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Writing for Publication for Counsellors and Therapists – Part I

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Abstract

Over the next three issues these three linked articles will take you through guidance about how to write for publication. In 2009 and 2010 Taylor & Francis funded two workshops on this topic for members of the British Association for Sexual and Relationship Therapy. Using some of the exercises and feedback from these workshops the article will consider: common anxieties which therapists have about writing and how to address these; some of the main forms of writing which counsellors and therapists can consider; key aspects of structure and content; and how to go through the process of submission, review and revision. It is hoped that the articles will go some way towards demystifying the process and increasing your confidence in writing and submitting publications.

Keywords

Writing, research, anxiety, dissemination, good practice.

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A year ago I was asked by the British Association for Sexual and Relationship Therapy (BASRT) to put on a workshop for members to train them in writing and submitting articles for publication. Taylor & Francis generously funded a London-based workshop in November 2009 with the hope that it might also promote, and encourage submission to, *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*. The workshop was such a success that they funded an additional workshop which I led in July 2010 in Manchester.

Why did I end up presenting such a workshop? From the perspective of BASRT and Taylor & Francis I think it was because I am on the editorial board of the journal, and indeed co-edit my own Taylor & Francis journal, *Psychology & Sexuality*, with Darren Langdridge. Also I wrote quite a lot of the material for the BASRT website so I think it is presumed that I should know what I'm talking about! From my own personal perspective, the reason I wanted to present the workshop was because of my own experience of the potential horrors of writing for publication. After my PhD, the first paper I submitted, to a counselling journal, was rejected because one of the reviewers didn't like it whilst the other two did. Some of the criticisms he made felt very harsh and I ended up deciding not to publish *or* research, and didn't try submitting a publication again for another five years. Given that I have found my way from that point to a point where I have published my own articles, chapters, and even books, I thought I might have something to offer based on what I have learnt along the way. Also, as I move now from academic writing to writing a 'self-help' style book for a general audience I am still excruciatingly aware of the self-doubts and crippling anxieties which can plague the writing process. As I try to free myself from their grip to write my book it feels a matter of urgency to help others to do the same.

I was blown away by the enthusiastic response of attendees to both workshops, and also very struck by the common anxieties and blocks which were preventing extremely competent and skilled counsellors and therapists from putting pen to paper, or fingers to keyboard. The round up at the end of both workshops was deeply moving as attendees

described how inspired they had been and outlined their plans to go away and write. Clearly, the sharing of their worries and blocks had been immensely helpful in freeing them to start writing, as had some of the practical tips which we discussed in the workshop. Therefore I decided to write this series of articles, both as a record of the helpful and open discussions, and as a way of getting some of the ideas from the workshops out to a wider audience. Hopefully it will have the same impact of encouraging everyone that writing is possible and that even the most inexperienced writer can find some way of getting their ideas 'out there'.

Over the next three issues, the articles will cover various aspects of writing for publication. I will begin, this time, by thinking about why people want to write and by reporting on the reasons why attendees wanted to learn how to write, and the anxieties and other blocks that they felt were standing in their way. I will go on to put forward my model for beating such fears and blocks and starting writing. Next issue, I will say a little more about the kinds of writing which might be most accessible to counsellors and therapists who want to write. Finally, in the third issue, I will present some top tips about how to write for publication, and say something about the submission process in order to demystify this for those who are keen to be published in a journal such as this one.

Why write?

It was only minutes before the first workshop that I realised that, at no point in my workshop plan, had I asked the most basic of questions: 'why write?' I had taken for granted that attendees would want to get published, but I suddenly realised that their answer to this question made quite a lot of difference to the advice that I should give them and to the kinds of plans they should be making. Different goals for wanting to write would suggest different kinds of writing as the most appropriate ways of meeting these goals. I quickly decided that the very first question I would ask attendees, before anything else, would be this one.

Here are some of the most common reasons given by attendees about why they wanted to write for publication, and indeed why they had attended the workshop. Under each general theme I have included quotes based on specific answers from people in the groups:

