

Writing for Publication Workshop

Aim: To draft a journal article that has a good chance of being accepted by your target journal.



Professor Frank Sullivan
Family Practice Research Skills Workshops
November 13th 2015

HOUSEKEEPING

1. How to use this course book

This workbook is for you to use during the workshop. Feel free to make extra notes and generally make it useful to you. I hope that you will keep it as a record of what we have covered.

2. Action lists

The blank spaces are provided to note any action points that will occur to you during the workshop. These should be specific actions that you can immediately put into effect.

3. Interruptions

Please turn off your mobile phones during the teaching sessions.

WORKSHEET 1: COMMON PROBLEMS

1. Check (✓) the following statements that apply to you.

- I don't have enough time to write
- I have too many good ideas
- I suffer from writer's block
- I find it hard to structure the article
- I am not sure when to write the title and abstract
- Other people keep correcting what I write
- I spend too much time rewriting
- I don't know if I've written a good article
- I don't know which journal to send my article to
- Getting past the reviewers is a major problem

2. Do you have any other writing problems?

GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

Goal:

Write a journal article that has the potential of being accepted by the target journal.

Objectives:

By the end of this workshop you will be able to:

- Identify the main characteristics of an article which is likely to be accepted by a journal,
- Make informed decisions on time management and journal choice,
- Set a 'writer's brief' by making decisions in five key areas,
- Use brain-storming techniques to expand this brief,
- Understand the structure of each of the four main sections of a standard journal article,
- Construct a plan for each section,
- Maximise creativity when writing the first draft,
- Use macro-editing and micro-editing techniques to make constructive changes to the first draft,
- Understand the advantages and pitfalls of internal reviewing.

STEP 1: UNDERSTAND THE PROCESS

1. The conventional view of journal articles

The assumption is that scientists should write up their work. If the work is good, it is accepted for publication. The best work becomes disseminated and knowledge advances. The criteria on which papers are accepted are generally considered to include the following:ⁱ

- Original
- Important
- Relevant to the audience
- True

There are three difficulties with this approach:

- The definition of a 'good paper' varies from person to person;
- The final choice of papers is made on subjective grounds;
- Medical publishing has now taken on other functions, such as ascribing hierarchies and pay – and publicising pharmaceutical products.

2. A more comfortable approach: the marketing model

An alternative approach is to view the task of getting published as **an exercise in persuasion**.ⁱⁱ You should approach the process as a sales person rather than someone taking an examination. This has some practical implications.

3. The effective communication model

Rather than aiming to please the unknown reviewers, you should **aim your work directly at the editor** of your target journal. ⁱⁱⁱ You will be able to understand what the editor wants by reading recent articles in that journal over the past year. Many points of style (e.g., how many paragraphs for the introduction) will be answered by looking in the journal. This is a concept of ‘evidence-based’ writing.

This model gives a new definition of a good paper, which is that it is published in your target journal. This makes the task more manageable. It also introduces the concept of the ‘false-feedback look’: when others (co-authors, supervisors, partners and yourself) make comments that may not necessarily be helpful in your task of selling the paper to the editor.

Remember:

- ***Writing for a journal is an exercise in writing a journal article. It is not a measure of whether you are a good human being or an adequate doctor.***

STEP 2: UNDERSTAND THE KEY PEOPLE

YOURSELF

1. Why do you want to write a paper?

Be realistic about what you want to achieve and why. Reasons include:

- It is part of your job,
- You need to publish to advance your career,
- You enjoy research,
- You want to share your findings with others.

Choose **only one as your priority** for the next 12 months

2. In which journals do you need to publish?

This will depend on your current goal (see 1, above). Once you have decided on two or three suitable journals, you should start reading them regularly.

3. By when?

Set a deadline. Be specific.

4. What are your publishing goals for each year?

These should be specific, measurable, agreed/ambitious, realistic and time-limited. Review them regularly.

THE EDITOR

Editors need good articles to have a successful journal. You should produce them.

