Skills for today's information professional

This is part of an occasional series of articles looking at essential skills for today's information professional.
If you feel you have valuable experience or know-how regarding management or professional issues – and would like to share your expertise with others by writing a short guide similar to the one below – we would be keen to hear from you.

Antony Brewerton
SCONUL Focus Editorial Team

The academic writing toolkit: writing for professional and peer-reviewed journals

Helen Fallon
Deputy Librarian
National University of Ireland
Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Irelan
Tel: +353 1 7083879
E-mail: Helen.B.Fallon@nuim.ie

This article offers a step-by-step approach to writing an article. It aims to be a practical guide, with writing exercises, for library staff who have limited or no experience of writing for peer-reviewed and/or professional journals. It draws on my experience of facilitating academic writing workshops for library staff from Irish universities and for postgraduate students at NUI Maynooth. The nine sections cover the following:

Section 1.	Beginning to write
Section 2.	Ideas generation
Section 3.	Outlining
Section 4.	Abstract and title
Section 5.	Finding a journal
Section 6.	Writing the article
Section 7.	Submission
Section 8.	Peer-review and resubmission
Section 9.	Publication and celebration.

Section I. Beginning to write

To begin writing you have to begin writing. That's not thinking about beginning: it's actually putting pen to paper or your fingers on the keyboard and getting words down. Here is a warm-up exercise.

Exercise – Writing to prompt
Write for ten minutes, without stopping, in sentences not bullets, beginning with one of the following prompts:

'I feel at my most creative at work when I'm …'
'Something I would really love to write about is ...'
'My most interesting experience in my career to date was ...'.
It can be helpful to do a warm-up exercise (e.g. 'My next writing task is …') each time you sit down to write, to get into the flow of writing.

Consult Rowena Murray for more on writing to prompt.[1]

Section 2. Ideas generation

Writing generates ideas. You have to write to discover what you know.

Exercise – Finding a topic to write about
Do the following exercises fairly quickly:
List five issues/topics/experiences you would like to write about.
List five issues/topics/experiences you know a reasonable amount about.
List five issues/topics/experiences you think people would be interested in reading about.
Are there issues/experiences that are common to all three of the above? Pick one topic that interests you. Do the following clustering exercise.

Exercise – Clustering
Write your topic in the centre of a piece of paper, and draw a circle around it. Surround the topic with subtopics. Circle each and draw a line from it to the centre circle. Brainstorm more ideas. As you do this, connect each new concept to a subtopic already on the sheet, or make it a new subtopic. You will probably find there are many angles to your topic. Pick one specific aspect/angle. Writing projects often fail because they are too broad.

Consult Elaine P. Maimon for further guidance on clustering.[2]

Buy yourself an ideas notebook, small enough to carry about with you. I started this about eight years ago. It's surprising how much free time we

actually have – time on the train journey to work, time drinking coffee while waiting for friends, five or ten minutes here and there. You don't need lots of time to jot down ideas. You won't use all of these. You probably won't use many of them. It will get you into the habit of thinking about topics and teasing out ideas on paper. Remember, an idea is only an idea until you write it down. Reading helps generate ideas and also helps develop writing skills. Reading can be done anywhere, and with so many journals available electronically, printing an article to read on the bus or train from time to time shouldn't be too onerous.

Read more about finding ideas in Rachel Singer-Gordon.[3]

Some authors suggest that at this early stage you identify the journal you will submit to. If you wish to do this next, follow the guidance in section 5. I prefer to have an outline before identifying a publishing outlet.

Section 3. Outlining

When you have chosen your topic and your angle (remember: there are no new topics, just new angles) you can approach writing in different ways. Some writers, both academic and creative, write in a stream-of-consciousness fashion. Teachers of creative writing sometimes suggest you try to write the story from start to finish – not necessarily at one sitting – without editing. That can work for some. If you want to try this approach, limit yourself to about 2,000 words. Otherwise you may keep writing, bringing in new topics, new angles, new information as you go and finally ending up with a very large loose piece of writing that requires major editing in order to get a focus.

