

# Publishing a manuscript

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## Why Publish?

There are several valid responses to this question, which to my mind, is all too infrequently asked. These include, first and foremost, the dissemination of new and important research findings and the description of important and relevant clinical observations. Other manuscripts serve an important function by providing a critical review of research and clinical data while many would argue that the process of preparing a manuscript for publication and shepherding it through the entire process is, in of itself, a valuable educational experience. Less valid though perhaps more prevalent justifications for publication include a need to pad one's curriculum vitae and, thereby, successfully compete for promotion. More dubious goals may include an ambition to use "peer-reviewed" publications as a vehicle to advertise ones self, a clinic, a hospital or a pet technique or therapy. The pursuit of these latter goals may have brought us to the situation in which now we find ourselves; a plethora of journals covering every conceivable area of medicine, the majority publishing articles of questionable scientific merit and of little clinical value. In my opinion we need fewer journals publishing better work.

## The Basics

It is, therefore, incumbent upon all of us to address a few key questions before we even consider putting pen to paper. These include: do I have something to say; what is it; is it novel and/or worthwhile; could my message be improved if, for example, I had more data; who do I want to reach;

and, finally, is my message truly relevant to my target audience? I hope that having to address these issues will help, not only to improve the quality of your submission, but also to increase its likelihood of acceptance by a journal which is read by those who are most likely to benefit from your message.

There are other essential considerations that must be addressed before embarking on the manuscript. All ethical issues related to the performance of the investigation must be clearly resolved and addressed. Few, if any, reputable journals will even consider a paper for review, not to mind publication, without the appropriate ethical approvals. Along the same lines, all potential conflicts of interest relating to the work must be clearly stated so that the journal can adjudicate on their impact on the work. The advent of electronic communication has rendered it much easier to detect plagiarism and duplication; my own experience as an editor has shown me that sooner or later these will be detected and may lead to embarrassing retractions and impact severely on the offending author's academic career. For these reasons, as well as for those of simple courtesy and fair play, it is absolutely vital that all authors are in agreement on all aspects of the manuscript, including order of authorship. Some leading journals now also insist on the inclusion of details of the precise role of each author in the work reported. It is totally unacceptable, for example, that the department head be included in all manuscripts emanating from his or her department even when they have had no role whatsoever in the performance of the research or in the writing of the manuscript.

At the end of the day, we are all at the mercy of reviewers and editors. Given the aforementioned plethora of journals it should come as no surprise

that there is a finite pool of reviewers under constant pressure to review more and faster. It is essential, therefore, that you do not irritate or annoy these hard-pressed individuals. My own experience as a reviewer and as an editor has led me to identify certain areas which are guaranteed to really annoy even the most patient of reviewers and must, therefore, be avoided at all costs. First amongst these, and perhaps unfairly so if your first language is not English, is bad English. While many editors will take time and effort to improve the quality of grammar and syntax many reviewers will not and will give up confused and annoyed. A disorganized or over-long article will frustrate others, as will poor quality in the presentation of the manuscript or of its tables, references or figures. Pay particular attention to the accuracy of your references; do not be tempted to simply copy these from other manuscripts, the continued repetition of an other author's error is an instant indicator that the author under review has not taken the trouble to check, or even read, each manuscript included in the reference list. Authors must be consistent throughout; if the results and conclusions in the abstract and main text do not agree, the reviewer becomes suspicious.

### **Getting it Down on Paper**

There are many types of manuscript. Your submission may be an original article describing basic science, clinical research or even a meta-analysis of prior publications, a review, an editorial or commentary, a case report, a literature review or synopsis or a letter-to-the-editor. Each has its own ground rules.

Original articles represent the core content of all mainstream journals and carry a high impact. It is essential that you clearly understand and meticulously follow the guidelines for authors for the journal of your choice. Adhere strictly to their recommendations regarding style of presentation for the manuscript itself as well as for the references, tables and figures. If you wish to include some color illustrations you must be aware of the journal's rules regarding the costs, if any, for publication of color.

