A synopsis of how to write and publish an article

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Publishing an article can be an arduous task, even for seasoned authors. But to a novice, publishing an interesting case report or research can appear to be an insurmountable task. This paper aims to assist by providing simplified advice on how to write a paper and get it published.

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Introduction

The prospect of starting your first foray into research is usually daunting enough to put many off from doing this. In the last issue of this journal, an attempt was made to ameliorate these fears by providing a basic guide on how to tackle a research project.[1] Once you have managed to complete your research successfully, you will be faced with another hurdle – publication. It is widely known that undertaking research without publishing your findings is as good as not doing the research at all. The world needs to know what your research findings are, even if they did not demonstrate what you thought they might, as that, too, is an important and useful finding to others. This article attempts to provide basic advice on how to translate your research into an article and ultimately publish it. The same advice can also be used for those who merely want to publish an interesting case report or case series.

It is important to note that your goal is not only to have your research or case report published but also to have as many people read it as possible. There is little purpose in publishing an article if nobody were to read it. In addition to wanting to make your case or research known to the world, you also want as many to read it as possible because they are then more likely to quote (cite) your paper when writing their articles.

Having as many citations as possible is desirable because the relevance and importance of an article is usually indicated by how many people have cited it. Similarly, author prominence in the literary world is measured not only by how many papers they have published but by how "important" those papers were. The latter is mainly indicated by how many times the paper is cited.

Something which is beyond the discussion of this article but an important indicator of the academic stature of a particular author is the H-index. A straightforward explanation is that the more articles you have that are cited many times, the higher your H-index will be.

Therefore, considering that we do not only want to see our article published but also read (and hopefully cited), it is imperative to entice prospective readers into reading your article. This article will, therefore, also offer tips on making your paper more likely to achieve this.

Title

The title should indicate what your article is about, e.g. "The use of hypochlorous acid in an irradiation ulcer of the lower eyelid – a case study".[2] One should aim to keep it as simple as possible. However, this is also the first thing a prospective reader will read before deciding if they want to delve further into your paper, so it occasionally helps to make your title "catchy". An example of such a title would be: "The paradox of negative-pressure wound therapy – in vitro studies".[3] The wording of this title is likely to make the reader interested to read further to discover this apparent paradox. However, it must be said that if you have "catchy" wording, you must make sure that it is relevant to the content of the paper and not purely to create sensationalism.

Author details

The names of the author/s usually appear below the title. If there are multiple authors, usually the author who wrote the article appears first. Usually, the senior author (in the case of juniors writing an article with their professor, for example) would appear last. The corresponding author is usually the author who would have the most knowledge about the content of the manuscript, in other words, what the research or case was about. This is usually the first or last author. The journal will need to know who is designated as the corresponding author, and it is this author who will have to address any questions about the article.

Journals differ with regard to how names are written. Some journals include your title, position you hold, etc. Some journals require your initials to be abbreviated, while others prefer to have them written out in full. Most journals will include your address or which institution you work at in the author details. Many journals now also prefer an ORCID (Open Researcher and Contributor Identification) to accompany the authors' names (if they have one registered). This identifier is unique to an author and their outputs.

Manuscript layout

After your title and author details, all articles, whether they are case reports or original research articles, follow a similar, although not always identical, format. They all usually begin with an Abstract. This is then followed by the actual article, which is usually subdivided into sections, starting with the Introduction. In research articles, the Introduction is usually followed by a section on Methods, followed by sections pertaining to Results, Discussion and Conclusion.

In case reports and case series, the Methods and Results sections are superfluous and therefore replaced by a section describing the case/s.

There may be slight variations to the above, which are journal specific, and it is, therefore, essential to look at the authors' guidelines and other articles in the particular journal that you would like to publish in.

Abstract

The purpose of this is to give a concise synopsis of your entire article. The abstract is usually published and freely available online, including in journals that would generally require a fee to download the article. Depending on the journal, some abstracts are written as a paragraph, while other journals require you to subdivide it into sections as mentioned above. Ensure you don't include unnecessary information in the abstract, particularly as you are usually limited in the number of words you may include.

