic and popular papers and as a book author and editor. If you find the article useful, please do distribute it freely amongst colleagues.

Is it possible for me to write?

Many novice writers are daunted by the idea of writing, probably owing to unfamiliarity and unrealistic perceptions about the supposed difficulty of the task. In this article, I will look at some specific technical issues in writing for publication and also examine the process of submission to and review by an academic journal. However, it is worth addressing these two general issues first.

Writing is not as unfamiliar as might be supposed. At a practical level, it is something we do every day in our social and work lives. We write clinical notes and reports, shopping lists, telephone numbers and cheques. Superficially, all this seems far removed from the business of writing for a journal, but it is worth considering two aspects of informal writing which prepare us for article writing.

Since we write all the time, it is obvious that we possess the basic skill required – putting words next to each other in order to communicate. We do not have to learn a new skill in order to be able to write for publication, we simply have to translate the skill we already possess into a different context. More importantly, through informal writing we demonstrate an awareness that different aims and settings require different styles, and that we are able to adapt to those different aims and settings. We do not, for example, write a thank-you note to a friend in the same style that we write a ward report or a letter to our bank or building society. Thus, we demonstrate that we have the skill to adapt. Writing for publication is simply a further and, in many ways, minor adaptation.

Similarly, writing for publication is not as difficult as is commonly supposed, and the rewards are great. Unfamiliarity certainly contributes to the supposition that writing is difficult, and I hope I have offered some evidence in the previous paragraph that such unfamiliarity is more illusory than real. Over and above this, reading the skilled writings of experts and 'big names' in the literature may create the impression that writing for publication is the exclusive preserve of eminent academics constantly engaged in transmitting their original research and ideas to the masses. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Like many other things, writing and publishing are practice effect skills – the more you do them the better you get at them. The ability of established academics to generate scores or even hundreds of books, book chapters and papers is at least as much evidence of this practice effect as it is of the originality of their ideas. Since writing is a practice effect activity, it is something you too can practise and acquire proficiency in.

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In terms of rewards, some of these are intangible. Writing helps us to organize our own thoughts about a particular topic. In a sense, publishing an article is drawing a line under our views on a given issue at a given time. For example, in this article, I am setting down what I now think about how to write for publication. By writing it down, I make a definite statement of the current state of my thinking on this topic, and this helps me clarify that thinking. Writing is also potentially rewarding in the way that all communication is – through sharing our experiences with others. As with all such sharing, we get the benefit of the feedback of others, and may potentially learn from their experiences and insights. In academic and clinical life, this is helpful in advancing not only the individual, but also the discipline, and this in turn leads to the reward of feeling part of a group endeavour. There is, of course, always the possibility that others will disagree with us. First-time authors often fear others will find their view foolish. No doubt this is always a possibility, but this is no more so than if one expresses a particular view in conversation. In fact, writing is actually safer than face-to-face disagreement, since one is not exposed to the possibility of ridicule in the presence of others! More practically, such fears are very rarely proved true, and academics are generally very liberal in their acceptance of the work of others.

There are also more tangible rewards. The letter of acceptance, the arrival of the proofs of the paper, the arrival of the complimentary copies of the journal or the reprints, the correspondence, the requests for reprints, the congratulations of colleagues, even (occasionally) money! All these gifts, and more, are the lot of the published author, however modest the paper. They may seem at once unlikely and trivial, but anything which keeps us writing, and thus contributing, is valuable. More than this, every author I have spoken with, regardless of how well established, not only remembers how they felt when their first paper was published, but reports a similar thrill whenever a paper is accepted for publication. If you want to communicate your work, can you imagine not being delighted when you have successfully done so? All these small tangible rewards are just different aspects of that sense of fulfillment.

What does it mean to be a writer?

Having convinced you that it is possible to write for publication, let me offer you two axioms from the novelist John Braine (1974): '. . . a writer is someone who writes; a writer is someone who counts words.' These seemingly trivial statements have helped me enormously in my own writing. A writer is someone who writes, rather than someone who thinks, talks, wonders about writing and has countless ideas and studies floating around in her head or lying in a desk drawer. Many people find the task of writing immense in scale, but the best way to address this is to *at least begin*. A writer is someone who counts words for much the same reason. Counting words focuses our minds on the task of writing, which is a simple one – to communicate. In order to communicate we must begin and continue, and counting words is the most profound evidence possible that we are succeeding in so doing.

The practice of writing

Although I have noted that we all possess the basic building blocks of writing, this section will concentrate on how to translate these into effective writing for publication. There will be no attempt to deal in detail with style, grammar and so on. There are books which offer advice about these matters (see *Further reading*, below). Rather, my intention here is to get you writing, and to get you to continue up to the point of submission for publication.

