Eight questions to ask before writing an article

ABSTRACT

Health professionals often have to write articles for publication in academic journals. Many of them find this difficult and suffer from one or more variations of writer's block. A good way of avoiding these setbacks is to prepare thoroughly for the writing project, and this article proposes eight different questions writers can ask before they start. The first is whether they are in a good position to complete the task, and if not whether they should try to negotiate their way out of the project. If they commit to going ahead, writers should work out where they will find the necessary time, and set deadlines for ensuring that they do. They should also decide on their co-authors, because getting them involved early should make the rewriting more straightforward as well as reducing the danger of ghost authors emerging once the work has been done. Writers should put their research away and reflect on the most appropriate message – a simple sentence that sums up the main implication of the paper. Armed with this message, they can identify a suitable journal for publication – and thereafter can use articles in this journal to guide them on matters of substance and style. If the article is published in that target journal authors can consider that they have written a successful paper.

Some years ago I transformed myself from a journalist specializing in medical matters into a trainer specializing in medical writing. As I leapt from one culture to another, one of the first things that I started to notice was that, when it came to writing, so many capable doctors were ending up stuck.

As I got more involved I began to realize that their writer's block came in many types. The classic is early onset writer's block, which has the would-be writer seated for hours facing an empty screen or blank piece of paper – paralysed with fear, inactivity and then depression. They report that under such circumstances even ironing becomes an attractive alternative.

Then I identified writer's block by proxy, when the would-be writer passes endless happy hours analysing figures or hunting down articles, but fails to put any words down on paper or up on screen. Others, suffering from midstream writer's block, go to the other extreme, rushing to get some words (any words?) on paper and then grinding to a halt somewhere down the line. And I identified more: perfect first sentence syndrome, post writing traumatic stress disorder, and another that boiled down simply to boredom.

All these afflictions have their remedies, but as always the best strategy is prevention. This article looks at the much-neglected pre-writing stage, and suggests eight sensible questions to ask yourself before you have a chance to find yourself blocked.

1. Should I be writing this article anyway?

This is not a silly question. Many people have writing forced upon them, so it is important to ask the key question: 'What's in it for me?'.

Write down the answers in two columns. On one side, list the benefits, such as approval of supervisor, learning new skills, and 'looks good on my CV'. On the other side, list the potential difficulties, such as lack of time, impending exams, new child, new job, upcoming appearance at the Olympic games.

If the potential difficulties clearly outweigh the potential advantages, be brave. Go back to whoever set this writing project in motion, and point out, giving reasons, that you may not be in a position to do the task justice at this time. And ask for help in solving your mutual problem.

However, if the advantages outweigh the difficulties, you should launch yourself into your project with enthusiasm. You have decided that it is clearly worth doing. Do it, properly.

2. How will I find time?

Finding time (or rather making it) is one of the hardest hurdles. Researching, writing and publishing a paper is a major project and will eat up the hours. It is not something that can be added on to your life, which presumably you already manage to fill quite nicely for 24 hours a day. It should be planned for.

The good news is that you do not need to find large chunks of time, such as a day here or a week there. These sessions usually end up being long, boring and ineffective. Look instead for where, in your weekly routine, you can find small and regular blocks of time, an hour say; even 20 minutes a day will take you further than you might think.

When I am in book writing mode, I get up an hour earlier each day (bar Sunday). My conscious mind is fresh, and my unconscious mind cleared and set to work on any residual problems during the course of the day. For many people (those with small children in particular) this solution might not work, but there are others that might. Give up a regular TV programme, or spend one less evening in the pub?

Of course these are sacrifices, but you have already established that they are worth making (see question one). And you can always reinstate these activities after your article has been submitted.

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Working out how you are going to find the time will help you to estimate how long the task will take. In the light of this, set yourself a deadline – the exact day you will submit the paper.

To soften the sheer terror that this decision will bring, set out a series of subsidiary deadlines: when will you complete the research, the planning, the writing, the rewriting, the internal peer review? Write all these dates down and enter them in your diary and/or display them on your fridge door.

You have now transformed a vague intention into a well-planned project.

3. Should I start writing what I can as soon as I can?

Many of the books about writing papers suggest that you should start writing some of your paper – the methods, for instance – as soon as you can. The thinking behind this is that it will help you to get your thoughts in order.

I disagree. In my experience this takes the would-be writer too far too fast. After a couple of months the writer may find he/she has written down thousands of words – a number that usually uncomfortably exceeds the stated word count. What is worse, while the individual sentences might be fine, taken as a whole they rarely hang together well, and frequently raise that most dangerous of questions: 'So what?'.

It is a bit like trying to build a house by taking a pile of bricks and shuffling them around. It is possible, but time consuming.

