

# Solving the initial problems involved in the writing of a biomedical paper for publication in a peer-review journal

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Every biomedical professional has heard the dictum: “publish or perish”. Communicating your discoveries to the rest of the community could help improve the lives of millions and, less nobly, give your career a boost and earn you endless research funds. Publication should be looked upon as completion of your clinical procedure or experiment as it authenticates your work and adds it to the database of biomedical knowledge. However, ideas and procedures need to be transmitted clearly and precisely and this is not easy when the language you have to use is not your own. It is not enough to simply dump large quantities of random data in front of your peer audience and hope for a positive response. Authors need to use fluent and elegant English in order to get their message across in a clear, concise manner.

When planning a paper you should always remember who it is aimed at, why you are doing it in the first place, what your take-home message will be and how your work can satisfy your audience. Indeed, your audience needs to be at the very centre of your attention at all times and you should take into consideration any previous knowledge

its members might have and build upon it. So, what is the difference between a good paper and a bad paper? Simple. The bad one doesn't get published. This, of course, is not always true as many excellent papers remain unpublished, at least by the original target journal, while some mediocre manuscripts make it through the maze of peer review with relative ease. It really depends upon how high you aim. If your target journal has a high impact factor you will inevitably come up against all sorts of problems caused by the quality control filtering carried out by the editor and referees.

Choosing the target journal before beginning to write your paper is fundamentally important as you will need to follow its Instructions to Authors to the letter. Failure to do so might not result in your paper being rejected (rejection is generally based upon scientific demerit or when the paper is not considered to be of interest to the journal's readers), but it will certainly delay the acceptance of your brainchild.

If the paper has a captivating title it might be read, but if the title is unattractive then it will surely be ignored. If your paper gets past the title stage, make sure that the abstract, whether it be of the single-paragraph or the structured type, is clear, concise and well written. All biomedical papers thereby go on to follow the standard IMRAD format (Introduction, Methods, Results and

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Discussion). This structure is important to readers with little time to spare as they are able to find what they are looking for precisely where they would expect to find it. Coming back to English, non-mother-tongue speakers should never fall into the trap of writing everything in their own language first and then translating it. Do not simply use English words and grammar in a 'foreign' frame. Keep your sentences short and simple, link your paragraphs together logically and wherever possible use the active rather than the passive voice. Use simple words to explain to your readers what you did, how you did it, why you did it and what you learned from it. You have to be clear so that others will have the chance to repeat your procedure in order to develop the learning process. Good writing is like anything else, in that the more you do it the better you get at do-

ing it. Being faced by a blank page can be incredibly frustrating and it can be difficult to get things moving. Try to follow these five simple phases that might help you reach your final objective, which is to get your paper published:

- 1) prepare: define what the task is;
- 2) organise: collect all necessary information and data;
- 3) plan: choose the key points and put them into some kind of logical order;
- 4) write: approach the first draft in short bursts of activity;
- 5) revise: carry out your macro and micro editing.

Remember, however, that there is never only one way to do anything. The important thing is to learn from your own experience and find the method that suits you best.

*“Questo è il primo di una serie di articoli sull’argomento.  
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*‘This is the first of a series of articles on this topic.  
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column.’*