It is useful to note that most people read the abstract first to see if it is worth their while to read the rest of your article, so word your abstract in a way that would entice the reader to want to learn more about your research or case report.

Introduction

This section sets the scene for what prompted your study. Usually, research aims to answer a specific question or to address a particular problem. The Introduction gives context to the question or problem to highlight to the reader what the relevance of your study is. The aim of your study (what you hope to determine) is worked into the latter part of the Introduction, after you have given context to, and framed, the problem or question.

In the setting of a case report, this section is often termed, Background. In the case of an unusual clinical case, one would enlighten the reader about the circumstances around the patient, the disease process, give an idea of its prevalence, etc., and then illustrate why your case is unusual. This might be because it is rare or because it presented in an atypical way, for example.

Methods

This section can be titled slightly differently, e.g., "Methodology" or "Patients and Methods", and certain journals require it to be done in their preferred way. It is this section that explains to the reader exactly how you did your research. This is often the most important part of your study (flawed methodology results in erroneous findings), and it is therefore critical to write exactly how you undertook your research.

How you selected patients, materials or instruments used, temperature settings, etc., are all mentioned in this section. When naming a product, one always mentions the company that manufactures it and the geographical location of this company. Examine other articles from the same journal to see what their preferred manner of describing a product is.

Toward the latter part of this section, one would typically mention what type of statistical analyses were used and whether your research was approved by an institutional review board or ethics committee.

This section may be written with different paragraphs for different aspects or even have different subheadings depending on the study's nature.

Results

Only the factual findings of your study are set out here, with minimal discussion of these findings, unless it is to explain certain aspects of the results, e.g., why the study was terminated early.

One normally begins by indicating how many subjects were recruited, giving their demographics (age, sex, etc.), followed by the rest of your findings relating to these subjects.

There will be a lot of numbers in this section, and it must be borne in mind that numbers less than ten are usually spelt out, while numbers more than ten are written as a number. You will have usually enlisted the help of a statistician to evaluate your research results to inform you whether they are "statistically significant" (indicated by a p-value < 0.05). In the results section, one can mention which variables you found to be statistically significant (the p-value is usually indicated in brackets after the result). You can also mention those that were found not to be statistically significant. If you have a large number of different variables with their results and associated p-values, it will make for easier reading if you illustrate these as a table and refer to this table in your Results paragraph. Graphs and pictures can be included in the manuscript as figures and referred to in this section.

The word Figure is often written in full but may be abbreviated (with or without a full stop after the word), depending on the journal style, e.g., Figure 1, Figure. 1, Fig 1 or Fig. 1. The Instructions to Authors of the journal will clarify what the preference is, or one can simply look at other articles in that journal. Each figure or table you submit requires a "legend" or "caption" which describes them.

In the setting of a case report, one would omit the Methods and Results sections and have a section which describes your case.

Discussion

In this section, one attempts to draw conclusions from your findings in your results. You would initially briefly summarise what you found in a few sentences. You would then discuss these findings in the context of existing literature, and it is here that the previous literature search that you did before undertaking the research will be useful.

It is useful to draw attention to how your findings are different (or similar) to existing research and what the implications of your findings are. It is important to draw attention to how your findings might result in a change in practice, use of a product, etc.

Toward the latter part of your discussion, it may also be useful to identify potential limitations in your study and how they could be addressed in future research.

In the setting of a case report, one would briefly mention the case's findings in a sentence or two and then discuss it in the context of the existing literature about similar cases, particularly pointing out what is "special or unusual" about your case. Try to incorporate some form of lesson learnt from your case, which might help practitioners who may encounter a similar case.

Conclusion

This is a much shorter, usually single paragraph that succinctly summarises your findings (or your case report) and how your study impacts us all. It is typically the answer to the question that your research initially posed when you started the study.

Acknowledgements

If you would like to acknowledge someone who helped you in any way with the research or manuscript but who did not do enough to warrant being an author, it is done under this heading. It often appears as fine print at the end of a manuscript.

