



MANUSCRIPTS: EXPERIENCES, REFLECTIONS, AND PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

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Reviewing manuscript itself is a great learning that tells you what's going on in the minds of the authors. Going through the process of writing a manuscript myself as well reviewing the manuscripts by different authors was stimulating me to write these few lines since long. These reflections shall be of great help, I suppose, to the biomedical authors to leave their own box and come on the other side to see how the work looks through the vision of a reviewer.

Clarity and simplicity of language, linguistic and grammatical accuracy, awareness of the length, and maintaining interest of a common reader are some of the strengths of a good manuscript.

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A. MANUSCRIPT WRITING/ BIOMEDICAL WRITING

A1: Serious work on the manuscript

Manuscript writing is an art as well as science. One should keep an eye on getting an opportunity of attending few sessions on biomedical writing. It is a serious business, and there is lot to learn from such workshops, which shall bring you to some of the very essentials that may be missing in your writing. Objectivity of presentation and hitting the right target to project your work are the main themes of biomedical writing. Being concise and appropriate in the presentation is not easy to achieve. It has to be taken as a task – as meticulous as the actual research work. One needs to look at his/her own manuscript from a third person's eye. This is why it is good to get

done an unofficial peer review of your manuscript. You may request one of your colleagues having a sufficient experience of preparing manuscripts. You may also request another person who is proficient in English/Biomedical English to go through your manuscript to do a sort of proof-reading to go through the English language construction, spellings, and punctuations. If you objectively think upon their feedback and do the necessary changes before actually sending the manuscript to any journal, it is going to be an important step in minimizing the obvious blunders. A simple language easily understandable to readers and clarity of thought is always preferred by reviewers rather than too clumsy constructions. Automated spellcheckers are useful, but still one needs to review word by word to search in to the missing errors. While doing such a task the author needs to be fully concentrating in the work. Many times too many occupations at a time prevent you from concentrating and dedicating time to this job. Due to this, some area of the manuscript is extremely well handled, while some other area is found to be left out of the screening. A particular job might be left halfway due to some other work propping up, and then so many things kept in the mind are lost later. Finally, when the time to submit is

approaching, the author is in a hurry to somehow complete the remaining job. Such manuscripts always suffer from flaws, and after reading them one can easily understand that the job has not been done seriously and the sufficient time has not been given to the architecture of the manuscript. Hence it is always better to complete a particular item in one go, rather than doing it in bits and pieces.

A2: English language hassles

English language has been changing its face in the situation where millions of people are using this language with their own expression and style. Many people in the world think in their own language and then try to translate their thoughts in to English, and this is ought to happen. This many times affects the English requirements in the biomedical writing, but from my point of view this is not the real hassle. While reviewing the papers, it is many times observed that the simple and basic rules of English language are ignored due to lack of basic skills in language, superficial handling of this issue, ignorance, and inadequate time spending. Punctuations and sentence construction are many times the areas not dealt with seriously. Repetition of same errors at many places is also found during review of the articles. Obvious spelling errors, erroneous sentence construction, and repetition of the concept are some of the common reasons for an immediate rejection of a research paper. The authors need to obtain adequate guidance from an English language expert. At least half of the errors could be avoided even by a preliminary screening by peers. Also collect and read some papers from the journals, which are the papers on topics similar to the topic of your article. This will help understand the terminology and way of presentation for your research article. Try to understand the way of presentation of these other researchers, and based on this make an appropriate framework for your article. A constant urge to learn and use newer terminology often helps in keeping us update.

B. ACQUAINTANCE WITH COMPUTERS

With the advent of online journals and the growth of technology, it has become essential for the researchers to learn, rehearse, and expertise the basics of computers. Computer has been a routine thing to use in the modern era. Searching references has become a miraculously pleasant job in this era. Use of internet and developing ways to search references has been now one of the key skills in preparing a manuscript.

