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## **Writing for Publication for Counsellors and Therapists – Part III**

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### **Abstract**

Following from the previous two articles in this series, in the previous issue of this journal, this article will complete the journey through guidance writing 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 these linked articles will consider the structure, tone and content of academic writing. After that, the current article will go through the process of submitting for publication, the review process and revising written work. The article will encourage readers to come up with a definite plan for a piece of written work.

### **Keywords**

Writing, style, content, structure, submission, review.

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This is the final article in my series about writing for publication, based on the Taylor & Francis workshops which I put on for BASRT members in 2009 and 2010. Last issue we continued thinking about strategies for easing the process of writing, and our anxieties about it. We also covered three key kinds of writing (beyond simple essays or reviews) which counsellors and therapists might like to get involved with: case studies, and small scale quantitative and qualitative research.

This issue I want to think more about the writing process itself. Once you have a case study, piece of research, or essay which you want to write, how do you go about it? We'll start by considering some writing tips and then I'll take you through the process of submitting for publication.

### **Writing tips**

Overall the best thing to do is to find a paper or chapter you like which is in the same kind of publication that you want to publish in (ideally the exact same journal). Use that as a model and just adapt it for your purposes. Make sure that you do everything the same way they have done and you can't go far wrong. Of course you need to avoid plagiarism. This means that you mustn't have anything word-for-word in your paper as someone else put it unless you put it in quotes and reference the original source with its page number.

Also, ensure that you follow the Information for Authors closely. Many papers are rejected simply because they don't follow the required format, word limit, referencing style, etc. The more you make your paper look like ones that have already been published (font, line spacing, headings, etc.) psychologically the more the editors will already feel that it is for them!

### *Structure*

So you want to write a paper or chapter. The first thing you do is to get a nice blank sheet of paper or word-processing file open in front of you and start writing that first paragraph right? Wrong. The best way to bring on writers block is to sit down and try to write like

this: cold. Similarly if you already have a lot of notes written down it is probably worth putting them aside while you work on the structure, and then bringing them back in.

Start by focusing on structure. Spend some time (on a walk, or talking with a friend)) thinking about what you want to write, remembering that you need to tell a story through it that the reader will find clear and engaging and which will be easy to follow. If you've already done a presentation on the topic that might be very helpful in terms of structuring your paper. Remember that you will need an introduction and a conclusion, and that it would be good to break up the rest of your writing into subsections so that the reader can see where you are going. You might end up with something like this (for a case study on vaginismus and gender issues).

Introduction

Vaginismus

Gender specific issues

Case Study

Conclusions

Once you have your subheadings, like this, break down each one into paragraphs. Say you intend to write a 5000 word paper you might decide to have 500 words each for introduction and conclusions, 1000 for the first two subsections, and 2000 for the case study itself. So that'd be around 3 paragraphs in the introduction and conclusions, 6 in the first two subsections, and 12 in the case study (if a paragraph is around 150 words long).

With paragraphs it is useful to think that each paragraph should start by making the point of the paragraph and then should use the rest of the paragraph to support that point. So you can now expand your structure to include the main points each paragraph will make (and mention after each one the material that you want to draw on to support it). For example:

### **Introduction (500)**

- \* State how common vaginismus is and that it has been linked to female gender roles (reference Tiefer, 1995)
- \* Set out the structure of this paper and the way the case study will be used to illustrate it

### **Vaginismus (1000)**

- \* What it is, what the experience is like for sufferers
- \* Purely biomedical explanations
- \* Problems with these
- \* Psychological explanations
- \* These don't really take account of the problematic relationship women have traditionally had with sex – so we need an understanding that also considers this

### **Gender specific issues (1000)**

- \* Back as far as Simone de Beauvoir (1949) there was concern about women's relationship to sex and their needing to be seen as objects of desire
- \* 1980s studies displayed lots of anxiety about sex. It was seen as something women need to give in order to retain heterosexual relationship
- \* This is related to wider idea that women need to be 'for-others' rather than 'for-themselves'
- \* There has been a more recent turn to more sexualised young women 'choosing' sex (reference Gill, 2006)
- \* But we need to question whether this turn is still about male, more than female, desire
- \* There is evidence that young women are still struggling to enjoy sex and are anxious about it

### **Case Study (2000)**

- \* Introduce client Helen – what she was like in the first session
- \* Use her own words to describe the experience of vaginismus
- \* Early sessions focused on her trying to solve it so she could give her partner sex
- \* Helen's fears of losing her partner
- \* Linked to concern generally about how others see her – wanting approval
- \* Explorations in therapy about being for-self or for-others (de Beauvoir, 1949)
- \* Key moment when Helen reported 'telling off' her friend
- \* Return to sex – tuning into her desires – how it was left with Helen

### **Conclusions (500)**

- \* Pull out key themes with Helen – being for others, giving sex to keep relationship
- \* Relate back to vaginismus therapy – important to keep these possibilities in mind rather than focusing only on a physical approach or psychological approach which doesn't take enough account of societal forces around young women today

Hopefully you can see that once you have this in front of you it will be a great deal easier, and less scary, to build it up into the final paper or chapter. It is also helpful in terms of time management because you can plan, each time you work on it, to write one or two specific paragraphs, rather than being confronted with 5000 words. For reports of research it is important to remember that there is a standard way of setting these out (introduction, method, results, discussion) so you must make sure you follow that (see [www.psych.upenn.edu/~baron/labrep.html](http://www.psych.upenn.edu/~baron/labrep.html)).