Most academic writers work from some type of structure / outline. Outlining allows you to order, categorise, sift, link and eliminate ideas. It allows you to contextualise and plan. Having an outline means you can view the structure of a 5,000-word article at a glance and dip into various sections when you have a short amount of time. This can make finding time to write a less daunting process.

The structure of an article will vary depending on the publication and type of article. Nick Joint offers useful suggestions on various types of article.[4]

Below are two suggested outlines – one for a peer-reviewed journal, the other for a professional journal.

Outline 1 – Peer-reviewed journal articles

- **Title** – This should include words that indicate the key theme of the article. If a subtitle is used, it should indicate the specific focus or argument.
- **Abstract** – This is a synopsis, not an introduction to the article. It should detail the essence of the article – its main arguments and findings – in clear and unambiguous terms, so that a potential reader knows what to expect.
- **Introduction** – This introduces the substantive content of the paper. It sets the scene and provides the reader with an insight into what is to follow. Normally it moves from the general to the specific.
- **Literature review** – It would be extremely rare for an article for a peer-reviewed journal to be so unique that it does not build on the work of others. The literature review should be highly selective and specific, referring to the work most relevant to the case being made. It should demonstrate that the author is familiar with thinking / debate around the topic. Abby Day[5] offers straightforward guidance on how to approach a literature review.
- **Methodology/approach/conceptual framework** – This explains how the study was undertaken. It should detail exactly how any data were generated and the specific techniques used.
- **Analysis/results** – This should state clearly • what the findings are and how they are being interpreted.
- **Discussion** – This folds together the previous sections, linking the findings from the research, the literature review and the author's own thinking on the topic.
- **Conclusion** – The conclusion draws the article to a close by summarising the rationale and findings, reaffirming the value of the research and suggesting how it might be developed further.
- **Bibliography** – This provides the references for material cited. It should follow the journal's guidelines on citation style.

Outline 2 – Professional/practitioner journal articles

Professional journal articles are different in style and content from peer-reviewed articles. They are

often based on practice and experience rather than research and have, generally, a bigger readership than peer-reviewed journals. Murray writes:

'It is important to see the value in both types of journal and to consider, over the longer term, whether you could or should publish in both … In practice, there are journals in some fields that bring the two together.' [6]

She defines academic journals as research-based, with a small audience and placing a high value on theory. Professional journals, she suggests, reach a large audience and value practice and experience. There are journals that combine both research and experience, believing that the study of practice generates new knowledge, and they have a mixed audience.
A professional / practitioner journal article will generally have some or all of the elements listed below and may use different / additional headings:

- **Title**
- **Abstract**
- **Introduction/background/context**
- **Description**
- **Evaluation**
- **Reflection**
- **Conclusion**

The headings you use in your outline are likely to change as you progress through your article. It is useful to look at an article you consider to be very well-written. Look at the headings and subheadings. These give the article its structure.

Exercise – Filling in the blanks
Do a working outline for your article.

Under each heading, with the exception of the conclusion, write a few sentences, not bullets, beginning with 'This section will cover …'.

Spending time planning and outlining rather than diving into writing will save time in the long run. Day suggests that:

'The reason many aspiring authors fail is that they throw themselves immediately into the activity of writing without realizing it is the forethought, analysis and preparation that determine the quality of the finished product.' [7]

More suggestions on techniques / methods of outlining can be found in Liane Reif-Lehrer,[8] Murray,[9] David Canter and Gavin Fairbairn[10] and Day.[11]

Section 4. Writing an abstract and finding a title

Having a working title and abstract is useful. This won't be your final title or abstract, but it will help you focus. Return to your title and abstract each time you read your draft and ask yourself whether the title reflects what you are writing about.

There are different types of abstract required for different journals. A basic informative abstract of about 60 words can later be redeveloped / restructured.

