

INVITED COMMENTARY

Writing for publication for the first time — Try the hunter style

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Abstract

Healthcare practitioners who want to write for publication for the first time can waste time and energy by relying on writing behaviour learned in educational settings, characterised in this article as the gatherer style of writing. The gatherer style is suitable for authors who are preparing literature reviews and similar types of publication.

A hunter style of writing is more appropriate when an author wants to describe work carried out, whether research, a quality improvement study, a clinical audit, a service evaluation or another project. In the hunter style, an author works through a systematic thought process and makes key decisions about the work the author wants to describe, before starting to write. The thought process includes defining what journal readers want to read about, answering key questions about the subject being written about and organising the ideas into a logical structure. Practical points about writing clearly also are provided.

Keywords: Writing for publication, first-time author, writing an article, publication

Your personal writing style: Gatherer versus hunter

If you are a healthcare practitioner writing for publication for the first time, you can put yourself off writing at the start. You could make assumptions about what is good writing, give yourself too much work to do and make major mistakes early in the writing process. Think about how you tend to get ready to prepare a report or a paper. Generally, when people have to write a report or a paper, they seem to have one of two work styles: 'gatherer' or 'hunter'.

A 'gatherer' starts to prepare for writing by collecting. A gatherer collects all of the available books, articles, or other materials related to the subject, particularly those that are similar to the paper that is to be written. Next, the gatherer reads all the material gathered and sifts through, analyses and possibly synthesises all the material. From the sifting, analysis or synthesis, the gatherer organises ideas in the material in what seems to be a logical sequence, and then begins to write.

A 'hunter', on the other hand, first decides why the paper is needed, what will interest the readers and what is expected of the paper's writer. A hunter devises a strategy to respond to the requirements and expectations for the paper in the form of a brief outline. Next, the hunter checks if the strategy developed, that is, the brief outline, will meet requirements and expectations. If there is any material needed to complete the outline, the hunter collects only what is needed, and then begins to write.

Gathering behaviour is very appropriate if you are intending to write a literature review or a similar type of report or paper. Gathering is the behaviour that students learn as part of their formal education. But gathering behaviour is not appropriate for all writing. Gatherer-type writers can make serious mistakes before they even begin to write, including being vague about who will read the paper, its purpose, the main points to be communicated and the logical sequence for getting key ideas across to the reader.

Experienced writers tend to use the 'hunter' style. If you recognise yourself as a 'gatherer', try to develop some of the techniques hunter-style writers use, such as the following:

- Decide for yourself who the intended readers of what you are going to write are likely to be and what will interest them.
- Get the specifications for what you are going to write from the publisher.
- Get your ideas down and test them yourself for clarity.
- Organise your ideas to best get them across to readers.
- Edit your own writing before you submit your paper.

Defining the readers

If you want your paper to be published in a journal, select the journal in which you would like to be published. When you choose the journal, you can easily learn who the readers of your paper might be by researching the background to the journal on the journal's website. The description of the journal will tell you the journal's intended readership.

When you know who reads the journal, you can think about the settings in which the readers are likely to work, how much experience the readers are likely to have with the subject you are writing about, and what might interest the readers in your work. You can consider if the readers are likely to be familiar with the situation or circumstances you will be describing in your paper. If you are submitting a paper to an international journal, remember that international readers aren't familiar with every country's healthcare system. Therefore, think about what you need to describe about the setting in which the work you are describing was carried out.

The most important idea to have about your potential readers is why you want them to read your paper. It is useful to think about what you would hope readers would learn from your paper and perhaps what you might want readers to do as a result of reading your paper. When you can put yourself in the setting of your readers, you can identify the kind of information about your work that would be important to include in your paper.

Getting the specifications

Every journal tells you the specifications it has for publishing a paper. For example, the length in words, main parts, references style, and how to prepare tables, figures and other illustrations are always described in the section of the journal's website that gives guidelines for authors. As a new author, it is important to follow the journal's specifications exactly. If you don't, no matter what the quality of your writing is, the journal is likely to return the paper to you to redo to the journal's specifications.

