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# Manuscript editing as a way of teaching academic writing: Experience from a small scientific journal

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## Abstract

Medical writing and manuscript preparation are rarely taught in the context of undergraduate, graduate, or continuing medical education. As editors of a “small” medical scientific journal published in English in a non-native English-speaking (NNES) country, we hold that the knowledge of scientific methodology and specificities of scientific reporting is a necessary precondition for a successful scientific publication. Our experience shows that language professionals and translators whose services NNES authors use should be acquainted with the basic rules of scientific reporting. In this article we describe how each of the four layers of a manuscript – the *study quality*, the *narrative*, the *scientific reporting style*, and finally the *language per se* – can be improved.

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In recent decades, the number of published research reports and medical journals as a main means of disseminating scientific medical information has increased immensely due to the proliferation of medical research. Internet, on-line accessible databases, and web-journals gave an additional incentive to medical publishing, led to the development of the concept of evidence-based medicine, and sped up the globalization of medical research and knowledge dissemination. All this, however, would not be possible if there were no common language—English. English has steadily replaced other languages in research literature and has become the *lingua franca* of the international science community (Flowerdew, 1999a, 1999b). As researchers are evaluated by the number and quality of their publications, they are under pressure to publish—the so-called “publish or perish”

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law (Garfield, 2000). Furthermore, they have to publish in English if they want their work to be accessible to the global science community. In this context, native English-speaking (NES) researchers are in a better position. In addition to having an advantage from a language point of view, they usually come from more affluent countries where “mainstream” science is produced (e.g., USA). Thus, NES researchers have better chances of publishing their work in mainstream science journals than their non-native English-speaking (NNES) peers from other, usually developing, countries (Marušić & Marušić, 2001). A quarter of the world’s well-known scientists come from developing countries (Gibbs, 1995), which contribute only 5% of the world’s total investments in science. Science Citation Index (SCI) includes only 2% of journals from developing countries (Gibbs, 1995), and 90% of relevant information is published in only 10% of journals (Garfield, 1986). Obviously, NNES researchers living and working in developing countries do not have much choice but to strive to join their “mainstream” colleagues and publish in the “mainstream” language. In doing so, many feel disadvantaged where the language is concerned. For example, Chinese scholars in Hong Kong interviewed by Flowerdew (1999b) reported they had less facility of expression because of limited vocabulary, needed longer time to write, were restricted to a simple style, and found introductions and discussions particularly difficult to write. They also said that they would have “preferred one-on-one supervision, where advice could be sought on specific problems related to a given research paper” (p. 259). On the other hand, many medical journal editors find language issues to be less important and are more interested in the scientific soundness, originality, and importance of the study than its presentation (Flowerdew, 1999a).

As many NNES scholars agree, their research hypotheses and results are meritable, but the weakest points of their manuscripts are introductions and discussions. This is in accordance with our 12-year long experience in publishing a medical scientific journal in English in a non-English-speaking country (Marušić, Mišak, Kljaković-Gašpić, & Marušić, 2002a). We recognized early that the authors of our journal, the *Croatian Medical Journal*, had valuable data but lacked skills to present them; we felt compelled to develop an instructional editorial policy to increase the critical mass of researchers competent in scientific writing (Marušić & Marušić, 2003). To the best of our knowledge, there are no other journals from the so-called scientific periphery which work with authors in the same ways as the *Croatian Medical Journal*. Some may occasionally help authors, but we have formalized this into an author-helpful policy and work as educators in our scientific community. We hope that the publication of this article will prompt discussion into this aspect of editorial work and prompt other journals to present their experiences.

The *Croatian Medical Journal* is included in all major databases, from the MEDLINE to the Current Contents®/Clinical Medicine and Web of Science® of the Institute of Scientific Information (ISI), i.e., in the same category with mainstream journals such as the *New England Journal of Medicine*, *The Lancet*, *JAMA*, *British Medical Journal*, *Canadian Medical Association Journal* and others. How so, if more than 60% of research papers that we publish originate from developing countries, and our authors are mostly NNES from the so-called “scientific periphery”, and we ourselves are NNES? There are several reasons. Firstly, we have found our “niche,” i.e., we deliberately opted to publish reports from developing countries and thus came to serve as a bridge between mainstream science and the scientific periphery (Marušić & Marušić, 2004a). For example, reports published in

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