Exercise – Writing an abstract
Draw up a draft abstract of no more than 80 words. Think about the verbs you use. Don't use the same verb continually through the abstract. Consider the impact of the following verbs: asks, argues, covers, demonstrates, describes, discusses, educates, elucidates, evaluates, examines, expands, explores, identifies, maps, outlines, presents, proposes, promotes, reports, reviews, shows, suggests, summarises, surveys, synthesizes.

Study the abstracts in journals you are considering approaching with your article. How long are they? What type of verbs do they use? How are they structured?

Day offers a succinct three-sentence method for writing an abstract, with Sentence One covering 'the purpose', Sentence Two 'the argument' and Sentence Three 'the findings'.[12]

Section 5. Finding a journal

It's best not to write comprehensively and then plan to find an appropriate journal for your writing; rather, at an early stage, analyse journals you think might be suitable, see where your topic has been covered before and work out if you have a new angle. Read the guidelines for submissions, checking the website for the most recent guidelines. Consider whether you can write your article to suit a particular journal's requirements. Don't just look to the literature of librarianship. Journals in various disciplines may also be interested in articles on topics such as information sources in the discipline, information literacy and other issues of common concern to academics and librarians. If you are a subject librarian, talk to academics in your area. Ask what journals they think might be interested in an article on your topic. The following two prompts may help clarify

whether your article matches a journal's submission guidelines:

1. The purpose of my article is …
2. The audience for my article is …

When you have identified a potential journal, read a few recent previous issues. Check the website for the name of the editor. Your query email should be brief and should, in a few sentences, tell what you are writing about, why you think readers of the journal might be interested in this and about your expertise/experience in this area. It's unlikely that you will get a guarantee of publication following a query email to a peer-reviewed journal, unless you are very established in a field, but you may get an expression of interest in seeing the completed article. It can also be useful, and save time, if the editor explains why s/he feels, based on the information you have provided, that the article would not be suitable for the journal in question. If you get an expression of interest in seeing the finished paper, write thanking the editor and letting her/him know when it is likely to be completed. You will then have an actual commitment and deadline to motivate yourself. The requirements of the journal will help you shape and structure your writing.

'Most papers fail because the writer has not considered the needs of the journal and its readers.'[13]

Make yourself aware of the journal's position on copyright. Most peer-reviewed journals hold copyright of articles. They may allow archiving (pre-print or post-print) in an open access repository. Check out Project Romeo at www.sherpa.ac.uk to ascertain the policy of individual journals on self-archiving. Many professional journals give copyright to individual authors or will, on request, grant permission to deposit in an open access repository.

Section 6. Writing the article

Go back to your outline. Select a section and begin writing. Don't try to write something perfect, just write. Every sentence you write, every word, can be revised later:

'"I just put down any sort of rubbish," a celebrated critic once remarked about his first attempts. And putting down rubbish is good advice … the truth is that once a sentence is lying on the page, it is often shatteringly clear what is right and what is wrong with it. Put it down, and go on putting more of it down. Everything can be mended later.'[14]

Remember that your first draft is just that – a first draft. Just concentrate on getting your ideas down. Write in full sentences. Confine each sentence to no more than one idea. Write in short sentences, thus avoiding the continuous use of 'and'. Don't look for perfection, just write. Write in sections, so that when you have a short period of time, say half-an-hour, you can work on a particular section. Don't worry about style in the first and second drafts.

Elizabeth Rankin makes the following useful suggestions regarding finding your writing voice:

'If you find it difficult to write in the formal voice required in many academic and professional contexts, write your first drafts in a more relaxed, informal voice. After you've succeeded in getting your ideas down on paper, you can come back and tighten up your style … don't get hung up on pronouns. If you like to write in the first person, go ahead and use it in your first drafts.'[15]

Don't begin to revise and edit too early. Give yourself permission to write badly. Later, you can add polish and style. When you have a rough first draft – which usually won't have a conclusion at this stage – reread it and begin to add, remove and reorder text.