Comparatively senior researchers-teachers in health science teaching institutes may have an immense experience of research and presentation, but may be apathetic regarding preparing a manuscript due to the technology issue. I know enthusiastic researchers who could get over this feeling by readiness to learn new things and consistent efforts. They know that everything is a matter of practice. Those who do not suit to this environment usually leave the job of preparation of manuscript to younger scientists who are well versed with computers. This can hasten the process of manuscript preparation, but also can lead to disconnection between the various authors of the same paper in presenting the right concept and right description.

Just as any other thing in the world, technology is also a weapon that needs to be used logically and sensibly. For example - Using a spellchecker and finding and replacing the commonly occurring errors has minimized the time lapsed in otherwise tedious-appearing manual task. At the same time, a blind use of a spellchecker whose memory does not have the words from your science may lead to enormous errors in your text. At every point, just as in any other task, meticulous work is needed to minimize the errors.

C. FOLLOWING AUTHOR GUIDELINES

Meticulously following the writing specifications mentioned by a particular journal makes the manuscript cross the first obstacle.

Every publication/journal has its own style and methodology of presentation. Most of the journals publish their guidelines under “author

instructions” or “guidelines for authors”. After choosing a journal, the first step would be to download the instructions, and note point by point, the specifications suggested.

C1: Make a detailed list

It is always good to prepare a list of specifications mentioned in the author guidelines of a particular journal.

C2: Split the requirements under different categories

It is better to split these specifications in to various categories. One - section-wise specifications – Title page, title of the article, short title, structured or unstructured abstract, introduction, methodology, observations, results, discussion, conclusion, within-text as well as bibliographical referencing, figures, and tables. Under each heading, the list of specifications should be noted so as to exactly what is the expectation to meet. Two, general formatting specifications such as regarding page setup, margins, spacing, indents, font size and type, faces (capital/bold), number of words expected, and such other expectations and making changes in your text – item by item to meet the requirements.

C3: Checklist

Prepare a checklist and pick up each item to go through and then prepare a checklist to see if all the guidelines for a particular journal are followed or not.

D. FORMATTING GUIDELINES

Formatting guidelines include title page guidelines, separate specifications for title, short title, and those for article including the font size, font type, single or double spacing, margins, indents, word counts for the whole manuscript as well as individual sections, individual section specifications, capital/small faces, bold/unbold/italics, abstract specifications, and many other minor requirements. Due to stringent specifications, the author may fail to understand the meaning or may misinterpret an item or may interpret correctly but may not comply with the specifications. Many times it is observed that the

author keeps on sending the manuscript which was originally rejected by a journal to a different journal, but forgets to make the meticulous changes as per the guidelines of the other journal. It is necessary to make a specific list of each and every specification mentioned in the “guidelines for authors” and then go to each item and see if the guidelines are followed. This is often missed or done hurriedly by ending up half-heartedly and submitting the manuscript. Modifying the manuscript as per the journal requirements is a time-taking job and there are no shortcuts. It has to be taken up seriously by spending sufficient amount of time to achieve the requirements. When this is not done, the manuscript is likely to be rejected in the first place for the reason that the house-style of the journal is not followed. The authors of older generations if not comfortable with the complexities, may get exhausted in understanding and fulfilling the requirements. This many times has been one of the factors behind the feeling of apprehension and discouragement.

E. REFERENCING

Referencing involves mentioning the references in the text and in bibliography. I am describing the gross characteristics of two commonly used referencing styles.

E1: Referencing styles

Vancouver style

Most of the biomedical journals now follow the Vancouver style which is a numbered referencing style and consists of citations in the text using numbers and a numbered reference list at the end of the document. It follows rules established by the International committee of Medical Journal Editors, now maintained by the U.S. National Library of Medicine. It is also known as Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts submitted to Biomedical Journals. An example in the bibliography is shown below:

Mutalik M, Srivastava R, Mutalik Maitreyee. Perceptions on primary mental abilities of second year medical students in Mauritius. *Int J Curr Res.* 2012;3(11):187-90.