One good place to start is to consider what kind of piece of writing you want to do. In medicine there is a traditional route which begins with a letter publication, then moves through short reports in clinical journals to full papers in peer-reviewed academic journals, reflecting the increasing experience and expertise of the maturing author/researcher/clinician. Nursing has generally lacked the groundswell of beginning researchers to sustain this approach, but some journals do publish correspondence. This is a good way to get a clinical observation into the public domain, and to gain feedback and potential collaboration from colleagues. The letter publication also possesses the great advantage of brevity, thus giving the first time writer the

opportunity to undertake a writing task which is immediately manageable, both conceptually and in terms of time. Importantly, two principal components of academic writing – the ability to write succinctly and clearly – are particularly evident in letter publications. Five hundred words is a typical upper limit for letter publications.

Some journals include a short-report section that is dedicated to pilot studies and accounts of innovative work in progress. As with the letter publication, the short report is a comparatively limited task, but with a typical word limit of 1000–1500 words.

The letter publication and short report offer two ways of making the task of writing for publication more manageable because the piece itself is in both cases brief, and, therefore, imposes less of a conceptual load on the author, although the constraints of writing to a word limit are themselves an important discipline to master. The other chief way of lightening the burden inherent in writing for publication is to calibrate the task and then work on each element of it. The classic way of so doing is to write an outline of the paper and then fill in each element of the outline.

The original outline need not be extensive. It has two purposes: to guide the ensuing drafts and to stimulate ideas. I typically write a *very* brief outline on the wordprocessor and then write successive elements into the outline. I do not find it necessary, or even advisable, to go through the outline sequentially. Instead, I move around within the outline as I get fresh ideas about how to express particular elements of the paper. I find this helpful because of the 'change is as good as a rest' principle. I get tired if I work on a particular strand of the paper for too long, so I move on to something fresh, then return to the original element when I feel like it. It is also often the case that ideas will come to mind during writing for parts of the paper other than the one being worked on. Use the outline to move quickly to the relevant part of the paper, jot down the idea, then return to the part of the script you are mainly working on.

Begin with an estimate of how much each element of the outline will contribute to the overall paper in terms of length, then count words all the time to gauge your progress towards the final goal. Some wordprocessors contain outline and redraft functions. These may be useful, but I have found this level of technology gets in the way of actually writing. Similarly, formal first, second, third, etc. drafts have little place in modern writing with the wordprocessor, except if you are writing with others or seeking feedback at interim stages (say from an academic supervisor). I think in terms of an outline (as brief as possible) and a finished draft. I consider this the best way to keep writing, particularly for the novice. John Braine describes a similar process in his approach to writing the novel. The aim, in any writing, is simply to finish the task. Over-attention to technology and successive drafting detract from this aim.

However, this ultimate aim is often distant. As a behaviour therapist, I recognize the importance of conditioning in influencing our behaviour, mood and cognitions and, in consequence, I apply some basic principles of operant and classical conditioning to the writing task. Thus, I recommend setting yourself goals for interim achievement and giving yourself rewards for achieving them. Set a target number of words for a writing session (be realistic – start small and work up) or a target number of words per hour. You can then give yourself one of two kinds of reward: artificial or natural. In the first instance, you introduce some novel desired item or behaviour. You could, for example, buy a bar of chocolate (or some satisfyingly healthy alternative) and allow yourself the reward of eating a square of it after each 100 (or 200 or 400) words have been written. By natural rewards I mean, in contrast, that no new item is introduced. Instead, you simply identify something which you do in everyday life and which is rewarding to you, then allow yourself access to it only when a certain amount of writing has been successfully achieved. For example, I like to drink coffee and, when writing, allow myself a cupful only after at least 500 words have been written. These interim rewards help to keep you on target when the eventual goal and its rewards seem far away.

By the same token, building up associations helps to increase the likelihood that writing will occur. Many professional writers describe always sitting in a particular spot in order to write. This may well be helpful, but is not always practical. The general principle, however, is sound. Prepare yourself for writing by trying to go through the same routine every time you sit down to write. Be

flexible, but try, for example, to spend the same amount of time on the task, to use the same computer each time and have it set up in the same way each time. Have all the materials you will need for reference for that session available. Eventually, you will be able to write more easily as these elements of the environment become established as triggers for writing. Moreover, the more you do this, the greater the range of triggers you will find, and, in consequence, the greater will be the range of settings which trigger writing from you.