A helpful hint about the length in words is to estimate how many pages the word length for your paper would be in the word processing software you are used to using every day, using your routine work as a guide. It is less daunting if you know that the maximum word length means that you only have to write six or eight or ten pages of text.

In addition to your desired journal's specifications, other specifications for publishing have emerged through international consensus. These specifications are applied by all medical and health care-related journals and were developed to assure the quality of publications for different types of work to be published in all journals. These international guidelines and where to find the detailed guidance are in table 1.

Nature of work being reported	International guidance	Where to find the guidance
Randomised controlled trial	CONSORT (Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials) statement	www.consort-statement.org
Qualitative research study	RATS guidelines RATS stands for: R elevance of study question A ppropriateness of qualitative method T ransparency of procedures S oundness of interpretative approach	www.biomedcentral.com/info/ifora/rats
Systematic review	QUOROM (Quality of Reporting Meta-analyses) statement PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines	QUOROM: www.consort-statement.org PRISMA: www.prisma-statement.org
Meta-analysis of observational studies	MOOSE (Meta-analysis of Observational Studies in Epidemiology) guidelines	www.consort-statement.org
Quality improvement research or project	SQUIRE (Standards for Quality Improvement Reporting Excellence)	www.squire-statement.org
Clinical audit	There are no specific international guidelines for the publication of clinical audits; however, refer to the SQUIRE standards as a guide.	www.squire-statement.org

Table 1. International specifications for work published in medicine and health care journals

Getting your ideas down

The most important work in preparing a paper is often the hardest, which is to think very clearly about exactly what you have to say. Start by thinking about the answers to the questions in Table 2.

For each of the questions in table 2, write one complete sentence. Skip any questions that are not relevant to your work or that would mean duplicating a previous answer. Often people make only bullet point notes for each question; however, the bullet points of only a few words aren't enough to guide your writing.

The ten complete sentences you write can make up the framework or outline of your paper. The sentences can become topic sentences for your first paragraph in each section or leading sentences for sections of your paper. The sentences also are helpful when you write the abstract for your paper.

After you have drafted the ten sentences, review each sentence. Check if the meaning of each sentence is as clear as it can be. Add any ideas that occur to you as you are working through your draft sentences.

When you are satisfied with your key sentences, decide on the one or two key points you really want to get across to readers. Be sure these points are clear in your key sentences, and amend your sentences as needed to draw out your key or main points.

Key questions to answer to structure a paper
Why did I (or we) set out to do the work I am writing about — what is the background that led to the work being done?
Why am I writing about it — what do I want to achieve through publication of the work?
What does available evidence say about the subject I am writing about? Refer to systematic review conclusions, research studies, expert opinion, or literature, as appropriate.
What was happening in our own work setting that prompted me (us) to carry out the work? Refer to evidence about the situation in your work setting.
What did I (or we) do in carrying out the work? Refer to the nature of the work you carried out, for example, research study, quality improvement project, etc.
How did I (or we) do it? Describe the approach or method you used.
What did I (or we) show through what I (or we) did? What was (were) the major finding(s)?
What did I (or we) learn by doing what we did? What lessons would I (or we) like others to learn from our work?
What did I (or we) do next or plan to do next with what I (or we) have learned if anything?
What are the benefits of what I (or we) did for patients, practitioners, healthcare organisations, researchers, quality improvement specialists, policy makers or any others?

Table 2. Key questions to structure the content of a paper

Headings	Answers to key questions
Objective or rationale	Why you did what you did and why you are writing about it
Background	What available evidence says
Setting or context	What was happening in your situation
Design and methodology	Exactly what you did and how you did it
Findings	What you showed through what you did
Analysis (sometimes called Discussion)	What you learned from what you did and what you did about it, if anything What you will do next or plan to do next, if anything
Conclusion	What are the benefits of what you did, including possible benefits for people working in other organisations

Table 3. General structure for a paper on work carried out

Organising your content into main parts

After working through the thinking process about why and what you want to write, you can organise your work into the main parts of your paper and develop a more complete outline of the content. Guidance for the structures used for different types of work being published is referred to in Table 1. However, a general outline structure for papers is in Table 3. The key sentences you have written respond to parts in the structure.

