

Getting your papers published

Or how to win editors and influence assessors*

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During the past three years it has been my task and privilege to act as an assessor for *The British Journal of Psychiatry*. In this time I have assessed, and in some cases reassessed, over 30 papers. Having looked back on my comments on these papers a number of common criticisms emerge. I thought intending contributors to the *Journal* might find it helpful if I commented upon some of these. I hope I do so with a sense of humility, since it is always easy to criticise the work of others and appear to be patronising. However, I have the impression that if intending authors paid heed to some of my suggestions (which are certainly not original) they would save themselves a great deal of disappointment and save the assessors and the Editors of the *Journal* a degree of frustration and occasional irritation.

Comments

My comments are listed numerically for ease of presentation, but not necessarily in any order of priority. In my view, all are equally important.

(1) A number of authors do not appear to take the trouble to read the short but highly relevant guidance given to contributors on the inside front cover of the *Journal*. For example, all too frequently authors ignore the quite clear advice given for the citation of references.

(2) It is apparent that a number of authors are guilty of what I can best describe as the 'blunderbuss' approach to publication. There are obvious signs that the paper has been prepared for multi-journal submission with the result that all too often it falls short of *Journal* requirements in terms of potential readership and general presentation. The point made in (1) above about citation of references is often a clear indication of this approach. Authors are more likely to find an initially favourable reaction to their submission if it bears evidence that it has been written and presented with *The British Journal of Psychiatry* as its target. Papers originally given as *lectures* (unless at the specific invitation of the College)

*With apologies to Dale Carnegie.

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almost always require revision for *publication*, a point ignored all too frequently by some contributors. It therefore pays dividends to follow the guidance in the 'Notice to Contributors' with great care.

(3) Potential readership is a very important factor. Nearly all the readers of the *Journal* are likely to be busy people and will not wish to wade through material that is repetitive, superfluous and prolix, however laudable the paper's concepts and contents. The commonest fault in the papers I have assessed is their prolixity. Nearly all of them could have been improved by rewriting and considerable pruning. It is old but none-the-less relevant advice that it is a good idea to prepare one's final, or nearly final, draft and then leave it to 'cook' or 'stew' (whichever culinary analogy you prefer) for a week or two. On re-reading it one can almost always clarify the material and delete superfluous observations.

(4) Another major weakness is over-all lack of clarity of intention. All too often the summary (abstract) does not encapsulate adequately the rationale, major themes or arguments in the paper. In addition, the material in some papers is so densely written that the central focus is lost and one has to keep going back to the beginning to discern it.

(5) If a review of the literature is considered appropriate, authors should make sure that it contains material that is directly relevant to the topic under examination. Some authors appear to believe that the 'kitchen sink' approach will enhance the success of their submission and demonstrate to the assessors the breadth and depth of their learning. If a review of the literature is included it should not only be brief (unless of course the paper is a literature review) but it should also be as up-to-date as possible. I have seen a number of examples where the literature cited has been very dated. Departmental and other library services are usually only too pleased to help authors with advice and to assist with literature searches. (Such help should, of course, always be acknowledged).

(6) The judicious use of clinical material can greatly enhance a presentation but only if it is directly relevant to the central arguments in the paper. In addition, it is my experience that the material is not always as well disguised as it might be, particularly if a patient's stay in a specific hospital or unit is referred to in the paper.

(7) My comments concerning relevance apply equally to the use of figures, diagrams and statistical material. In many cases they do not appear to carry the author's arguments any further and they seem to obfuscate rather than clarify. In addition, authors should remember that such material should be able to be read without reference to the text. It may be useful to re-inforce here the advice given in paragraph 6 of the 'Notice to Contributors' concerning statistical computation.

(8) Many of the papers submitted embrace good ideas but are spoiled by poor presentation as referred to above, or in a number of other ways. A paper should have a 'beginning', a 'middle' and an 'end'. All too often, they appear to start well – sometimes at a great pace and then the author seems to lose his or her way and shudder to a halt. In some papers concluding comments or summaries seem to bear little or no relation to the preceding text. (Experienced writers of court reports will know what I mean). A lack of facility for expressing oneself with reasonable grammar and syntax was all too common. I do not imagine that the editors are looking for 'Churchillian' prose, but in some cases authors had obviously not even considered it necessary to consult a dictionary, book of synonyms or comparable glossary. It is always advisable to work with a dictionary at one's side. I always do; (in writing these observations its use saved me from spelling culinary incorrectly!). A significant number of authors fail to check their final manuscript for typing errors. When there is more than one typing mistake per page one tends to lose confidence in the author's attention to detail; this detracts inevitably from the value of the paper as a whole, however much merit it may have on other grounds. Authors would therefore be well advised to show their work in draft form to a colleague or friend. Colleagues can advise on the presentation of technical matters and friends outside one's discipline can tell you if the material makes sense. In fact the best advice is likely to come from those not immediately acquainted with the technicalities. Any intelligent lay person should be able to get the gist of a *Journal* paper even if the technical details and data are not completely understood. For many years now I have been saved a good many 'howlers' and infelicities by getting my wife and/or children to read a near final draft (my wife has read the final draft of this paper and it has been improved as a result). If you also have the advantage of a careful and skilful typist (as has been my good fortune in recent years) this can also save you from a number of mistakes; for example by spotting that your date or

dates for a reference in the text do not tie up with those given in the list of references.

(9) To summarise

If you wish to enhance the chances of your paper being accepted in the *Journal* you should:

(i) follow the basic instructions for contributors provided in the cover of the *Journal*;

(ii) ensure that you really have addressed the topic with brevity and clarity;

(iii) ensure that you have the readership of the *Journal* clearly in view at all times;

(iv) always seek the advice, scrutiny and criticisms of colleagues, friends and/or family.

Finally, to paraphrase from Horace: 'In one's struggle to be brief one should not become obscure'.

Useful sources of guidance

In addition to dictionaries of one kind or another there are some other very useful sources of guidance for authors. I have listed a selection of these. The pamphlet by Booth is a very useful short primer.

BOOTH, V. (1975) *Writing a Scientific Paper*, (3rd edn). London: Biochemical Society in association with Koch-Light Laboratories. (This booklet of only 26 pages contains very relevant information in summary form).

COLLINS, F. H. (1969) *Author's and Printer's Dictionary*, (10th edn), London: Oxford University Press. (A very useful complement to the conventional dictionary. Contains some less familiar words and phrases).

HART'S *Rules for Compositors and Readers at the Oxford University Press*, (1970) (32nd edn). London: Oxford University Press. (Contains a mine of information about style, punctuation, grammar, spelling and the correction of proofs. Anyone who intends to write regularly would do well to possess this little book).

KING, L. S. (1978) *Why Not Say it Clearly? A Guide to Scientific Writing*, Boston: Little Brown & Co. (A good introductory text aimed at a medical readership. Contains some useful and amusing examples of how not to express yourself!).

LINTON, M. (1972) *A Simplified Style Manual For the Preparation of Journal Articles in Psychology, Social Sciences, Education and Literature*, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts. (Although not intended primarily for medical writers this book contains some very relevant information).

LOCK, S. (1977) *Thorne's Better Medical Writing*, (2nd edn), London: Pitman Publishing. (A useful introductory text for medical authors).