Remember:

- ***The most important component of a journal article is you, the writer!***

STEP 3: SET THE BRIEF

1. Importance of setting the brief

Writing is not an extension of research or thinking, but a distinct process. It should therefore have a definite starting point. This process can be formalised as setting the brief. The time spent on this process is not wasted.

Once you have settled on your message, you can test it. For example: is it likely to be of any interest and do you have the evidence to support it?

2. What a good brief should contain:

- The message: **one sentence of about 10 words**,
- The **market**, so that you start market research,
- The **format**: which is determined by the market,
- The **deadline**: which should be divided into several deadlines,
- The **co-authors**: deciding these in advance helps enormously.

3. Get agreement on the brief

If you cannot get the co-authors to agree on a 12-word message and a suitable market right now, you will have terrible trouble doing so later on.

Remember:

- ***If you cannot describe your message clearly, your writing will probably fail.***

WORKSHEET 2: SET THE BRIEF

Message (about 10 words):

Journal:

Format:

Deadline(s):

Co-authors:^{iv}

WHY WRITING FAILS

Here are some common reasons why papers are rejected for publication:^v

- The study did not examine an important scientific issue.
- The study was not original – that is, someone else has already done the same or a similar study.
- The study did not actually test the author's hypothesis.
- A different type of study should have been done.
- Practical difficulties (for example, in recruiting subjects) led the authors to compromise on the original study protocol.
- The sample size was too small.
- The study was uncontrolled or inadequately controlled.
- The statistical analysis was incorrect or inappropriate.
- The authors have drawn unjustified conclusions from their data.
- There is a considerable conflict of interest (for example, one of the authors or a sponsor might benefit financially from the publication of the paper and insufficient safeguards were seen to be in place to guard against bias).

You must sort out these problems before you start the writing process.

CHOOSING A JOURNAL

There are many reasons for choosing a journal:

- You goals: what do you want to achieve with your time?
- Goals of others: what do they want to achieve (mainly with your time)?
- Strength of the message: the more prestigious journals will only be interested in the more interesting messages.
- Hierarchy of research: the more rigorous the research (and the greater the numbers studied!), the more likely you are to be published in a more prestigious journal.
- Evidence of 'thread': journals have conversations within their own pages, and the trick is to find an answer to a question that has already been raised.
- Appropriate format: some journals, for instance do not publish case reports.
- Links with the journal: knowing an editor or an associate editor, for example, will help you obtain good quality market information.
- Status of journal: other things being equal, which journal has the highest impact factor and therefore will give you the most 'points'?

Avoid the 'downward spiral' approach to marketing: this starts with the 'most prestigious' journal and then (as the authors see it) spirals down... This wastes time and energy. Instead we advocate an evidence-based approach for identifying journals that you think will be suitable.

STEP 4: ORGANISE THE INFORMATION

1. Know the market

You should have a clear idea of the journal article requirements and of your chosen journal in particular.

2. Know the subject

Refresh yourself about your own work. Results should be made into rough tables.