Planning the work of writing the paper

When you have established the main parts of your paper and your content outline, you can plan the work remaining. Work backwards from the word limit for your paper and allocate the number of words to be written for each of your main parts. This tactic avoids writing too much on the rationale or background to the work and not writing enough on the analysis. For example, for the main parts listed in Table 3, say you are intending to write a paper that has a total word count of 3,500 words. You might decide that, given the content of what you have to say, you will allocate the word count as follows: 350 for the objective and rationale, 550 for the evidence (perhaps because there is some evidence to summarise), 250 for the context, 600 for the methodology (with a diagram showing a key part of the methodology), 700 for the findings (with tables and a graph), 750 for the analysis and 300 for the conclusion. As you draft each section, you know the word count you are aiming for by each part of the paper. This approach will help you focus on writing the most important ideas for each part of the paper.

As you are planning the content in more detail, consider where you can use tables, diagrams, graphs, charts or other illustrations to present findings or other information. Some authors prefer to plan and prepare tables, diagrams or illustrations before writing text for the relevant sections of a paper, so that they know the main points the text needs to make about the content presented in graphics as they are writing. As you prepare each table or other type of graphic, remember to number and title each one completely describing the contents of the graphic and include a key or legend to explain any symbols or abbreviations you use.

Practise makes perfect

Writing is like any other skill. It requires practise. If you want to become a good writer, you have to practise writing. After you have completed a first draft of your paper, go back through the draft paragraph by paragraph. Find any words that can be deleted without losing any meaning, and delete the words. Find any words or phrases that are long and substitute a shorter word or phrase where possible. Revise your sentences as needed to make them as clear as you can. Improve your writing; if you feel that you need to, using the key points in Table 4.

Getting a colleague to review your paper

When you think your paper is ready to submit to a journal, ask a colleague who has not been involved in the work you described to read the paper. First, ask your colleague to list the three most important points made in the paper. Also, ask your colleague to mark every idea or sentence in your paper that is not entirely clear. If your colleague's points are not the important points you intended or if your colleague identified ideas that are unclear, review the paper and edit it to resolve the lack of clarity.

Also, ask a colleague to tell you if any tables, charts, graphs or diagrams were entirely clear and any statistics you described clearly explained. Clarify any graphics or statistics that may not be as clear as they need to be.

Key points on improving your writing
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Simplify — rather than complicate — your writing.<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use the shortest words possible, without compromising meaning, throughout your text.• Use active rather than passive voice to the extent possible.• Try to have each sentence consist of no more than 20 to 25 words.• Try to limit each paragraph to no more than 6 sentences.• Delete unnecessary punctuation, especially commas that aren't needed.• Find any jargon words and replace them.2. Review the structure of your paper and the headings you used.<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Check if you have followed the structured process described in this article.• Rewrite and rewrite each of your paragraphs until you think your paper describes your ideas in the clearest, simplest way possible.3. Recheck the overall meaning. Decide:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have you communicated your most important ideas clearly?• Is what you hope readers will get from reading your paper stated as clearly as possible?

Table 4. Key points on improving your writing

Summary

The keys to planning to write a paper for publication for the first time are clear thinking about what you want to communicate about the work you are writing about and clear writing to explain your thinking. If your thinking follows the structure required by the journal and the outline suggested in this article, you should be assured about the clarity of your thinking. When one or more colleagues can't identify anything that could be more clearly written, you are ready to submit your paper for publication.

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Further reading

A number of articles have been published providing guidance for new authors. A selection of useful references on different aspects of preparing a paper for publication in a journal follows.

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