References

These appear at the end of your manuscript, the order of which is based on when you quoted these papers in your manuscript. It is important to ensure that your referencing style (which varies for different journals) is correct and consistent. Many authors use one of the many reference managing software applications available, e.g., RefWorks® or Endnote®, to populate the References. This is highly recommended when you are likely to have many references because the software will re-arrange your referencing order if you delete a sentence containing a particular reference. It also correctly converts your references into the appropriate style of the journal.

Submitting for publication

At this point, you will have come a long way! You have successfully undertaken your research and managed to write a well-worded article. Yet, one final "stumbling block" awaits – publication. This is, in fact, the easiest step of your journey to publication glory, but nevertheless requires that final bit of stamina to finish the process.

Before you do so, read through your article meticulously to ensure there are no grammatical or spelling errors. It gives a very bad impression if this has not been done and may be the pivot point for a reviewer deciding against accepting your article. Ensure your language is both professional and scientific. Avoid using dramatic words, e.g. "enormous/massive" when you could have written "large". Avoid speaking in the first person, e.g. "I then found that…" when you could have written, "it was then found that…".

Once you are happy that your manuscript cannot be improved any further, you must decide which journal you submit it to. There are advantages and disadvantages to which particular one you choose.

Choosing a journal

The journal you choose will obviously be related to the topic of your research or case report. Ideally, you would want your article published in a journal with a high "Impact Factor". This designates the importance of the journal and how wide its readership is. These are always accredited journals, and their articles are "searchable" on all the major search engines, like PubMed, MEDLINE, etc. Readers must often pay a subscription fee for these journals or "pay per download" to read an article. However, this could be detrimental to your article because fewer people might read it compared to open access journals. Recently some of these journals have also developed an open access component of their journal, in which the author pays for their article to be published in this section. However, these fees are often prohibitive for most authors unless their institution is prepared to pay on their behalf. The benefits are that your readership is vastly expanded when published in the open access section.

High-impact journals typically have a much higher rejection rate unless your research and manuscript are of exceptional quality and importance. Most of these journals no longer accept case reports or case series and focus purely on original research articles.

Although one finds that it is easier to have your paper accepted by journals with a lower impact factor, one should try to ensure that the journal is accredited and available on these search engines; otherwise, your article is less likely to be visible when other researchers are doing their literature searches and is therefore unlikely to be quoted. Fortunately, *Wound Healing Southern Africa* has recently been accredited and should be approved to appear on online search engines as of next year. Unlike most open access online accredited journals, this journal remains free for both readers and authors.

Submitting your article

Once you have chosen your journal, read the Instructions for Authors on their website on how to submit an article and follow these instructions meticulously. Ignoring them can result in rejection.

The journal will confirm that they have received your article. They will send it for review to their reviewers, who will, after a month or two, reply with the following: "Accept", "Accept with minor revisions", "Accept with major revisions", or "Reject".

If your article gets rejected, do NOT let this get you down. Even the best researchers in the world have their articles rejected. Move on to the next journal and re-submit.

If their verdict is "Accept with revisions", you must undertake to have the revisions done timeously. You should acknowledge all the reviewers' recommendations and comments, address them, and indicate to them how and where you have addressed them in the manuscript. Do this for each comment or recommendation the reviewers have made. Failing to do so may result in rejection.

It is usually recommended that you comply with the reviewers' requests, unless you feel strongly about a particular point. In these circumstances, you must give very good reasons for your reluctance to do so (this is very seldom done though, as the Editor of the journal is likely to agree with the reviewers' comments).

Reviewers' comments can easily knock your confidence or result in feelings of anger, frustration or sadness. This is quite understandable and common. Do not allow your feelings to come across in your reply to the reviewers' comments. This is not only unprofessional but will not get you anywhere, other than possibly getting your article rejected. Rather appear appreciative of their comments and attempt to address them one by one.

If all goes well, your article will be accepted and go to print and/or be made available online in due course. Seeing all your hard work, both your research and manuscript writing, appear in print and online for the whole world to see is extremely rewarding and makes it worth it to do it all over again with your next publication.

Conclusion

Writing and publishing your first article is daunting, but following these simple guidelines will hopefully lead to success. You can take comfort in knowing that your subsequent publications will be much easier.

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