

# Writing for publication

## Introduction

As the number of medical students increases, the competition for foundation and specialist training posts becomes more intense. One way to strengthen your application is to show the selection committee that you have written articles that have been peer reviewed and published in respected journals. This article is intended to guide you through the process of writing for publication.

An article can take many forms. Your article may describe some original research carried out by you or by others; alternatively it may provide advice which will be of relevance to your audience. For example, medical students will often be interested in:

- Case reports
- Educational articles
- Careers advice.

Whatever you decide to write about, it must always be informative, but if you can make it engaging, then so much the better.

This article will show you how to present your ideas in an appropriate manner before submitting work for peer review. The article is split into four parts. The first part deals with searching the literature and developing your idea. It then describes how to plan the structure of your article. The third part offers instruction on how to go about writing your first draft. The final part addresses the process of writing in good English and editing your work.

## Develop your idea by searching the literature

A proper literature search involves a systematic exploration of relevant material

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already produced on a particular topic. There may be many reasons to undertake a literature search (Table 1).

Keep a record of all the potentially useful articles you discover. Make sure you record all the details necessary for the reference section that will form the end of your article. It is a good idea to document these details thoroughly and consistently as you go along to avoid hours of painstaking work at the end; above all make sure your references are accurately reported in your finished article.

Be sure to know when to stop. It is easy to go on searching for new material, ending up with too many references that do not add anything to your arguments. It is much better that you provide only necessary references that support your arguments without overwhelming or confusing the reader. A large number of cited references does not necessarily mean your article will be well received by the peer reviewers.

The type of article you reference is also important. Many writers prefer to start a literature search with the internet. However, it is always worth cross-checking web-based information against traditional sources; the internet is quicker, but the material is often less reliable. It is better to concentrate on primary and published research articles (where possible) when getting to grips with the current literature on your topic of study. Using non-primary published articles should be the exception rather than the rule.

In summary, you should ensure that your references are:

- Accurate
- Appropriate (not too many)
- Primary and published where possible.

**Table 1. Why do a literature search?**

Discover what exists on a topic
Increase your knowledge of that topic
Use earlier work as a foundation or a springboard
Find gaps, errors or inconsistencies in previous work
Generate ideas for your own work
Avoid duplication of previous work
Justify and lend authority to your work

## Time spent on planning is time well spent

Once you have established your idea, use it as a focal point for a mind map. From this mind map begin to consider different areas you wish to cover and use them as your initial headings. Write any thoughts under your headings and begin to create a visual picture of how the various elements can be connected together. Bounce your ideas off others; ask for their comments about whether or not they think anyone would be interested in the topic you have in mind. They may point you in a different direction or you may realize that there is still a great deal of research to be done. Your mind map and initial thoughts form the skeleton of your article; you now need to begin to add the flesh.

An article is no different from any other piece of written work in that if it is going to succeed, it must be well planned. Your plan is how you intend to structure your article and guide your audience from start to finish. First you need to break the article down into three basic parts:

- Introduction
- Body (methods, results and discussion)
- Conclusion.

Each part needs to be carefully considered, with your main points running as a continuous theme throughout. Detail can be refined when writing your first draft. Time spent on planning is never wasted.

Once you have your plan, you can start to write in more depth, expanding on your main points.

## Writing the first draft

Remembering the three basic parts previously mentioned, you need to start with a concise introduction that defines the topic that you are going to be writing about. It is essential to highlight the most important points you are going to cover in order to give the reader a good idea of what the article is about. Writers often struggle with their introductions because they think it must be pithy and witty otherwise they will immediately lose the reader's attention. The introduction can be the hardest part to write, so it is sometimes better to put off writing

it until the end. Apart from anything else, the final version of the article may not resemble the first draft, so if you write your introduction last, you will have the advantage of knowing exactly what is in your article.

