

Style

16 thoughts on getting that paper published!*

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(1) *Authors may be divided into three classes—shooting stars, planets, and fixed stars.* Arthur Schopenhauer: *Parerga und Paralipomena*, 1851
How brightly should you shine, and for how long? At appointments committees lists of publications are becoming increasingly important as proxy measures of candidates' abilities and potential. As competition for posts becomes fiercer, number and quality of publications are likely to assume even greater importance when similarly qualified individuals are being compared. We may bemoan this trend but in the absence of other more valid indicators of worth and from the point of view of self-interest it would be prudent to acknowledge it and to support it.

(2) *If a man have no heroism in his soul, no animating purpose beyond living easily and faring sumptuously, I can imagine no greater mistake on his part than that of resorting to authorship as a vocation.* Horace Greeley: *Letter*, 1860
Few write for the love of language and the thrill of communication: the majority find it a tedious task, made all the more difficult because guidance and training are lacking.

(3) *There are three difficulties in authorship: to write anything worth the publishing—to find honest men to publish it—and to get sensible men to read it.* C. C. Colton: *Lacon*, 1820
Publication signals the completion of the scientific process, but as a key to research funding and promotion, publication has become an end in itself, distorting scientific work and leading to Quick And Dirty research.

Counter measures to this trend include: imposition of higher scientific standards by medical journals; improved supervision of research activities; and antidotes to the rising tide of publications such as the Harvard guidelines, suggesting that candidates

should indicate no more than three publications per year or 10 in a five year period.

(4) *A newspaper consists of just the same number of words, whether there be any news in it or not.* Henry Fielding: *Tom Jones*, 1749
It is expedient to publish in a peer-reviewed journal.

(5) *The difference between literature and journalism is that journalism is unreadable, and literature is not read.* Oscar Wilde: *The Critic as Artist*, 1891
A small number of psychiatrists have made a considerable reputation treading the tightrope between science and journalism. For the rest, there remains an important need to inform the public. In hard times recall that: “*No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money*”. Samuel Johnson: *Boswell's Life*, 1776.

(6) *Like author, like book.* John Ray: *English Proverbs*, 1670
The task of writing is made easier if it is imbued with a strong personal interest, though to an audience of psychiatrists this may inadvertently divulge aspects of self better kept hidden.

(7) *An author is like a baker; it is for him to make the sweets, and others to buy and enjoy them.* Leigh Hunt: *The Indicator*, 1821
Ask yourself: What message do I wish to convey? Who are my audience? Is the paper worth writing? What type of article is most appropriate?

(8) *Writers, like teeth, are divided into incisors and grinders.* Walter Bagheot: *Literary Studies*, 1879
Optimise the glory-to-effort ratio. In descending order of importance come: original observations, secondary analyses, scholarly reviews, leading articles or editorials, correspondence and book reviews. Some contributions are more difficult to rank: lectures, comments, points of view, brief reports, historical pieces, notices, case conferences, and finally, obituaries.

*Based on a presentation at Friern Hospital, London on 14 December 1989 to the East Anglia Division Trainee's Day.

(9) *Good writers have two things in common: they prefer being understood to being admired, and they do not write for the over-critical and too shrewd reader.* F. W. Nietzsche: *Human All-too-human*, II, 1878

Title – Keep short
 Name and address
 Abstract – Facts only
 Introduction – *Why did you start?*
 Method – *What did you do?*
 Results – *What did you find?*
 Discussion – *What does it mean?*
 Conclusion – Not needed usually
 Acknowledgements – Be sparing
 References – Not too many and in Journal style
 Figures and Tables – Should tally with text
 Appendix

Only include essential information required by readers to assess to what extent the work is reliable and valid. And only include tables and figures if the data are better understood that way.

(10) *If you wish to be a writer, write.* Epictetus: *Discourses*, 110

Once you have chosen a journal, study its 'instructions to authors' and follow the advice given.

Use short, correct words; double spaced type; and wide margins. Begin by writing down a series of side-headings to guide your sequence of ideas. Ask someone to read what you have produced to find out whether it makes sense. Expect to have 4–5 drafts before finishing.

(11) *The greatest part of a writer's time is spent in reading, in order to write; a man will turn over half a library to make one book.* Samuel Johnson: *Boswell's Life*, 1775

Guard against obsession: shoot from the hip. For: "*I have protracted my work till most of those whom I wished to please have sunk into the grave, and success and miscarriage are empty sounds. I therefore dismiss it with frigid tranquillity, having little to fear or hope from censure or from praise.*" (Samuel Johnson: *Dictionary*, preface, 1755).