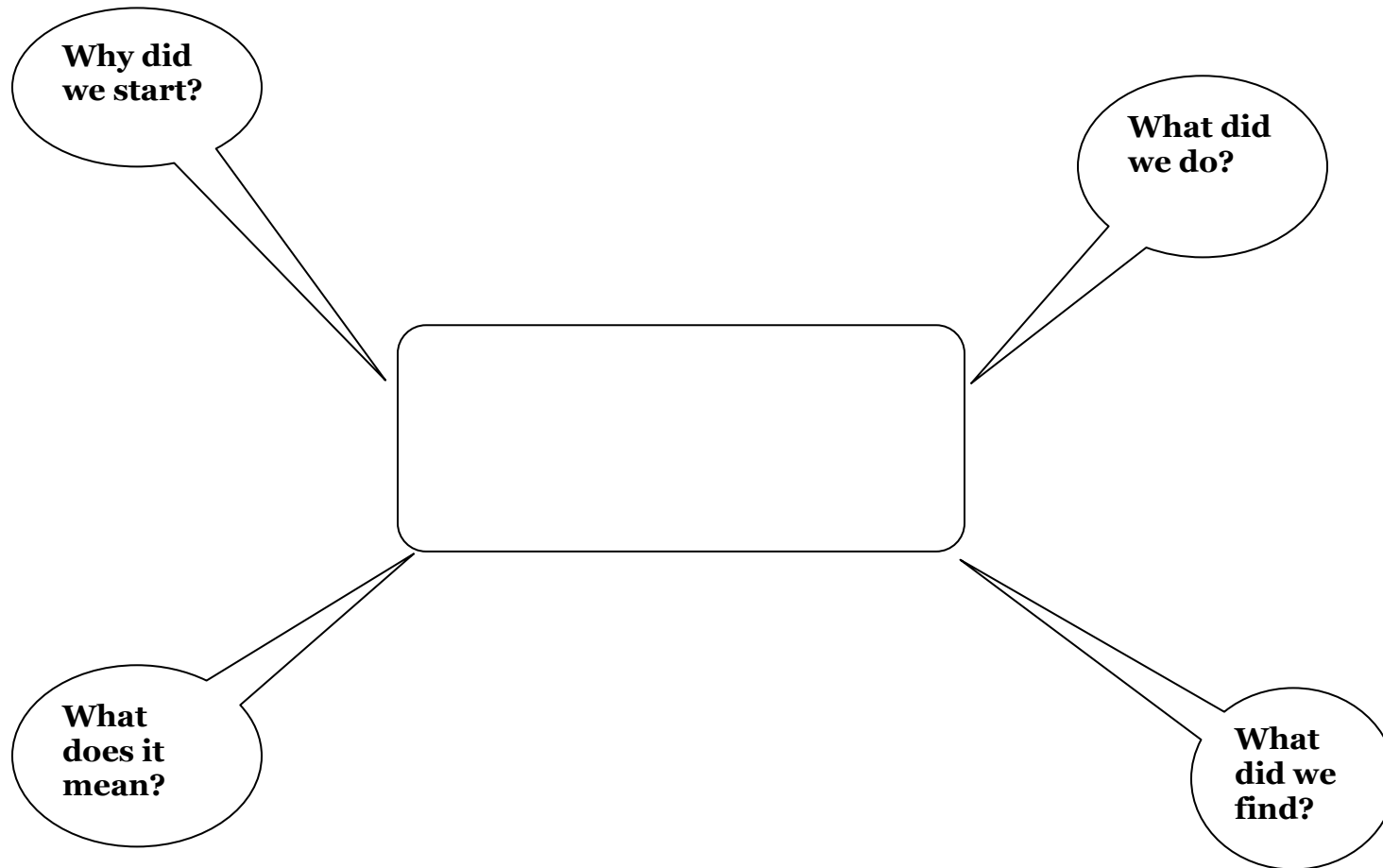
3. Organise the information

- Leave the data on one side.
- Write your message on a piece of paper.
- Write down the four main questions:
 - Why did we start?
 - What did we do?
 - What did we find?
 - What does it mean?

4. Think

Set aside about 10 minutes and brainstorm, working out from the centre of the page. In this way you will be organising your information to suit your brief.^{vi}

JOURNALS: COLLECTING THE INFORMATION



Principles:

1. Write the message (12 words with verb) in the centre.
2. Work out from the centre as far as you can go.
3. Return and start the process again.
4. Keep to one or two words per point.
5. Avoid lists.
6. Don't make value judgements (yet).

Reference: The mind Map Book, Tony Buzan, London: BBC Books. 1993. UK.

STEP 5: WRITE THE PLAN(S)

1. Use the paragraph as your building block

A piece of writing is made up of several units of thought. These are paragraphs. Each paragraph should start with a clear message (or 'topic sentence').^{vii} Paragraphs are easier to manage than word counts.