- *Sharing good practice*
 - 'I want to tell people about the interesting cases I've been involved with'
 - 'I'd like to open up debate and dialogue with other people working in this area'
 - 'It would be good to tell other practitioners about this technique which I've found really helpful for people with X'
 - 'I want to fire people up about this because I feel so passionately about it'
 - 'My work can be so isolating. Writing could be a way to find and develop community'
 - 'Writing myself will help me understand other peoples' writing better'
 - 'I'm always encouraging my trainees to write – so I thought I really ought to do some myself in order to be a good role model'
 - 'One thing I do have is experience. I've worked in this area for 20 years and I've seen hundreds of people in this population. It'd be a shame not to share that somehow before I retire'
- *Personal reasons*
 - 'To see my publication out there!'
 - 'For enjoyment'
 - 'I'd really like to build my confidence in this area'
 - 'I was always told I couldn't do this kind of thing as a kid, so I'd like to show them...to show myself'
 - 'It feels like part of the journey I'm on: the next stage in the process'
 - 'I'm so excited about this area I want to get it down somehow'
 - 'I'd like to bring the creative side of myself together with the more intellectual side: writing might be a good way to do this'
 - 'Having gone part time it's now something I've got time for'
 - 'Curiosity – I keep noticing things and making links'
- *Academic reasons*
 - 'Well I've done this masters thesis and I don't want it just to stay stuck at the bottom of a drawer. I want to get it out there'
 - 'I'm returning to academic study and I want to learn how to write in that context in order to qualify'
 - 'I'm going to be marking student essays and I'd like to know what I'm looking for'
- *Professional reasons*
 - 'I want to demonstrate to my employer the great stuff our department is doing'

'I'd like some publications on my CV'
'Someone knew I was an expert on X and asked me to write a paper with them, so I'd better find out what I'm doing!'

I will return to these towards the end of the article when we think about making our own plan towards writing for publication. For now you might just like to tick off the reasons which most resonate for you, and add any further ones that you have.

Anxieties and other blocks

What were the main things standing in the way of attendees writing and submitting their work? I asked attendees to discuss their anxieties, and other blocks, and we made a list of these. Most were shared by many people in the group, and by far the most paralysing blocks were those involving self doubt and anxiety.

Across both groups a common terror echoed. That, by writing, it would be revealed that we were 'not good enough' and would be 'found out' as poor writers, poor researchers, and perhaps even poor therapists. Another phrase that resonated was '*who do you think you are* to be telling people about this?' Writing about something seemed a great responsibility and how could we possibly 'get it right'? It is clear that despite all our counselling training and personal therapy we are still very afraid of the potentially devastating impact of others' critique and disapproval. To be fixed in the gaze of others as wanting is to be a flawed and illegitimate person, and writing fixes us in a way that is black and white, available for all to see and unchangeable once it is out there. People were frightened by the perceived 'authority of the written page'. For many of us, early narratives were brought up by even the thought of writing, for example the story that we were the 'non-academic one' in the family, or that our views were not as valuable as those of other people, or that we had our head in the clouds. One attendee said that writing for publication felt as self-exposing as stripping naked right there in the middle of the group!

This level of anxiety suggests that these fears in themselves might be something that it is worthwhile for us to explore in personal therapy or through the kinds of self-care

practices that I've written about previously (Barker, 2010). This might help us to think through the old stories that writing triggers in all of us, the ways in which we deal with others' perceptions of us and the possibility of rejection. However, I did point out to the group that such fears are not uncommon in the face of the unfamiliar. As someone who was an academic before I was a therapist I remember very well all of the feelings of self-doubt and 'who do you think you are?' when first confronted by a client in the therapy room. Many academics are so daunted by such a possibility that they stay in the security of their books and lectures and never engage with the messy world of 'real people'.

Also it is important to confront some of these anxieties head on. The fear that what we've written will then be 'set in stone' for ever and ever is a common one. People think that this means they must get it perfect which is such an impossible task that they either give up or remain in terror that someone is going to find them out after publication. To this I point out that we are always, inevitably, a work in progress. We will change our mind and find out more after we have published. This is particularly the case in the information-saturated world in which we currently live. It is simply not possible to have read everything on a topic, much of what we have read we will forget, and there are bound to be things we will leave out or come across later. Perhaps we should shift our aim of perfection to being a Winecottian 'good-enough' writer. Probably we will subsequently disagree with some, if not all, of what we've written. The thing is to acknowledge that when it happens rather than feeling we have to defend it till the end of time. Is it not okay to say 'yes I really feel differently about that now', or 'having read X I now think quite differently about that issue and this is what I'd say now'. It seems a real shame that we don't have more such re-visitations of work in academia and psychotherapy.

And what of the fear that people will think our writing is rubbish? Again let's face it head on. In all likelihood, if people do read our work, somebody somewhere *will* think it is rubbish. This is particularly the case because we are in an area where people follow different approaches. If we present a nice cognitive-behavioural technique, someone purely psychodynamic may well dismiss it. If we do a very medical case-study, someone

existential or systemic will probably critique it and vice versa. Instead of trying so hard to please everyone all the time we need to remember that it is also likely that somebody somewhere will find our writing valuable and useful (given that we found these ideas valuable and useful ourselves). Isn't that enough?

