

Commentary

Manuscript preparation and publication for would-be writers: An aid to disseminating osteopathic research

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Abstract

Disseminating research findings among the osteopathic profession is essential for growing the evidence base, and yet few osteopaths have experience of writing for publication. This article describes how to craft a paper by looking at four components of manuscript preparation: the process of writing; content and structure of a paper; style and grammar; and publication procedures. It provides practical advice on how and where to get started, what must be included or left out, and how to present data. It aims to encourage researchers to identify a clear message from their findings and then to embark on the challenging and yet rewarding path to becoming a published author. Good writing and manuscript preparation is important in advancing the profession's need for a body of evidence that will inform practice and, in the longer term, contribute to improved patient care.

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1. Introduction

The osteopathic profession is being encouraged to plan and conduct research in order to meet the increasing calls for clinical evidence on which to base practice.¹ Conducting research is no simple undertaking;² yet, even when it has been performed, often as part of an academic degree, the findings are not widely disseminated. Many osteopaths appear to lack familiarity with, and confidence in, the preparation and publication of manuscripts. So, believing that the craft of paper writing can be learned like any other, I describe in this article the four interlinked components, shown in Fig. 1, that together contribute to writing for publication.

2. Process: the writing journey

Writing for publication can be likened to a journey, and like most journeys it can be undertaken by anyone. But there will be challenges along the way. Enthusiasm for the task is essential, as motivation and hard work will be required before the journey's end. That said, the quiet satisfaction of seeing your name in print, together with the wider recognition and respect accorded by colleagues and friends alike, will make the journey rewarding. Also, you will acquire new skills in the process and, by sharing your research findings with other practitioners, will be helping the profession to mature.

2.1. The journey begins: how do I start?

Focusing on the finishing point is a good way to start. To do this you need to consider three things. First, why might your research be of interest to others? Think back to your own initial enthusiasm for the topic and consider

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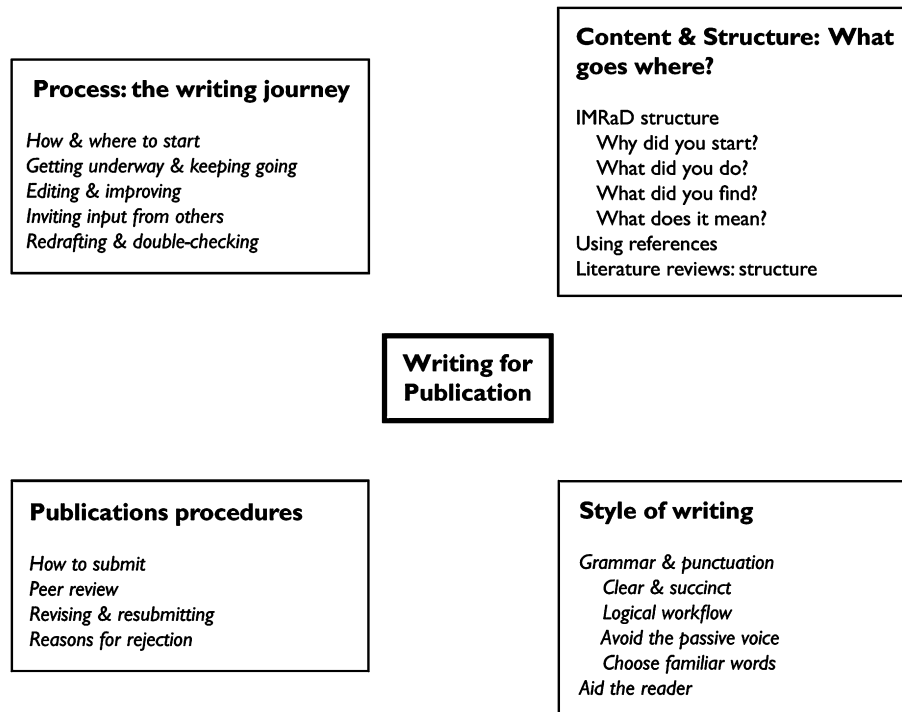


Fig. 1. Crafting a paper: components of manuscript preparation and publication.

how to capture it in your paper. If unsure, try revisiting the data, or your research project write-up; identify the major points and discuss these with others to gauge interest. There is a mistaken feeling that inconclusive or negative findings do not warrant publication: this is not so, as such data can often help direct subsequent research.

If you have spent several weeks or months collecting data or reviewing articles, it may seem hard to encapsulate your work into a simple message. But that is the second consideration: describing in a sentence or two what it is that you want people to remember from your study. This is the ‘take home’ message. If you have difficulty formulating a message, look again at the goal (objective) of your research. What was it? Was it met? Did anything else emerge (positive or negative)? Having a clear idea of what you want to say is preferable to hoping that the reader will uncover this themselves.

Third, consider your audience: what are the interests and background of the people you want to read your paper? Then review potential journals to check the different types of papers published there, their length and structure, and read the Instructions to Authors/Guide for Authors (printed at least annually and also available on the journal’s website). In choosing a target journal, consider whether your work is for specialists (e.g. osteopaths only or another distinct group, such as midwives) or of more general interest (e.g. all manual therapists, muscle physiologists or similar), then assess the quality of your work in relation to the prestige, popularity and circulation of the journal.

2.2. Planning: a framework for your paper

The next step is to plan ahead, before commencing any writing. Activities essential for a successful writing journey are listed in Table 1. Listening, reading and thinking are key amongst these,³ so talk to others about your research, read around the subject and, if necessary, seek advice from those with experience of writing.^{3–5} If you have previously written a thesis or dissertation, spend some time to bring yourself up to date with any new literature or current developments in the area.

Thereafter, try devising a framework for your paper: map out a way to assemble your research findings and their interpretation so that your message emerges. Most authors use section headings and sub-headings to help them in this task. If this proves difficult, try brain storming with others or mind mapping.^{3,4} As you plan the sections, with rough notes of what might go where, a picture of the whole article will emerge. This is the stage when choices can be made of what is important to include and what to leave out. The content of a paper is considered in more detail in Section 3.

2.3. Getting underway and keeping going

Where to start is a matter of personal preference; some advocate devising the title while others tell you to draft the abstract first. Each approach has its merits, and both will inevitably need revision before the journey ends. My advice is to start where you feel most

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