Whatever kind of publication you write, if it is for a journal they will probably require an abstract. This is a brief summary of the paper so you should make sure that you succinctly say what the main points or arguments in the paper are, rather than just saying what you are going to talk about (that would be an overview rather than a summary). For *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* the word limit for the abstract is 100 words. Also it is likely that you will need to provide 5 or so keywords. For example: vaginismus, female sexual dysfunction, sex therapy, gender, femininity (for the above example).

### *Style*

Once you have your structure for the paper down to the main point you want to make in each paragraph, then you can flesh each paragraph out. Dixon's useful (2001) article on writing for publication for health practitioners includes the advice for this stage: 'first get it down, then get it right'. It is useful to go through the first time just writing each paragraph so it says what you want it to say but not worrying too much about language, punctuation, etc. Where you know you'll want to put in a reference you can always put 'ref' in brackets for now so that you don't halt your flow by going down and chasing down the right book or paper. It can be good to leave a gap of at least a few days between 'getting it down' and 'getting it right' so that you come back to it fresh and can spot any errors more easily.

Also think about when you write. Sitting down and trying to churn out a whole paper or chapter in a day is probably not a good idea. Think about which time of day you find best for writing. Think about spreading the writing out over a week or so. The popular psychologist Richard Wiseman has written many books by giving himself a couple of hours each morning to write a thousand words. Recognise when you are really in the zone to write and write then, also when you're really not in the zone don't try to force it.

Dixon (2001) also suggests early on thinking through the key messages that you want to put across in the article and writing a very clear sentence for each of these which you can incorporate into your paper (e.g. answering the questions 'why did I do this work?', 'why is it important?', 'what has been done on it before?', 'what did I do?', 'what did I find?', 'what did I conclude?' and 'what are the implications?')

Here are a few pointers on writing style for when you are polishing your piece.

- Use short sentences rather than long ones with lots of clauses. Anything well over 20 words is probably too long to easily follow
- Make sure that each sentence follows well from the last. If not, put in linking sentences
- Explain any jargon terms. Actually it is much better to keep it simple than to try to write 'academically'
- Make sure the key points you are making are very clear at the start of the paragraph and probably revisit them at the end of the paragraph before linking on to the next paragraph
- As you are writing you may well decide to break down paragraphs that are becoming over long and complex into two or three (remember to break so each has a main point)
- Don't be afraid to use diagrams or bullet points to help clarify or spell things out

In terms of readability it is often very helpful to read a paragraph out aloud when you have finished it to ensure that it makes sense. Getting friends to read over your work and

say if there is anything they don't understand, or which could be clearer, is also invaluable.

If you are unfamiliar with referencing it is worth reading a brief guide to this (see Epstein & Kenway, 2007). Remember that most journals have slightly different styles so the best thing to do is to check past papers they have published and follow these. You need to put a reference in the text (surname, date) each time you mention information that comes from elsewhere to acknowledge that. It is good practice not to make unsupported claims but to make sure you provide a reference that shows where your statements are supported and some explanation of the kind of support this is (research study, theoretical idea, etc.). If you can't do this then be more cautious in your claims.

Finally it is good to know when to stop. We've already said that you're aiming for 'good enough' rather than perfection. Remember that you will almost definitely have to make some changes after the review process so it is best not to get the paper *too* perfect, otherwise it'll be more difficult to 'murder your darlings' when you're asked to make changes.

### **Submitting for publication**

Many journals nowadays have online submission which take you through step-by-step how to upload your article. Alternatively you may just be expected to email your paper to the editor as an attachment. Or, occasionally, to submit a number of hard copies in the post. Make sure that your article is anonymous before submitting (no names on it and separate biographies) because it will generally be sent out for anonymous review (see Information for Authors for details on this, plus inclusion of figures, pictures, etc.) Again if you struggle with the technology it is worth finding a peer who can help you with this and offer them something in return.

### *The review processes*

Once your paper is submitted to any 'peer reviewed' journal it will be sent out to two (or occasionally three) reviewers by the editor (people in the same field who will read it and respond to it). It is definitely worth suggesting people for this role if you have the chance.

The reviewers usually have the following options with your paper:

- Accept
- Accept with minor revisions (if there are few errors, references missing, etc.)
- Accept with major revisions (if you have missed out key ideas or sections are unclear, etc.)
- Revise and resubmit (if it has potential but is just not good enough for publication yet)
- Reject

So how can you ensure a happy reviewer/editor?