You need a middle section, which forms the main body of the article. This is where your main points will be discussed in detail and the majority of your work will be presented. Keep your paragraphs short and restrict each one to a single point. Draft out the order in which you think they should be arranged. The paragraphs may naturally fall into some sort of chronological order or you may decide that they should be arranged in a hierarchy of importance. Ensure that your paragraphs flow naturally and do not read as a series of disjointed points.

Finally, your ending should reiterate your main points to the reader. Make sure these are clear before finishing with your conclusions and opinions. There is a saying that is applicable to both giving a presentation and to writing: 'Tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you have just told them'.

### Good English is clear, concise and correct

Doctors do not have to be good writers to be good doctors, but if your initial idea is ever going to be published then you must be able to write well. It is therefore vital to have a good understanding of the structure of the English language. Essentially, 'good' English must always be clear, concise and correct. The final part of this article deals with writing good English, editing and redrafting. It highlights some of the basic rules of English grammar and punctuation, and outlines a strategy for editing.

In a vain attempt to impress the reader, some authors construct long sentences made up of clauses, sub-clauses and phrases, all of which are separated by commas. It is better to have a number of short sentences than one long sentence. This makes sure that the meaning is not obscured by the over-use of commas. You should avoid superfluous words and phrases (e.g. 'at the present time' instead of 'now'), as they serve no other purpose than to waste time and distort meaning.

Ambiguity is the sign of poor writing and can be caused by three things:

1. Poor syntax
2. Incorrect or over-use of punctuation
3. Over-use of pronouns.

The arrangement of words and phrases to create grammatically correct sentences is known as syntax. The normal word order is subject, verb, object, dependent clause. You are less likely to make syntactical errors if you restrict the length of your sentences, but too many short sentences will make your article seem disjointed. To avoid this you should try to vary the length of your sentences to help retain the reader's attention.

Reading anything that is littered with punctuation is difficult. As a general rule leave out all punctuation except full stops in the first draft, and only insert commas, semi-colons and colons later where they are absolutely necessary to the meaning and sense. A full stop is used to mark the end of a sentence. However, it is acceptable to separate a series of short sentences using semi-colons or commas. Modern writing tends to omit full stops after initials or abbreviations, for example 'B.M.J.' is better written as 'BMJ'. Colons are used in front of a list, or to divide a sentence where both parts are grammatically complete in themselves. Semi-colons are generally used to separate items in a list where each item could form a sentence in itself. A comma is used in complex sentences to separate clauses. The apostrophe is a much abused punctuation mark. It serves one of two purposes: it shows that a letter has been omitted, for example, 'it's' meaning 'it is'; or that something belongs to someone or something, for example, Dr Graham's office.

In short, you should ensure every sentence is syntactically correct and punctua-

tion is as it should be; be consistent with your use of punctuation. It is also much better to make the subject of a sentence clear by using their name rather than repeatedly using pronouns.

Every writer has their own method of editing their written work. The purpose of editing is to prepare the article for publication by correcting, shortening, or improving it. Once you have your first draft, and are armed with a red pen in one hand, read the article through, checking for spelling mistakes and syntactical errors. Don't forget to check factual information, such as names. It can also be useful to get someone else to read through it, to check again for anything you may have missed.

### Conclusions

Writing for publication is a skill which must be developed through practice. Writing can be a complex process because of its very personal nature, but it can be simplified by approaching it in a methodical way as has been suggested here.

Once you have formed your initial idea you need to carefully think about how to develop it. Consider your initial framework and areas you wish to cover, before analysing your thoughts in depth. Then begin to put your ideas onto paper, as a first draft. Ensure all of your main points are covered before dealing with the important issue of grammar and clear writing. Once you have edited and are happy with your work, you may be ready to find a publisher. **BJHM**

*Conflict of interest: none.*

#### Further reading

Hall GM (2003) *How to Write a Paper*. 3rd edn. BMJ Publishing Group, London

## KEY POINTS

- Writing publications can strengthen a candidate's application for a training position.
- This article explains how to write successfully and get published, and gives tips on how to negotiate the peer review process.
- Mind-mapping can help generate ideas for publication.
- Good grammar will create the right impression with journal editors.