I will describe the above reference by each character and content. It goes as –

Author's last name – space – authors initials or first initials or first name as mentioned in the original reference **WITHOUT FULL STOPS IN BETWEEN** – comma – then the next author name in the same fashion - full stop after all author names – space – Title of the article – full stop - Abbreviation of the journal name – full stop – space – year – semicolon – volume number – bracket – issue no – close bracket – colon – starting page – hyphen – ending page – full stop.

This is an arbitrary example and will involve variations depending on the number of authors and the type of referenced article – whether a book or a monograph or a journal article.

In this formatting, where space is given and where it is not given should be meticulously followed. Journal name abbreviations should be searched and included.

Harvard style

Harvard style or author-date style of referencing consists of mentioning the author name and date in the text citation. In the bibliography, the references are arranged alphabetically. The bibliographic referencing is as shown in the following example.

Mutalik, M, Srivastava, R, Mutalik, Maitreyee. 2012, “Perceptions on primary mental abilities of second year medical students in Mauritius”, *International Journal of Current Research*, vol. 3, issue 11, pp. 187-190.

The character to character description is as follows:

Author's last name- comma- author's first name or initials without full stops in between – comma - the next author's details just like the first author- full stop after the last author details – space – year – comma – title of the paper in inverted comma – comma – journal name – comma – volume number written as for example vol.3 – comma – issue number written as for

example issue 11 – comma – pp – full stop – space – page numbers starting and ending with a hyphen in between – full stop.

This is an arbitrary example and will involve variations depending on the number of authors and the type of referenced article – whether a book or a monograph or a journal article.

Other styles

There may be any other style of referencing required depending on the journal house-style.

E2: Uniform nature of formatting the references

The author needs to study carefully what is required as per the guidelines and comply with the requirements.

It is important to remember that throughout the text and bibliography the same expected style should be carefully followed for each and every reference.

Especially when the references are straightaway copied and pasted from the web, there are found to be enormous variations and errors. This happens because the original references may be styled in different ways, and the author does not bother to look into the fact that he/she needs to make it uniform as per the journal requirement. So also, depending on the type of the original file from which the reference has been taken, the formatting of the spaces may be variable when the reference is copied and pasted from a particular reference. The author needs to go manually to each and every character to assure that the uniform nature of referencing is maintained.

There are minor variations under any style depending on number of authors, the type of the article – whether it is a journal article or a chapter from a book or a monograph and so on – the authors need to be careful in formatting each reference as per the requirements mentioned in the author guidelines.

F: REFERRING TO THE ARTICLES IN THE LATEST ISSUE

I have another important suggestion for the authors. Once you have chosen a journal for sending your article, go the latest issue of this journal, and save a similar article type as that of your article (research article or review article or a case report or whatever is the type of your article). Look at all the features of this saved article, and follow the same features in your article. This will give exactness to your effort of following the house-style of the journal. Many times the author guidelines may not satisfy the doubt in your mind regarding a particular issue. In these instances, an article from the latest issue of the same journal may come to your help to help resolve your doubt.

SUMMARY

Writing a research article is an interesting and meticulous task. More deeply you involve yourself to understand and follow the expectations; more will be the results of satisfaction in achieving the task. Carefully understanding the requirements and trying to follow them may be initially a tiring job for you, but every effort shall pay later in terms of being

accurate, and will make you feel more and more comfortable during the process of each next article that you prepare. Hurriedly done work with a purpose of sending earlier leaves behind simple and large number of errors which prevents the reviewer from writing in favor of your manuscript. Division of work between different authors appears useful, but the writing task has to be well coordinated. Otherwise a gross disconnection between different authors ends up in a mess in which the accuracy of the article is destroyed. Copying and pasting of references may leave behind large variations in the formatting. Computer use is a matter of practice, and breaking the barrier of apathy at the earliest brings you closer to the expected goal. English language proficiency is an important issue as also the training on biomedical writing. “Review before review” and “again review” are the important keys to creation of a good manuscript. Time spending should not be taken as a loss over period of time. More time spent for each article shall save great losses of time in terms of the articles getting rejected or being sent for repeated revisions. In addition to this, you will positively notice that over a period of time, you have attained a good level of expertise in the writing task.