

MEDICAL WRITING

Why and How Should Doctors Write for Publication? A Surgeon's Eye View

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“A man who is intelligent enough to be a surgeon, is also intelligent enough to write down what he wants to say in simple accurate terms”.

(Macphail 1911)

When the question asked why we must write, most of us first think of the need to communicate. Communication is so important that it is easy to overlook our other reasons for writing.

The main purpose of writing is to advance knowledge and since knowledge is one of the great glories of civilisation, it should be shared. Writing helps us to think and express our thoughts, and anyone writes badly is handicapped both in private study and in dealing with others. However, when we write to people whom we have never met, they must judge us in the only way they can by our writing. We learn most by practising this art and by considering the comments of our teachers and colleagues or the advice of editors.

Writing helps us to observe, think and remember

Observation is the basis of science and preparing a description, like making an accurate drawing, helps us to

focus attention on an object or event. Writing is necessary for precise description, and as a trained observer one should try to miss nothing. It is an aid to learning and is a creative process which helps us to sort our ideas and preserve them for later consideration.

Preparing an essay or report make you set down what you know and help you to re-organise gaps in your knowledge and so lead you to a deeper understanding of your work.

Writing helps people to arrange their thoughts and to plan their work. Any original thought on mental or social subject need properly selected words or a phrase to nail them down and hold them fast. Most scientist keep a diary to help them remembering what they have to do and they have done.

As a surgeon I usually write down a summary of the instructions and operative technique prepared by other people in operative textbooks, when I intend to do a major surgical procedure which I perform say once a year or so. In these instances I feel I need to be reminded of the procedure to be followed in preparing the patient, positioning, length and exact site of the incision... etc.

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Why do doctors write so badly ?

I do not set up myself as an authority in medical writing but this article is a trial to offer suggestion for achieving a better medical writing and is based on 5 years of editorial experience during which I realised that many young doctors have felt that they must publish one or two scientific papers to improve their career, climb the academic ladder or to win a grant. Yet these doctors do not know how to go about it. He may recognise a problem or have collected a significant amount of material but cannot set it down. Writing is a very private struggle between you and a blank sheet of paper and doing the research or collecting case material, is by and large, a child's play compared with the moment of truth when you come to write down your results.

I feel that most doctors write badly because little has been done to improve medical writing as nowhere in our educational system is teaching students how to write and however Arab doctors speak English excellently but many of them find it difficult to write.

As an editor I often receive article that conveys an important message but is so badly written as to be quite unpublishable, now how to improve it ? You may think that I need to ask the author to do so. But usually the author has done his best, and offering advices and suggestions or recommending some standard textbooks on writing is not usually helpful, as the poor author cannot identify needless words, eliminate redundancy or use strong active verbs. This process require judgement and not memory, and judgement cannot be taught, it can only be trained or developed.

Some of the rules of medical writing can be taught in two or three hours to postgraduate doctors or in a short day's course which include advice on speaking at meeting, even better or combined with the course would be the head of the department or a senior author to go through the paper with his junior doctor. Alas, few of them now have time for this.

Requirements for Scientific Writing

These can be summarised as follows:

1. *Clarity*: Your purpose is to answer the question of how and why your work is done and what you have found, it often necessitate the use of illustrations.
2. *Impartiality*: You need to show awareness of all sides of a question and try not to be biased by preconceived

ideas, be careful not to overestimate the importance of your work.

3. *Order*: The reader will understand your report easier if information and ideas are presented in a logical order.
4. *Objectivity*: One problem faced by anyone who has something new to say is that people are reluctant to accept anything, that conflicts with existing beliefs. In science every statement should be based on evidence and not on an unsupported opinion. Think of the need for further investigations before your work is ready for publication.

Ask yourself these questions: what, where, who and why. They serve as mental tin opener (Warner 1915).

The pleasure to be derived from writing comes from the effort of creative activity (like doing a major surgical procedure) it leads to a wider understanding of the subject.

Those who write best probably spend most time criticising and revising their prose, making it clear, concise and ensuring logical flow of ideas. Poor writing may result from not knowing what to say, from not considering how to present the information, from sufficient care in the choice of words or from distraction, and from leaving too little time for writing, correction and revision.

Looking critically at other people's writing will help you to improve your own but do not be afraid to write for fear of making mistakes.

What is a good article ?

Well written papers do not just happen, they have to be worked for, and it is only by writing often and critically that one can attain a high standard. To write well it is necessary to acquire a wide and accurate vocabulary.

Improvement in writing skills come from thoughtful revision and rewriting as revision is the process of editing your own work. Stephen Lock as an editor of the British Medical Journal described a good article as "the one that has a definite structure, makes its point and then shut up, it should have a crisp scientific structure and each individual section does what it is supposed to do and no more badly written articles are characterised by the difficulty in understanding what the author is trying to say.

Be your own subeditor

Each author, however eminent, should learn to do his subediting himself, by deleting unnecessary words dealing with inaccurate grammar, imprecise expression and abbreviations as those will distract the reader from the author's message.

A short title with an active brisk flavour makes a good start to winning a reader.

Most editor will subedit your original draft to bring about your main points really and clearly. As much of what the editors do can be done by the author either by himself or in collaboration with an interested colleague to make the article shorter and clearer. Revise, revise and

revise as no article is likely to read well unless it has been through at least five revisions.

There is no easy way to write and doctors cannot learn overnight how to write well. In practice, few doctors are willing to write, revise, rewrite and revise again solely to improve the impression of an article.

Finally, remember that if your article is rejected for whatever reason you may think of, the editor is actually as interested in publishing new exciting and important work as you are, but he also has a much better idea than you have of what his readers want.

After all, nearly all eminent authors have received letters of rejections. These should be considered as constructive and should be followed by a trial to improve your skills in writings.