

Planning

Writing starts with planning. If you are writing a standard paper for a medical journal, then the outline for your plan will be the usual **Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion**. Methods is sometimes expanded to Patients and Methods, and Results may be Observations. Start by jotting down short answers to these questions:

1. What was I trying to do?
2. Why did I think it was worthwhile to do it?
3. How did I do it?
4. What did I show?
5. What do I need to stress?
6. What excuses do I need to make?
7. What is my message?
8. What would I like to do next?

Introductions usually start with the answer to 2: a *brief* review of important facts and references. Most introductions, when first submitted to journals, are too long; many of them stay that way. The last sentence or paragraph of the introduction should state the answer to 1.

Methods is the answer to 3. Make your notes in a logical order, describing things in sequence.

Your **Results** or Observations, question 4, must be stated as you measured or described them, not as you choose to interpret them. Use tables and figures if they will help readers; dense paragraphs of text interspersed with numbers make for difficult reading.

The **Discussion** is the most interesting part to write, but knowledgeable readers — and referees — will take far more notice of your methods and results.

Keep in mind that “What is the question?” is the single most important part of a clinical trial and, by extension, of any research. You should make sure that it remains uppermost in your readers’ minds as they digest the fruits of your labours.

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- Goodman NW, Edwards MB. Medical Writing - A Prescription for Clarity, 2nd Edition. Cambridge University Press. © 1997.
 - Huth EJ. How To Write & Publish Papers In The Medical Sciences, 2nd Edition. Williams & Wilkins. © 1990.

Twenty Steps in Planning, Writing and Publishing a Paper

- 1) Decide on the message of the paper. Can you state it in a single sentence? With case reports and reviews, you may not be sure of the exact message until you have searched the literature.
- 2) Decide whether the paper is worth writing. Have similar findings been reported? Is there a need for another report? With case reports and reviews, has your literature search turned up similar cases or reviews?
- 3) Decide on the importance of your paper. Apply the "so-what" test; how would the paper change concept or practice?
- 4) Decide on the audience for the paper; apply the "who-cares" test.
- 5) Select the journal for which you will prepare the paper.
- 6) Search the literature: For a firm decision on writing the paper and on its message; for documentary materials.
- 7) Decide on authorship.
- 8) Assemble the materials needed to write and eventually publish the paper. If you are writing an invited review paper or editorial, make sure you know the conditions accompanying the invitation and request any you feel should be met before you accept it.
- 9) Look up the manuscript requirements for the journal.
- 10) Consider the proper structure for the paper before you begin to outline it and write the first draft.
- 11) Develop a sketch or outline for the first draft.
- 12) Write the first draft.
- 13) Revise the first draft and subsequent drafts (with any coauthors) until you are fully satisfied with the content of the paper.
- 14) Revise your prose for fluency, clarity, accuracy, economy, and grace.
- 15) Make sure that the details of scientific style are correct.
- 16) Prepare the final choices and right presentations for tables and illustrations.
- 17) Review, and revise if necessary, the last complete draft and get it typed for the final manuscript.
- 18) Assemble the manuscript copies and accompanying materials to send to the journal's editor with a submission letter.
- 19) Respond to the editor's decision: Revise a provisionally accepted paper as requested; send a rejected paper to another journal after making needed revisions; or give up trying to get the paper published.
- 20) If the paper is accepted, correct proof carefully as soon as it arrives, return it promptly, and await publication of the paper.

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