It can be helpful to save each draft of your article. This will give you 'the ecology' of the paper and. rather than deleting material, you may find that material in earlier drafts will become the basis of future articles. It is also a good idea to number and date each draft.
Consider the tense you use. Will your article be in the present or past tense? Can you use the continuous present instead of the past?

When you go on to the third and subsequent drafts give more attention to structure: that is, the arrangement of paragraphs and sentences. Keep related material together and have a logical movement from sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph and section to section. Remember you are a storyteller. Ask yourself how each sentence moves the story along. Do the paragraphs and sections flow easily or do they jolt from idea to idea? If your writing jolts, consider what types of connecting sentences you need. While not specifically related to academic writing, useful advice is offered by Clark on the nuts and bolts of writing – tenses, verbs, organisation of sentences and so forth.[16]

'The author Samuel Johnson once said, "what is written without effort is read without pleasure", and it is

often the most seemingly effortless prose that has been written, rewritten, scratched out, sweated over and rewritten again.'[17]

Draft and redraft. When you feel your article is complete or close to completion, give it, and the guidelines for submission, to a colleague/critical friend. Tell the person the type of feedback you require. Is it on the content, the style, the suitability for a particular journal? Take on board any relevant suggestions.

Leave the paper aside for at least a week. Reread. Reread first for content, then reread for style. Edit. Proofread. Ensure all your references are in the format required by the journal and that the layout is consistent and matches the requirements of the journal.

Section 7. Submission

'There are only two types of articles; those that are perfect and never get published, and those that are good enough and do.'[18]

At a certain point, painful though it may be, you have to let go of your article.

Reread the submission guidelines. Reproof your article. Submit it according to the journal's guidelines.

Most journals acknowledge receipt of an article. In the case of a professional journal, the editor/editorial board will make a decision relatively quickly. S/he or an editorial team may do some editing of the article. Depending on the frequency of publication, the lead-in time to publication is usually a few months. In the case of a peer-reviewed journal, there is a more detailed process and the lead-in time is generally much longer. The procedure for peer-review is outlined in the next section.

Section 8. Peer-review

Editors are reluctant to waste the time of referees, who give their services free of charge, so they will generally indicate quickly if an article is not suitable for publication. If the article is considered potential material for the journal, it will be sent for peer-review. This process will vary depending on journal, but will generally be at least two to three months.

Just as there are guidelines for submission, referees are also given guidelines. Kitchin and Fuller give the following guidelines on judging criteria referees may be asked to use:

- *Does the paper fit the aims and brief of the journal?*
- *Is the topic of the paper interesting and pertinent for the journal's readership?*
- *Does the paper make a significant new contribution to the literature?*
- *Does the paper display sound scholarship?*
- *Is the paper clearly written and well structured?*
- *Is the paper of an appropriate length?*[19]

Once the editor receives the reviewers' comments s/he will read the paper again and make a decision. This may be to accept the paper as it is (this is rare in the case of a peer-reviewed journal); accept with revisions (in this case the paper need not be seen by a referee again); ask the author to revise and resubmit (referees will generally be asked to re-evaluate); or reject.

If your paper is rejected you need to find another outlet and rewrite for it, taking into account the audience, length, style and so forth.

If asked to revise and resubmit, go through the suggestions. Make the changes, unless you feel there is a valid reason for not doing so. Reread and reproof the full article. Resubmit. Point out where you have made the changes in your email to the editor. If you have not taken a suggestion of the referees on board, explain why.

Read more about the peer-review process in Day,[20] Joint[21] Kitchin,[22] Murray[23] and Gilmore, Cason and Perry.[24]

Section 9. Publication and celebration

The editor may give you one or more copies of the journal in which your article is published. Copyright permitting, deposit your article in your institutional archive, assigning appropriate keywords.

Finally, celebrate your success!

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