I will now look at the issues of grammar, spelling and punctuation. These technical aspects of writing often deter the would-be author, but are comparatively easy to deal with through care and practice. Spelling, in particular, is easily dealt with now that spell checks are included in all but the simplest wordprocessing packages. It is, however, worth being aware of such potential pitfalls as alternative spellings, homophones (words which sound the same but have different meanings and different meanings and different spellings according to their meanings), and differences between English and American English. Despite the wide availability of spell checks, I regularly receive, as an editor, manuscripts which contain elementary spelling errors. The same is true of grammar and punctuation. I once heard a friend and colleague state that she never worried about such issues, but expected the journal sub-editor to sort it out. I find this attitude hard to support. Writing is a craft skill (rather like research) and I expect a good craftsperson to take account of and be bothered with all elements of the craft. Will your script be rejected *because* its spelling, grammar or punctuation are poor? Probably not, unless the offences are so grave as to obscure communication. However, since presentation is such an easy matter to deal with, it seems unwise to fail to attend to it, particularly when other flaws in papers may be much more difficult to address. There is little point in adding unnecessary weaknesses which contribute to the whole impact of the paper. More practically, as an editor, I do infrequently but regularly receive reviews, in which the reviewer rejects a paper because the standard of these technical aspects of written communication is inadequate.

Punctuation and grammar are more difficult to deal with, since punctuation and grammar checkers are invariably inadequate. Grammar books are widely available and worth consulting, but the most useful guidance I can give aspiring writers is to read good writing, whether fiction or non-fiction, incessantly, and to read their own work, carefully and, whenever possible, aloud. The best guide to modern English usage is your ear: reading and writing helps to develop this. Most errors I see are simple, and would have been simply corrected with sufficient rereading. Over and above this, it is usually helpful to write in short sentences and to avoid punctuation you do not really know how to use. In this context, the most important piece of advice I have ever received came from Professor Windy Dryden, an incredibly prolific author and editor: HELP THE READER. If you bear this in mind, your writing will be direct, and you will communicate well. Do not assume that because you understand what you mean, the reader will. Similarly do not assume that because you mentioned something a couple of paragraphs ago, the reader will immediately refer back to it. Good writing signposts every new element before it arises and explicitly connects it to what has gone before.

What do editors look for?

In my experience, and that of several other journal editors I know, the most frequently successful papers are ones written by experienced authors. This is not because they are great writers (although some are), but because they are practised and take care. More than this, their papers generally reveal the following characteristics, which you can easily emulate.

Successful papers show *knowledge of the market*. Such papers do not need to be particularly original, but they address a need within the market, whether that be the need of the academic for accounts of original research or for systematic review of such research or the need of the clinician or manager for accurate, critical and accessible synopses of such material. Knowing the market allows your paper to be relevant to the audience and timely in its appearance. These two facts alone greatly enhance the chances of publication.

Following from this, the author of the successful paper *knows the journal* to which the paper is submitted. This involves knowing the academic level at which the journal is pitched, knowing the sort of papers it publishes and

knowing its intended readership. The author can then respond accordingly and choose a journal which most closely fits the level, subject matter and proposed audience of her paper. By not being clear as to the focus of the journal, you immediately reduce the chances of successful publication.

The submission and review process

Most academic journals follow a broadly similar submission process, and a knowledge of this will increase your chances of successful publication. It is worthwhile obtaining the Instructions to Authors (ITA) and Aims and Scope statements of a range of journals you want to target. These documents, particularly the ITA, should guide the way you construct your papers, and should be followed with slavish accuracy. As with spelling and punctuation, adherence to the ITA is a simple matter, and it wastes your time to have a script returned (often before it even reaches the formal review process) because it fails to follow the ITA.

Some journals are very precise in their requirements. The *British Journal of Psychiatry*, for example, insists on an abstract with a very tight word limit, since it is a requirement that the abstract fit within the first full column of the paper. Similarly, they insist on the identification of three shortcomings of the study and three implications for practice. It does not matter whether you think your study has no shortcomings or 100. You are required to identify three, and publication time will be greatly delayed if the script is returned to you to do so. The ITA will also guide you as to the requirements of the journal regarding subheadings, referencing style, and so on. It is by far the best policy to write with a single journal in mind (and revise for another journal if it is subsequently rejected) rather than attempt to write a 'generic' article which you think you will adapt later. In my experience, this tactic usually results in papers which remain in the wordprocessor.

Ensure that you send your script to the journal in the form required by the editor. With regard to electronic copies, pay attention to the format required by the journal. The use of Microsoft WORD is widespread, but not universal. Once again, not adhering to these requirements does not mean your paper will be rejected, but it lessens its attractiveness and is a sign of inadequate attention to the craft elements of writing.

If you are writing a joint paper with others, agree the order of precedence between you at an early stage. Also agree who will perform what roles in the writing process, and try to set agreed deadlines as a group. Joint papers are hard to organize, particularly when the authors are geographically distant from one another. Similarly, although the issue of precedence in the author list is of less importance than was once the case, it is surprising, as a paper nears publication, how far various members of the team feel their contribution has merited a particular place in the 'batting order'.

