



## Arab Journal of Urology (Official Journal of the Arab Association of Urology)

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### EDITORIAL

# How to write a medical original article: Advice from an Editor



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Received 10 September 2013, Received in revised form 14 October 2013, Accepted 14 October 2013  
Available online 6 December 2013

#### KEYWORDS

Teaching;  
Medical;  
Manuscript;  
Writing

**Abstract Objectives:** To provide guidelines for potential authors on how to increase the chances of their manuscript being accepted, with a review focusing on writing an original medical article.

**Methods:** This review reflects the personal experience of the present author, who has extensive experience as an author, reviewer and editor.

**Results:** To write an original article successfully, there are three essential requirements, the 'basic triad' of an original article. These are subjects worth reporting, knowledge of the basic structure of an article, and knowledge of the essential mechanics of good writing. This review details each of the three items.

**Conclusions:** Writing, like every other art, cannot be learned wholly from books or lectures, but can be learned largely by experience. The best training is to start the task and persevere. The act of writing, like surgical techniques, must be learned the hard way, by practice and perseverance. Anyone can start writing but only a good writer can finish the task.

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#### Introduction

Much has been done to improve medical writing. Editors reject ill-prepared manuscripts and attempt to

improve those accepted. Referees provide a detailed criticism of the content of papers submitted, so that a journal retains its high standards in the face of the volume of work presented to it.

However, many authors find difficulty in placing a piece of writing which has taken much time and trouble to prepare, and might contain work of importance. Doctors spend a great deal of time with 'pen in hand'. What they need is someone to help them to express themselves clearly. The aim of the present review is to provide guidelines for potential authors on how to increase the

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Peer review under responsibility of Arab Association of Urology.



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chances of a manuscript being accepted. In this review I focus only on the writing of original articles for publication in a peer-reviewed journal.

To write an original article successfully, there are three essential requirements, the 'basic triad' of an original article, including a subject worth reporting, knowledge of the basic structure of a peer-reviewed article, and knowledge of the essentials of good writing.

### The subject

There should be a subject worthy of reporting, and that must be an addition to the existing literature. The author should read the previous relevant reports carefully and ensure that he or she is not repeating what has been done successfully before. Do not waste your time in writing a paper which will never be published.

### The basic structure of an article

An original article contains the following items: A title page, an Abstract, Introduction, Patients (or materials) and methods, Results, Discussion, Summary or conclusion, the References, Tables, Figures, legends to Figures and any acknowledgements. A quick checklist of the main items is provided to the author in Box 1 and, to help potential authors to understand the demands of the journal, the criteria used by the reviewer are shown in Box 2.

#### Box 1

The author's check list.

##### Introduction

- Short review
- Shortcomings of the existing reports
- Aim of the study
- Scope of the study

##### Patients (or materials) and methods

- Full description of patients/materials
- Full description of methods
- Study design
- Statistical analysis
- Ethical considerations

##### Results

- Presentation of data
- Correlation of data

##### Discussion

- Introduction to discussion
- Discussion of the results
- Advantages of the study
- Limitations of the study
- Recommendations of authors

#### Box 2

The reviewer's checklist.

##### Introduction

- Are the objectives clear?
- Is the importance of the study adequately emphasised?
- Is the subject matter of the study new?
- Is previous work on the subject adequately cited?

##### Patients (materials) and methods

- Is the study population detailed adequately?
- Are the methods described well enough to reproduce the experiment?
- Is the study design clear?
- Are statistical methods included?
- Are ethical considerations provided?

##### Results

- Can the reader assess the results based on the data provided?
- Is the information straightforward and not confusing?
- Are there adequate controls?
- Are statistical methods appropriate?

##### Discussion

- Do the authors comment adequately on all their results?
- Have the authors explained why and how their study differs from others already published?
- Do the authors discuss the potential problems and limitations with their study?
- Are the authors' conclusions supported by the results?

#### The title page

The title page contains the title, list of authors, institutions, a running title, keywords, a word count, a correspondence address and a second title page.

The title should be informative, specific, comprehensive and accurate, stating exactly what the article is about. It should convey maximum information in a minimum of words. It should express the main issue of the study and preferably the type of study. The title should state the subject, never the conclusion. It should be considered and reassessed frequently, and when the paper is finished the final title is the last sentence to be written.

#### The authors

To be included as an author, the person must have contributed something worthwhile, such as creative thinking, performing diagnostic or therapeutic techniques that are essential to the study, collecting data, or writing the paper. The Vancouver protocol is internationally recognised as the standard for determining the authorship on publications. This protocol was first described

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