(12) *This is the writing that was written, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.* Daniel V, 25, c165 BC

Submit the required number of copies of the article to the editor of the journal chosen, together with a brief letter:

Dear Dr Johnson,

Writer's cramp

I am submitting three copies of the attached article to your consideration for publication in the Journal, and I look forward to hearing from you about the outcome.

Yours sincerely,

If there are several authors they should all sign to signify consent.

(13) *There is a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will.* Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, v, c.1601

Articles submitted to journals are generally dealt with as follows:

<i>Registration</i>	
<i>Seen by editor</i>	– Rejection
<i>Peer review</i>	
1	
2	
Statistician	
3–12 months delay	
<i>Reports</i>	
Approve	– Editorial decision
Disapprove	– Rejection
Disagree	– More reports
<i>Editorial decision</i>	
Quality	– Acceptance,
Acceptability	– Revision, or
Space	– Rejection

Technical editing

Printing
 3–12 months delay

Publication

The process is lengthy, so have a strategy. To impress an appointments committee with a recent publication, start work 18 months beforehand.

(14) *A writing man is something of a black sheep, like the village fiddler. Occasionally a fiddler becomes a violinist, and is a credit to his family, but as a rule he would have done better had his tendency been toward industry and saving.* E. W. Howe: *The Blessing of Business*, 1918

A long list of publications may be taken as evidence that your training experience has not been well-rounded – you have spent insufficient time with patients, teaching, or on committees. At an appointments committee a colleague was asked to explain how she had been able to produce so many publications and why she was first author on such a high proportion of them.

(15) *No one is so rich that he does not need another's help; no one so poor as not to be useful in some way to his fellow man; and the disposition to ask assistance from others with confidence, and to grant it with kindness, is part of our very nature.* Pope Leo XIII: *Graves de communi*, January 18, 1901.

Alex Paton (1985) concludes his article on writing papers with the words of a respected journalist who when asked how he managed to write with such ease replied: "The first million words were the worst".

(16) *Write without pay until somebody offers pay. If nobody offers within three years the candidate may*

look upon this circumstance with the most implicit confidence as the sign that sawing wood is what he was intended for. S. L. Clemens (Mark Twain): *A General Reply*, 1870.

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Further reading

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The nuts and bolts of writing papers

Number 4: Technical matters

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Jargon

Some jargon is useful. Though I invariably place inverted commas around 'caseness', just so that everybody knows that I know that it is jargon, I would be a lost man if I diligently replaced it with a statement to the effect that this particular patient has achieved an index of definition of 5 or over on the Present State Examination.

I would like to make a special plea here for the use of the word 'case'. Popular dictionaries do indicate it can be used to refer to people, but I really do think it's a bit much, inhumane even, to refer to six cases having children. *Butterworths' Medical Dictionary* gives "Any particular instance of injury or disease". I have even read of cases coming to post mortems. Some papers are full of cases that I have to assiduously amend, which can take a lot of patients.

Interestingly, *Butterworths' Medical Dictionary* gives two definitions of 'jargon', the first of which, topically perhaps, is "The babbling talk and incomprehensible words uttered by certain idiots and by insane persons".

Some jargon is used by cunning authors to add a dubious authority to their writing. The worst case I have yet come across of this was 'positive future-orientated mental construct', which really sounded great in context, but 'hope' was actually more honest.

Patient numbers

If the reports I read are to be believed (and one can only assume that they are), anyone entering a hospital (or perhaps it is only a research study) is endowed with the ability to disappear. This is doubly true if he or she is also a percentage. Fifty per cent of the last 30 papers to pass my desk contained numerical errors – three had over three errors, ten had only one.

There is also the sort of patient who can materialise out of nothing at all. They generally do it in tables, but wily ones work themselves into a footnote.

Practical advice

I would suggest thinking how a technical something could be said in plain English – if it is shorter the plain way, say it that way; if it is longer, there is still the consideration of your audience, and whether they will readily understand.

The other point about technical matters is that they are very easily overlooked or forgotten, even by authors. You should therefore make sure that what you've said in one place tallies with what you've said somewhere else. Cross-checking facts within the paper itself can show up the trivial reference error as well as the more than somewhat embarrassing numerical howler.

Next month: the structure of a paper.