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Writing for publication – some advice and tips

by

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There are many reasons to write for publication: the thrill of seeing your name in print, prestige, for your CV and job prospects, and to inform colleagues about innovative practice. All of these are author focused. Additionally there are other reasons why those working in healthcare should engage in writing. All healthcare professionals have a requirement to update themselves and keep themselves current. This requires there to be a literature base from which they can select articles relevant to their practice to read and inform that practice. Therefore it can be said that writing for publication is a professional duty.

However, many healthcare professionals see writing for publication as an arduous pursuit and not one that they can engage with. This article hopes to show you that writing is something that everyone can do if they follow some simple guidelines.

Subject matter for your article

The first thing that you need to decide upon is a topic for your article and what sort of article you want to write. For your first article, it is advisable to choose a subject that you know well. You need to be able to explain what you are going to be writing about to your readers; you need to come across as being authoritative and informed so that they can have trust in your writing.

As you become a more experienced writer, you can undertake research into subjects and then write them, thus being able to write on subject that you are not so familiar with. But for your first few, keep to subjects that you can write about without the need for too much research so that your individual voice and message comes through.

Types of article published

Once you have an idea for a subject you need to choose the format or type of article you want to write. There are many different types of journal article from the more academic to less so. Some of these include:

Original research articles

Depending upon the journal, these can vary from the very academic and 'dry' to read to those that are more descriptive of current research. Their aim is to present a piece of research that has been undertaken and show its relevance to current practice.

Research articles tend to follow a similar pattern and, depending upon the journal, include an abstract, introduction, literature review, aims, methodology, results, discussion and a conclusion. Unless you have been part of a research team, I would advise against a research article as your first publication.

Literature reviews

The aim of a literature review is to show current thinking on a particular subject or area of practice. They should provide a thorough coverage of the chosen topic or aspect of practice, from both sides of any debate. They should have accurate and up to date referencing. They should also have a strong conclusion that clearly brings together all the various strands of the topic or practice and states what current thinking is on the topic or practice area.

Practice descriptions

These can be very effective in detailing something innovative or how a particular change has been put into practice. They can show how specific areas of practice such as a clinic or department operate the new system or how the role of a particular individual has been used to change practice. They can also be used to discuss the effects of a new procedure. When writing these forms of article, as well as discussing the new development or the innovation in practice, you also need to show how this is relevant for other healthcare professionals or other departments and units.

Opinion/debate pieces

These can be fun to write and are often recommended for those new to writing. Essentially, you are giving your opinion on a particular aspect of practice or a proposed change. However, although it is your opinion you are writing about, there are still some features you should aim to include. You need to ensure that your structure and writing is logical. You need to guide your reader through your argument, so that you lead them point by point to your conclusion. An introduction which sets out the area of your discussion and your main line of argument is essential, as well as a conclusion that summarises your main points.

Case studies

These seem to be losing popularity as articles in their own right but are still used within other forms of article. There has to be a reason for the case study; there is no point just describing the care of a particular patient. The case study should have a key point or points you wish to make. If you wish to publish a case study, ask yourself what does the care or treatment of this particular patient illustrate that would be of use to other healthcare professionals?

Book reviews

These are not strictly classified as an article but can be extremely useful for those who wish to develop a writing style to consider. My first ever publication was a book review. There are many ways of reviewing books for publication. Probably the easiest is to contact the book review editor of a journal that you are familiar with and ask them if they are looking for any reviewers; briefly explain your background and the areas in which you could review books.

Each journal will have its own format or style of book review that they publish. So before approaching the book review editor, look at several book reviews in the journal you are interested in and try to determine what style of review they are looking for and whether that is a style that you could write. Most journals will send you the book and let you keep provided that you send them a written review.

Letters to the editor

Again these are not strictly articles, but they are a good way of developing and establishing your writing. A good letter can be as difficult to write as an article. You will have a word limit and so will have to get your point across succinctly but also vividly and interestingly. It is easier to write about something that has either fired your imagination or has piqued you in some way. However, be careful not to let your feelings run away with you and to have a point to your letter.

When choosing a style of article to write, consider what form of article you read. If you read a particular kind of article, it is probable that this is the form of article that you could most successfully write.

Choosing a journal for your article

Now that you have a subject for your article and a style of article that you want to write, where are you going to send it to be published? It is said that successful writers will write an article specifically for the journal they are sending it to, to maximise their chances of having it published.

There are many different kind of journals published for healthcare professionals. Each will have its own identity and its own target audience, and will have a range of articles that the editor believes are suitable for that audience. For instance, some journals will not publish opinion pieces whilst others will not publish original research articles. Ask yourself whether the target audience of the journal is the target audience you want to write for. Would you read that particular journal, would you read the types of article that the journal publishes? If not, ask why you want to write for that journal. If the journal does not publish the type of article that you want to write, you need to find another journal or change the style of your article.

Writing that first article

Assuming that you have your subject area, you need to see what has been published on that topic in the last 6 – 12 months. If you find that practically every journal you would consider writing for has published an article on your chosen topic, unless you can come up with a novel viewpoint your chances of getting published are not very high. It may be that you need to put that topic to one side for a period of time and choose another one.

If you are in the lucky position of finding that your topic has not been written about recently, you need to clarify your style of article and the journal you will be writing for.

Immerse yourself in the style of article and also your chosen journal's overall style. You can then write your article for that particular journal. You need to know what kind of references they use and adopt that approach; do you need any tables or photographs; do they use headings and sub-headings, how do they differentiate between different types of heading. Write in the style of the journal that you are going to send your article to. If they have articles that are friendly and chatty, then

your article must be friendly and chatty; if they adopt a more academic or serious tone, then so must your article. This is why choosing the right journal at the outset is so important.

Increasing your chances of getting an article published

Even if you have followed the advice above and chosen your subject well and picked an appropriate style of article for a journal which targets your audience, there are still some things you can do to improve your chances of being published.

An article that expresses some interesting ideas in a clear manner on something that is relevant to the readers of the journal is more likely to have it published than if your article looks like it is part of an assignment you had to write.

Some things to consider:

- Follow the journal's normal style, especially with regard to references
- Avoid abbreviations, if possible, or explain them on first use
- Proofread – it is amazing how many typographical errors can get through, so once you have done it a first time, proofread again. Better still, get someone else to proofread it for you
- Avoid lengthy paragraphs; reading without breaks in the writing can be tiring
- Keep in the normal range of word length for that journal

You should be aiming for an article that:

- Is clear in its message
- Is precise in its writing
- Has brevity, don't use too many words
- Doesn't dress up its message in fancy words or try to use complicated language – 'a nod is as good as a wink to a blind horse' is always preferred to a slight inclination of the cranium is as sufficient as a spasmodic movement of an optic toward an equine quadruped utterly devoid of any visionary capacity'.
- Is complete – you don't want to leave your readers searching for more on your topic because you haven't rounded off your discussion
- Is objective – even for an opinion piece

- Grabs the reader's attention
- Follows the journal's house style

Finally

Once you have done all that, put it to one side for a couple of days. Then once you have forgotten it, go back and read it. If you enjoy reading it and can see the point it is making, it is ready to be send to the editor of your chosen journal.

Send an e-mail to the editor of your chosen journal and briefly explain what your article is about and why you think that their readers will be interested in reading it. Be respectful and polite but try to give the impression that if they don't publish this article their readers will be missing out.

Good luck.