There were also some more specific anxieties about writing which coalesced about how to 'do it right'. Attendees were worried about their abilities to write in academic language, to conduct research or statistical analysis properly, to find out what relevant literature was out there in order to reference it, and to use computers for the submission process. In terms of more practical blocks, people also talked about the difficulty in finding time to write, and the lack of energy and motivation, particularly when working within certain systems which were experienced as discouraging of anything as creative as writing. People also spoke of the many avoidance strategies they would use when they had something to write. There was general agreement that at no other times in our lives were our houses tidier!

A model for beating anxieties and other blocks

The model that I have used for beating writing anxieties is the basic cognitive-behavioural model of gradual exposure or systematic desensitisation. As with many fears and phobias, this technique is incredibly helpful in getting us writing in a stepping-stone manner, rather than plunging us in at the deep end. In the second workshop, the person who had commented that writing felt like stripping naked in front of a group commented that they had just assumed that they had to go from not writing at all, to submitting a journal article. That kind of flooding approach might work for some, but I would suggest that it is easier, and much pleasanter, to find where you are on the following list of types of writing. Start there, until you are comfortable and relaxed with that kind of writing, and then move on to the next stage, and the next. Remember to properly celebrate having made each step before moving on.

Writing stepping-stones:

- Engage in online discussions – practising putting your argument across clearly – on a forum for a topic you are interested in
- Write a referenced letter or two to a journal that publishes these
- Write short pieces such as downloadable information sheets for clients to put on an organisational website (such as the BASRT one) on a topic you know about
- Write a book review – most journals have a stack of books they are looking to have reviewed, or you can propose one to them – you also get a free book this way!
- Conduct an interview or discussion with people in the field and write that up. You can record and transcribe the interview or discussion so your only real work is writing an introduction and conclusion and polishing it to make it clear
- Write an essay such as a review of the literature or a personal opinion piece
- Write up a case study with a client
- Conduct and write up a research paper in the standard format

Examples of most of these kind of writing can be found in any journal and I'm also happy to send examples of each of these to anyone who wants to see them (my email address is at the end of this article). Particularly I recommend the book reviews and interviews to those who have not published in journals before. Early in my career I spent time as the book review editor and the editor of 'focus on activism' interviews for a very small circulation journal. Both were great ways to get publications out there in a way that didn't feel too exposing of me.

Obviously you need to create your own versions of the stepping stones based on what you find least to most anxiety-provoking. For example, some find the idea of writing up research far scarier than writing about their therapy, and vice versa. I am currently very worried about writing my 'self-help' style book, whereas several BASRT members have written more than one of these, but might be more anxious about writing an academic

piece. For some computers are anxiety-provoking so online forums wouldn't be such a great place to start, but they may enjoy letter-writing.

You might also think about gradual exposure in terms of the forum for your writing. For example you might move up these stepping stones.

- Online discussion or forum
- Your own blog or research/writing journal
- Local newsletter or newsletter of your training course or college
- Small scale national publication (e.g. *Counselling Psychology Review*)
- Practitioner based national publication (e.g. *Therapy Today*)
- Chapter in a book a colleague is editing
- National academic journal (e.g. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*)
- International academic journal (e.g. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*)
- Your own edited collection or special issue?
- Your own first-authored book?
- The sky's the limit!

When you get to the stage of publishing in journals, the more you can find out about different journals the better. At first glance it is hard to tell apart those which are likely to be easier to publish in from the others. They all seem to have quite similar titles. However, as you chat with people in the field you can get an idea of which ones are local, national and international; which ones are most open to articles from practitioners as well as those based on research; which ones have a peer-review system, as opposed to those smaller scale ones where the editor decides what goes in; and which ones are particularly high profile (often with the highest 'impact factor' as it is called). The highest up journals make reject over 80% of the articles that are submitted to them simply because they receive so many, so even very good articles are likely to be rejected. Some people with very thick skins for criticism and rejection treat these stepping-stones in the opposite

direction. They write a paper, aim high to start with, and then go for lower and lower journals. However, this can be tough on the ego.

Looking at these lists many of the workshop attendees realised that they were *already* writing in ways that they hadn't acknowledged. They were emailing many people every day or writing reports for their organisation. They found it helpful to see these things *as* writing and to think about what skills they already had from this that could apply further.

For now you might like to think about write your own versions of the stepping stones above and think about where you are on them. What would be the next step along for you and how might you go about it? Next issue I will look at some further strategies for writing and also the kinds of writing that you might like to consider: particularly how to conduct and write counselling case-studies and small-scale quantitative and qualitative research.

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Notes on Contributor

Meg Barker is a writer of many things: websites, emails, textbooks, journal articles, 'self-help' materials, occasional fiction, and letters. She is fortunate enough to have a job (at the Open University) which encourages her to write (both for students and for academics) and to work in counselling practice (at Dilemma Consultancy) with an inspiring writing mentor Emmy Van Deurzen.

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