Typically, the order should be decided when the paper is first being produced, although you may want to be flexible if roles change during the course of production. In the case of a team working together on a large project which is likely to result in a number of papers, the question of authorship is best resolved at an early stage. The general rule of thumb, however, remains unchanged – the greater the involvement, the higher in the batting order. It should be noted, however, that definitions of involvement vary – just because you did all the data collection (or all the writing) by no means implies you should have first authorship. People in clinical practice working alongside academic colleagues should be aware that those of us who work in the academic sector may be slightly more assertive in pushing for first authorship, since we perceive (rightly or wrongly) that it affects our job prospects. This is irrelevant to deciding author order – the rule of involvement = precedence stands. In fact, some journals ask authors to state, in a covering letter, the extent and nature of their involvement in the project.

The review process varies widely, even amongst the peer review journals. Many journals offer double-blind peer review from two reviewers plus a statistical reviewer. Surprisingly, some high-prestige medical journals (for example, the *British Medical Journal*) offer non-blind (open) review, whilst yet others (e.g. *British Journal of Psychiatry*) offer the author a choice between blind and open review. The method of review has consequences for the preparation of

the script, so that, typically, authors are required to present anonymized scripts to blind peer review journals.

After review, the author typically receives one of the following four results: unconditionally accept; accept subject to satisfactory amendment; resubmit following amendment; reject. The process can take between 3 and 6 months. Typically, if the amendments required are not extensive, the editor will take the decision about whether to accept the revised paper, and this procedure is common to many journals. Where the amendments are extensive, or have not been undertaken in full, the paper is typically returned to the reviewer(s) who required corrections. In most cases, if the reviewer is not satisfied, the editor will reject the paper at this point or follow the reviewer's guidance in this regard. With some journals, the reviewer is not permitted to ask you for further new changes on rereading your revised script. However, this is not always the case, and you may find yourself in the frustrating situation of having undertaken the originally required changes, only to find the reviewer now requires a series of further amendments.

This brings us to the question of whether or not to make the changes. If the journal is offering to publish if the changes are made, *always* make them. You are already most of the way to getting into print, so capitalize on your investment in this particular submission. If a resubmission is required, this does not imply an offer to publish, and so the position is less clear. Personally, I would almost always make the changes. Once again, you have climbed some part of the hill towards publication in that journal and received feedback which you know is regarded as valuable by it. The only exception to this rule is if you believe the reviewer essentially wants a different paper from the one you have submitted (perhaps because of the reviewer's own academic or clinical interests). It may well be a waste of time trying to meet someone else's expectations of what your paper should be about.

Where publication is offered subject to amendment, you will increase the likelihood and speed of publication if you approach the amendments in the following way. First, ensure that you undertake all the amendments you can. As with all stages of the submission process, check repeatedly. It is amazing how easy it is to overlook things at every stage. Second, list, in a covering letter, *all* the changes you have made and note where they appear in the revised script and where in the *original* script the issues to which the amendments refer occur. Specify page, paragraph and line in each case. Your objective here is to make the process as easy as possible for the editor. If the amendments are simple, the editor is (in my view and that of several other editors I have discussed this with) far less likely to return the script to the original reviewer if she can be clear that the required changes have been adequately made. This, in turn, speeds up publication of your paper and avoids the possibility of getting into protracted correspondence between yourself, the editor and the reviewer about the adequacy or otherwise of the changes made. Finally, if you cannot make all the changes, or do not feel it is appropriate to do so, state why in a covering letter. The reviewer may well feel you have made an adequate case for why the changes should not be made. Naturally, your case should be made in sufficient detail to allow a fair judgement of it.

Sometimes, however, a paper cannot be saved. Regardless of how worthy it is, it may fail to meet sufficiently high standards of presentation or academic content. This in itself is part of the learning process, and most people who write as part of their job have many rejection letters and at least a few papers which never got published. In many ways, writing is a very honest activity, both on the part of the writer, since you are deliberately laying yourself open to criticism, and on the part of publishers, since the political wrangling and personal interest which are often apparent in other areas of our profession are to a great extent absent in journal publishing. It is important, therefore, to learn from the feedback, even when it is negative. It may be that a paper will find its home in a different journal, particularly if the advice offered by the journal rejecting it is followed during the next submission.

One of the best ways of dealing with rejection is to ensure that you always have fallback plans – where will you submit the paper instead, what will you write about next and where will you submit that? Most papers get published eventually, in one form or another. Journal publishing in nursing and allied health has expanded to an extraordinary degree in the last few years, and most journals are constantly

looking for high quality papers to publish. As a clinician, you potentially have an important contribution to make, since your clinical work should lead research and justifies appropriate evaluation and dissemination. Indeed, this final element – dissemination – is the key to evolving excellence in clinical practice. Writing for publication is both a personally rewarding and a clinically important activity which is within the scope of the majority of people in nursing, midwifery and allied health professions.

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Further reading

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