2. For a journal article, follow the IMRAD structure:

- **Introduction**: typically 2-3 paragraphs which answer the question: **'Why did you start?'** It starts with a formulaic opening sentence (usually a 'seminar' type) and ends with a key sentence which says something like: 'In this study we...'
- **Method**: typically 6-7 paragraphs, which answer the question: **'What did you do?'**
- **Results**: typically 6-7 paragraphs, which answer the question: **'What did you find?'**
- **Discussion**: typically 5-6 paragraphs, which answer the question: **'What does it all mean?'** The first sentence of this section provides a summary of what you found. You should then talk about shortcomings, how it fits in with other findings, implications for research, clinical practice, etc. The last sentence should be a clear statement for the implication, i.e., the message defined when setting the brief.

3. Follow the style in your target journal

For any other type of article, look in your target journal, analyse the style it prefers, and follow it.^{viii}

4. Construct a plan

Work out how many paragraphs you will use for each section, and the topic of each paragraph. Use key words, not full sentences, when you write your plan. Make a note of your four key sentences.

Remember:

- *You are creating an outline, not writing an examination.*

WORKSHEET 3: PLANS(S)

Introduction:

-
-
-

Methods:

-
-
-
-
-
-
-

Results:

-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-

Discussion:

-
-
-
-
-
-

STEP 6: WRITE THE ARTICLE

1. Be creative

A major problem with writing is that we can too easily allow our critical faculties to dominate. The answer is to prepare well, and start writing straight away. Do not 'correct' your work as you write.

2. You need three components:

- The plan: make sure you have this in front of you. This is your route map and will tell you which way you need to go.
- An implement: some means of writing, whether it be a word processor, dictating machine or pencil.
- Peace and quiet: though probably less than you think.

3. Don't fight writer's block

Usually the best solution is to do something different. Sometimes the problem may be more serious, and could reflect that you are unclear about what you are writing. You may have to revisit your brief.

4. Try to write each section in one attempt

This should give the writing continuity.

Remember:

- ***This is the first draft only: it does not have to be perfect.***

STEP 7: REWRITE THE ARTICLE

1. Macro-editing

First ask yourself the major questions (that are often ignored):

- Is there a clear message?
- Is this message still appropriate for the market that you have chosen?
- Is it supported by evidence?
- Is the structure appropriate?
- Is the tone appropriate for you target journal?

2. Micro-editing

Now look to the details.

- Check your facts: make sure there are no errors and that you can prove everything you say. Do you have enough evidence to support your writing?
- Look for important omissions: use the checklists put out by your target journal.
- Check the grammar and spelling: use electronic and human help.
- Tidy up the style: others will want to make changes so don't spend too much time on this. Aim to put your information across simply and clearly.

Remember:

- ***Ask the macro questions as well as the micro.***

STYLE EXERCISE

Turn to more readable English using as few (unreadable words) as possible:

Research networks are organisations which encourage interaction and provide a variable amount of central organisation to clinicians and academics who want to work together. Similar motivations in all four devolved nations have led to a strong impetus for a UK wide strategy, not least in primary care where 80% of all NHS consultations take place.

We examine here the potential of the different approaches adopted in the four countries to enable synergy between research in primary (generalist) and secondary (disease specific) care across the UK as a whole. The different approaches offer a natural experiment in the development of service infrastructure for research, as well as an opportunity for different nations to learn from each other^{ix}.

STEP 8: USE INTERNAL REVIEWERS

1. Voluntary reviewing

Choose carefully whom you will invite and why. You will probably need four different types of feedback though some people may fulfil more than one role:

- An outsider: can they spot any stupid mistakes?
- A linguist: is the language appropriate?
- A colleague: are there any major omissions or logical flaws?
- Another colleague: if they were the reviewer what would they say?

2. Compulsory

- Co-authors: beware changes that will make the paper less suitable for the target audience. Make sure you have already agreed the brief with the co-authors – and remind them of that fact and that you are the lead author. Otherwise they may try to make you write a different article for a different audience. Of course remember this if the positions are reversed.
- Professors/supervisors: at this stage you need good negotiation skills. Allow through all changes that will increase the article's chances of being accepted.