Most journals now prescribe the format of the abstract; follow the rules! In writing the main portion of the manuscript try to imagine yourself as the reader. Attract and sustain attention. Describe your methods clearly and precisely;

imagine that the reader is going to repeat the experiment. Be certain that the most important conclusions are given due prominence; do not overshadow them with minor observations. In the discussion, summarize and interpret results in the light of current observations; be succinct, do not over-interpret! Make sure that you know the references and in choosing references use up-to-date key original articles; refer to reviews and editorials for opinion, not fact. Include only those figures and tables that are necessary; do not duplicate data in the text and ensure that figures and tables are legible and not crowded. It should be possible to read and follow figures and tables on their own, using the legends provided.

What are the common pitfalls? One of the most common reasons for rejection is lack of originality; the paper simply does not contain any new information or is restating the obvious. It may not be of interest to the target audience of that particular journal. For clinical studies, a common deficiency is that the study has not been powered adequately and/or is based on an inappropriate statistical analysis. A trial that does not include appropriate controls is unlikely to gain acceptance in a mainstream journal and retrospective series are becoming of limited appeal.

Despite the protestations of some, it is evident that case reports are never read and rarely, if ever, referenced. As a consequence, they are very deleterious to the impact factor of any journal and, therefore, highly unappealing to an editor. It is also my belief that they are rarely of any real value. I do not encourage them and suggest that the keen trainee be encouraged, instead, to review the topic or develop a case series.

Review articles, in contrast, are very popular and widely read. In preparing a review one must, first and foremost, define the goals of the exercise. For a clinical topic, one must make it clinically relevant; what will be the readers' key questions? It must truly be a review and not merely a catalogue of quotations from other articles; the author must strive to synthesize the information reviewed and provide an interpretation of the available literature which is readily interpretable and of practical value. Your review must include all original, complete and up-to-date references. Review authors now face an additional challenge as many feel that certain categories of review must adhere to the principles of evidence-based medicine and should be in the format of a scientifically rigorous meta-

analysis. For some topics, such as reviews of diagnostic and therapeutic strategies, these approaches have become de rigueur.

If you are invited to write an editorial, be sure to keep it brief and to the point. You must include an interpretation of the related article. Give an informed opinion but in doing so be careful to avoid personal bias and destructive criticism.

### Submission

The next step, and an underestimated, one is to choose the journal that you would like to have your work published in. Factors to consider in this decision include the scientific quality of the journal and its audience. For example, do you primarily wish to reach scientists or clinicians (1) or both? Is your message of local, regional or global importance? If the answer to the latter question is, indeed, local or regional then you may want to consider your national journal, which plays an important role in disseminating information of local importance. What is the relevance of your findings? In other words, are your conclusions of broad interest or will they interest only those who work in a highly specialized area. By addressing these questions you will, I believe, increase the likelihood of acceptance in your desired journal.

In submitting the completed article be certain that you are adhering to house rules regarding copyright assignment and author permissions. If an electronic submission option is available, use it as this will shorten turn-around time, especially if you live at some distance from the journal, and eliminates the vagaries of mail systems (2). Electronic submission also facilitates standardization of font,

format and overall appearance. Once the manuscript has left you, it is appropriate to monitor its progress either on the journal web site or by direct contact but be reasonable and do not annoy the editorial assistants.

### Responding to Reviews

When the much dreaded and awaited letter or email arrives with the editorial decision be sure to read the cover letter carefully and be sure that you know exactly what it means! It may not imply outright rejection. If the response has been negative or comes in the form of a "reject, resubmission possible" you must ask yourself, is it really possible to provide an adequate response? Above all, try not to take rejection personally and use the editor's and the reviewers' comments to choose your next target and to rewrite the manuscript. Remember that the best journals reject at least 75% of all submissions!

If, on the other hand, the review is favorable you must respond with a cover letter which summarizes your response and a point-by-point response to every item raised by the editor and the reviewers.

### Summary

How can one maximize publication success? Here are some general guidelines. Know what you want to say and why you are especially qualified to say it. Target your audience and the journal. Pay attention to details and, above all, adhere to all of the rules of a given journal. Finally, be realistic!

### REFERENCES

1. Quigley EMM. Same ship - new crew. *Am J Gastro* 93:1, 1998.
2. Quigley EMM. The "Red Journal" on the Web. *Am J Gastro* 93:493, 1998.