So hold back for the time being. Jot down some notes if you feel the need to do so, but do not spend time on joined up writing. Do some thinking, in particular (and to continue the analogy of the house) about the walls and the floors. Tips on how to do this will appear under question 6.

4. Who are my co-authors?

Over the past few years journal editors have recognized that they have a problem with gift authorship. This is the practice of allowing people to nudge their CVs by appearing as co-authors of articles when in reality they had very little (or nothing) to do with the project. This is clearly unethical (why should we believe the research if you are lying about the authors?) and there are now clear rules about co-authors needing to have 'substantial involvement' (International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, 2017).

This problem will largely go away if you agree on (and with) your co-authors before you start. You can make sure that they are involved in the writing process.

This will give you another advantage. As your project advances, and you finish a first draft, you will usually find yourself engulfed by an avalanche of suggested amendments, often conflicting. Some of these are individual preferences of style, but others stem from the fact that the co-authors have completely different views on what the article is about, and where it should be submitted.

This can be extremely discouraging, and many papers founder at this point. But such destructive wrangling can be avoided if you can persuade the co-authors to agree on these points before the first draft is written.

5. How will I know when I have done enough research?

Research, like self doubt, can go on forever. But if you really want to get published, there comes a time when you have to say that enough is enough – and move on to the next stage.

If you have set a series of deadlines, as recommended above, move on when the schedule says you should. You will almost certainly feel uneasy, but if you have done your work reasonably well you will have covered the main points – and still have far too much material.

The problem, you will find, is not putting things in, but leaving them out. So put your notes away, and ruminate. Trust your mind to make sensible decisions, and to remind you of what is important and what is not.

And that brings us elegantly to the next question.

6. Should I start with the title?

That is a bad idea.

Editors of academic journals (unlike editors of newspapers and magazines) tend to be fairly laid back when it comes to the title. They give the subject matter and the methods. Thus:

> **Writer's block and apples: a multi-centred, randomized trial.**

What the title does not tell you is what it all means, in other words the message (or what as a journalist I would call the story). I strongly advise spending time trying to work this out. To get the best results (i.e. the greatest clarity) it should be about 10–14 words long, and should contain a verb (the doing word). So, for example:

> **Five apples a day alleviate the symptoms of writer's block.**

The first thing this should have done is concentrated your mind wonderfully. And now it is time to test it. Is your message justified by the evidence?

> **Five apples a day may alleviate the symptoms of writer's block**

Is there a stronger one?

> **Five apples a day eradicates the symptoms of writer's block**

Could it be made clearer?

> **Five apples a day alleviate the symptoms of three versions of writer's block**

These are not quibbles. These are important differences – and if you can work out now what is the best way to put this idea then it will help enormously as you try to focus your writing.

In my career of teaching nearly 1000 courses on writing skills I came across only one or two people – medical sociologists invariably – who insisted that they never knew where their writing was going until they had finished the task. They saw writing as a heroic voyage of discovery. They had not published much.

7. Should I decide now which journal I am submitting to?

Many authors like to write first, and wait until their article is finished before deciding on which journal to send it to. This is largely based on wishful thinking: they feel that somehow a piece that might scrape into the *West European Journal of Hand Surgery* can somehow find a place in the *BMJ* or the *Lancet*, if only they write it up well enough.

The immediate consequence is disappointment, and then more hard work as they have to resubmit, often to several journals.

But if you know your message – and its strength – and you have the evidence to support it, you can make a good judgment as to which editor or journal is likely to be interested. Or to put it another way, you can make a rational decision, not an emotional one.

And it gets better. Once you have identified your target journal you can start to study it. Journals may look as if they all run the same 'product', but if you look carefully there are differences – some of which are quite important.

Look at several recent articles, and you will be able to find out all kinds of useful information, such as:

- How many paragraphs in each section?
- What kind of opening sentence do they favour?
- Where does the message appear?

KEY POINTS

- Identify where (and whether?) you will have enough time to write the article, and then set down a deadline and have it agreed by your co-authors.
- Do not start writing before you have clearly thought through what will be your message, and where you will send your finished article.
- Do your research first, and then move onto the writing stage.
- Consider your article a success when it is accepted by your target journal.

- What form do titles take: do they have a verb or a colon, for example?
- What is the range of references quoted?
- How does the editor like to present the tables and figures?
- Does the editor like the use of the passive ('it was discovered') or the active (we discovered')?

This is marketing. You have plans to make a product (your paper) and sell it to a customer (the editor). You know what the customer wants. It should be straightforward from now on.

8. How should I define success?

This is easy. If you get your article published in your target journal you will have succeeded in your task. Congratulate yourself and resume your normal life. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: Mr T Albert is author of Winning the publications game, *now published in its fourth edition by CRC Press.*

International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (2017) Defining the Role of Authors and Contributors. www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/defining-the-role-of-authors-and-contributors.html (accessed 18 April 2017)