- Aim for the right journal for the piece. It is frustrating for them if this clearly isn't the right journal (e.g. if it is submitted to *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* and doesn't really relate to sex or relationship therapy)
- Make sure that you have checked your paper several times and had it checked by a friend so there are no simple spelling or grammar errors, typos or lapses in clarity
- Make sure you haven't left any notes to yourself, highlighting, etc. in the final version
- Make sure you reference properly throughout
- Use the correct font and format of the journal
- Don't go over the word limit
- Make sure everything is clearly explained for a reader who isn't familiar with the theory, research or case you are writing about. Avoid jargon and keep it concise.
- Ideally have it checked by someone who knows the field before submitting to make sure there are no obvious omissions

- Remove hyperbole (extremely, uniquely, really, etc.) and emotive terms for an academic article – the argument should be strong enough to speak for itself

### *Dealing with rejection/amendment*

Expect to get rejected – this is part of the process. A useful analogy is that a sports person intends to win every game but doesn't expect that they will. The same is true for submitting papers. Many publications have a rejection rate of 80% or more so this is very common. This can be very strange for people who have just finished an academic course where they have passed every essay well. A rejection can feel like receiving an 'F' on a piece of work, which is very unfamiliar if you've generally been getting As, Bs and Cs. It is *not* the same thing. A rejection is not a failure in that sense. Many 'A' grade papers get rejected for all kinds of reasons (e.g. not fitting the journal content for that year, not being quite the kind of thing they publish, being great but not quite as high quality as other submissions, being unlucky with a reviewer who has a very different view, or simply being one paper more than they can fit in).

Also it is incredibly uncommon to have a manuscript accepted with no revisions. Expect to have to put at least another day into your paper once you get it back from the review process to address these points, and probably another few hours once it has been accepted and when it is at the proofs stage (when the editor will contact you with a list of queries about references and so on). It is not uncommon to have to go back and read some additional papers or re-analyse some data.

Try to do all the revisions that you are asked to do, but don't feel that you have to do any that completely go against your beliefs or the point or flow of your paper. Simply explain your reasoning behind not making such changes very politely in an email to the editor accompanying your resubmitted paper. It may be that the reviewers disagree and you have to think creatively about how to amend the paper in the light of their comments. Again most editors will be happy that you have done your best. Unless it is 'revise and resubmit' it is unlikely to go out to the reviewers again anyway.

### *The human factor*

The publication process can seem very harsh and cold, and the online systems we have now exacerbate this further. The review process is anonymous (both you to the reviewer and the reviewer to you) which, as we know from psychological research, makes it a lot easier for people to be cruel. Sadly many academics and professionals seem to have chips on their shoulders and use the review process as a chance to lash out at someone (perhaps because they have received unkind reviews themselves). If you ever get to be a reviewer yourself then please make sure that you halt this cycle of abuse! It is perfectly possible to be compassionate and constructive even when rejecting a paper.

To make it a more human process it can be good to get to know the editors of the journal personally (either at conferences or over email). It is fine to drop them an email to ask if they might be interested in the kind of thing you are submitting. The best thing you can do is to read lots of papers and get involved with relevant journals. Offer to be on the editorial board or email the editors saying that you'd be happy to review papers for them (they will be very grateful). Make sure you read the journal regularly.

When you do receive a cold-sounding email from the editor remember that it likely comes from an automated process rather than an individual. If you respond to this email then you will get into a dialogue with a real human being!

### **Where do we go from here?**

Returning to our question of 'why write?' at the beginning of this series of articles, it is important to think about whether journal publication is really the be-all and end-all. Whilst I would be very keen to get your case studies, research and essays into the journals I'm involved with, there can be a sense that academic publication is terribly important. Actually fairly low numbers of people actually read academic journals (a few more read professional ones like *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*). What is really

important is that your ideas, practices and participant experiences get *out there* to the audiences who will find it most useful.

Think about other means of dissemination, such as speaking at conferences, posting on the web, engaging with the public via media or other means, feeding back research to the participants themselves, informing policy, making videos, posters, etc. You can even self-publish your own booklets or web pages. Publication in 'recognised journals' is not the only (or even best) way in every case. Also remember about writing for the love of it. When you love writing that comes across to the reader. Trying to write in a way that is unfamiliar and overly constraining is not great.

Now that you have read through my advice about how to write in these three articles I suggest that you allow yourself a little time doing what attendees did at the end of the workshop: Think about a definite plan for a publication. What do you want to write about? For what audience? Where will you submit it to first? When will your deadline be to have something submitted? Remember to start at the place you are comfortable at on the gradual exposure list and to remember your reasons for writing for publication in the first place. Then have a go at writing a structure for this piece as suggested above (building up from subheadings to paragraph points). You'll be amazed at how quickly you have a realistic plan which you can take forward.

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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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