

Publishing in peer review journals

Criteria for success

Peer review papers contribute to the body of knowledge that forms the evidence on which best practice is based. Publishing facilitates knowledge sharing, thereby enabling individuals and organisations to contribute to the body of evidence on best practice.

Collectively, the authors of this article have had many peer reviewed papers published and are also peer reviewers for several journals relevant to the primary health care sector. The authors have drawn on their experience, as well as information derived from electronic searches, to develop a set of criteria that will increase the chances of your paper being published in a peer reviewed journal.

Preparing to write your paper

Aim of paper is clearly defined

The clearer you are about the aim of the paper, the easier the writing will be. Key attributes of a clear aim are specificity, originality and relevance to the readership.¹

Conditions for authorship are followed

Papers often have more than one author. Decisions on how articles should be credited can be contentious. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors states that 'authorship credit should be based on: 1) substantial contributions to conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; 2) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and 3) final approval of the version to be published. Authors should meet conditions 1, 2, and 3'.²

An appropriate journal is selected

Before writing, select the journal which is best suited to your work and your message, and is easily accessible to the readership you want to influence. Read recent issues of that journal to get a feel for the writing style and types of articles likely to be published. Many papers are rejected because they are not suited to the journal to which they

are submitted³ or because the authors did not follow the journal's guidelines (see below).

Journals listed in electronic databases such as MEDLINE and CINAHL or those freely available online are more likely to be read. If you have an idea for a paper but are not sure if it is appropriate for the journal, contact the editor to discuss your idea with them. A useful list of primary health care journals can be found at <http://som.flinders.edu.au/FUSA/GP-Evidence/PHCRED/Resfor.html>.

Author guidelines are followed

All journals have author guidelines. These guidelines provide important information on word limits, referencing styles and formatting information. Following these guidelines will not only increase the likelihood of your paper being accepted but will also reduce the time spent preparing your paper for submission. *Australian Family Physician* author guidelines are available at www.racgp.org.au/afp/authors.

Prescribed referencing style is followed

Referencing is an essential part of your writing. It acknowledges where ideas have come from and is also a useful resource for further reading for your audience. Referencing styles are a key component of author guidelines and should be followed carefully. Software programs such as Endnote are useful tools for keeping track of references. Endnote allows you to enter references into a database which can then be used across multiple documents, creating accurate reference lists which can be quickly and easily changed to meet the requirements of different journals.

Writing your paper

Title conveys key message clearly

The title of your paper will influence the reader's decision to continue reading and should convey the paper's key message in a clear and succinct manner. It is sometimes useful to devise a draft version of your title before you



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begin writing. This draft title can be revised later but will help to keep you focused on the key message of your paper.

The paper has an introduction, body and conclusion

The introduction of a paper describes what you are going to say. It describes your review of the relevant literature, the context in which your work is placed, your rationale for writing about the issue and the aim of the paper.

The body of the paper focuses on what you did (method), what you found (results) and what this means (discussion).

The conclusion of your paper outlines briefly what you found, how this builds on the body of knowledge and any limitations to your work. It also answers the ‘so what?’ question, demonstrating why your research is important.

Most journals require an abstract. This is a summary of the key points of your work and is best written last so that it conveys an accurate summary of the paper’s content and theme.

Writing is easily understood

Remember the ‘when’, ‘what’, ‘where’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ of the piece you are writing. Saver⁴ suggests that writing effectively involves ensuring that the intended message is easily conveyed to and understood by the reader. Dixon⁵ summarises this concept, stating that ‘a paper is well written if a reader who is not involved in the work can understand every single sentence in the paper’.

Tables and figures capture information concisely

Tables and figures reduce the length of the paper by including data that can be displayed concisely and efficiently. They should complement – not repeat – information in the text. Be sure they are cited in the text and include suitable headings and explanatory footnotes if required.

Paper is subjected to editing and feedback

It is not unusual for a paper to undergo several drafts before being submitted. Have colleagues read and comment on your paper and use these comments in your next draft. There is evidence that writing groups are effective in providing suggestions for improving papers: a writing group not only keeps the

momentum going during the writing process, it also improves publication rates and gives its members opportunities for continual learning.⁶

University departments of general practice and rural health funded through the Primary Health Care Research, Evaluation and Development Strategy provide editorial support. Contact details can be found at the PHCRIS website (www.phcris.org.au/phcred/contacts.php).

Realistic timelines are set

Setting realistic timelines with the authors of the paper is a useful strategy to maintain momentum during writing. When you are planning the timeline, allow each author to take a break so they can return to writing with a fresh mind.

Submitting your paper

Submission guidelines are followed

Just as each journal has guidelines for writing a paper, they also have specific guidelines for submission. Following these guidelines carefully will ensure your paper is received and reviewed. However, if you haven’t heard from the editor for some time, contact them to find out what progress has been made.

Peer review process is understood and used

Peer reviewing is critical to maintaining quality and standards in publications. Experts in the field are invited to review and comment on the submitted paper and recommend whether the paper be published or not. These comments and those of the editor are then sent to the authors.

It is up to the authors to decide what to do next; but having come this far, it makes sense to follow editorial and reviewer suggestions or to argue or explain your position through the journal’s communication channels.

Don’t be discouraged if your paper is initially rejected. There are several reasons why this may occur: your paper may not have met guidelines, it may be better suited to another journal, or it requires further editing. Try again, keeping in mind any feedback you have received.

Your paper is accepted

Once the paper has been accepted, it may take some time before it is actually published.

You can, however, add the reference to your resume prior to publication, by citing the paper as being ‘in press’.

Conclusion

Publishing your work in a peer reviewed journal can be both rewarding and effective in contributing to the body of knowledge of best practice in health. Having a clear idea of what you are trying to achieve with your paper is a good starting point. Deciding which journal to publish your paper in, and following specific requirements as set out by that journal, are essential. With careful planning, advice and revision, you can write a quality paper.

Conflict of interest: none declared.

Acknowledgment

The authors thank members of the Department of General Practice writing group for their input. This writing group is funded by the PHCRED Strategy.

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