Remember:

- ***Incorporate changes that are likely to increase your chances of getting published: otherwise negotiate...***

ADDING THE EXTRAS

For your target journal, do you know:

- What is the maximum number of references required?
- Which comes first in the references: author or title?
- What is the maximum number of illustrations?
- Is the abstract written in the active or passive?
- Does the journal use 'structured abstracts'?
- How long are the titles?
- Do they have verbs?
- Do they use colons?
- Do you need to state what involvements each author had?
- Is a conflict of interest statement required?

STEP 9: ADD THE EXTRAS

1. References

The purpose of references is to support statement in the text, not to show how clever you are. Go through your draft, adding references where required. Follow the style laid down in the relevant EQUATOR guidelines or *Instructions to Authors*. The author is responsible for all references, so make sure you have read the papers you cite, and double check that you have copied down their locations accurately. If you have no references from your target journal, you might want to ask yourself if that is really journal you should be aiming for.

2. Tables and illustrations

Prepare the final versions once you have completed the draft. Make sure they are presented in the style required by you target journal: look at previous articles in the journal for guidance.

3. Abstract

Approach the abstract as if it were a separate piece of writing (i.e. go through the stages outlined already). Follow the market requirements: is it a structured abstract, for instance? Most abstracts are written in the passive – but check in your target journal.

4. Title page

Choose the kind of title that the journal favours; variables include length, presence/absence of verbs; use of semi-colons. Follow the *Instructions to Authors* as to what else to include in the title page; normally it will list all authors, their place(s) of work, author for correspondence, etc. Journals will also require a declaration of interest (e.g. funding from the manufacturer of the drug being tested). See ICMJE: summary of technical requirements.^{iv}

5. Letter to the editor

This is an often overlooked, but vital, part of the package. A good letter will establish three things:

- Who you are: how the letter looks is as important as what it says.
- What are you sending: give the editor the message and not just the title (this is particularly important if the title has no verb).
- Why it should be published: draw attention to previous papers in your target journal to which your paper will add; give any other reasons for inclusion – but delicately. Remember, the editor’s job is to choose; yours is to provide information to enable that choice is to be made.

If the *Instructions to Authors* have specific requirements about the letter, make sure you meet them. Normally all authors must sign.

Remember:

- *These additional items are an important part of the package.*

STEP 10: POST THE PACKAGE

1. Collect the package

Make sure that you have everything. Make a final check of the *Instructions to Authors*.

2. Keep copies

Make sure you keep a copy of everything.

Remember:

- ***You have now completed the first stage of your mission, which is due to send off a completed article...***

STEP 11: CELEBRATE

You don't need me to make suggestions here...

STEP 12: WAIT

- Respond to the reviewers' and editor's comments.
- Unless these are a flat rejection, they are usually constructive. If you respond effectively, then publication is likely to follow.
- If rejected, the comments are often still useful in deciding what to do next.

References

- ⁱ *Lock S Thorne's Better Medical Writing*. John Wiley & Sons. 1977.
- ⁱⁱ Asher R. *Talking sense Churchill Livingstone*.1985.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Winning the Publications Game and other books at www.timalbert.co.uk
- ^{iv} ICMJE Guidelines on Authorship and Contributorship: <http://www.icmje.org/>
- ^v Greenhalgh T. How to read a paper: getting your bearings (deciding what the paper is about). *British Medical Journal*, 315:243. 1997. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.315.7102.243>.
- ^{vi} Hall GM: *How to write a paper?* Second Edition, London, UK: BMJ Publishing Group.
- ^{vii} Sullivan FM, Swan IRC, Donnan PT, Morrison JMM, Smith BM, McKinstry B, Davenport RJ, Vale LD, Clarkson JE, Hammersley V, Hayavi S and Daly FD. Early Treatment with Prednisolone or Acyclovir and Recovery in Bell's Palsy. *New England Journal of Medicine*. 357:1598-607. 2007.
- ^{viii} Orwell G. *Politics and the English Language*. 1946.
- ^{ix} Sullivan F, Butler C, Cupples M, Kinmonth AL. Primary care research networks in the United Kingdom. *British Medical Journal*. 334:1093-4. 2007.