Supporting Health Sciences Librarians to Publish: The Dublin EAHIL Academic Writing Workshop

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Abstract

This article offers practical assistance to health sciences librarians who wish to write for publication. While aimed at the novice writer, it also provides insights for the more experienced writer. Based on an academic writing workshop I presented as a satellite event at the Dublin European Association for Health Information and Libraries (EAHIL) conference, the workshop is reproduced here as a series of tasks with observations. Feedback from participants in the workshop and a discussion around the issues are presented.

Key words: writing; publishing; authorship; librarians.

Introduction

Eight librarians participated in *Writing for Academic Publication: A workshop for Health Sciences Librarians,* presented as a three-hour satellite event at the Dublin EAHIL conference. Five were Irish, the remaining three were from France, Germany and Serbia. The irish participants are librarians in the health board and hospital libraries and one Institute of Technology. The three European librarians are employed in research centres.

The group was extremely enthusiastic and the forum provided an opportunity to discuss issues relating to writing with colleagues from diverse backgrounds. Motivation for attending included learning the craft of writing, structuring articles, using information generated through practice, adapting writing for one purpose (digest and thesis) to another audience (journal article) and developing a knowledge of the publication process.

Participants expressed the view that while there is an expectation for medical practitioners to write, they received little encouragement to write. The exception to this was the non-Irish librarians working in research centres, who felt under some pressure to publish in peer-reviewed journals, particularly those relating to the discipline of the centre. They felt there was little recognition, by their organisations, of articles published in library journals.

Three of the participants had published previously (internal newsletters, digests, posters, letter, short stories); five had not. The main barriers to writing they identified were

- finding a suitable topic;
- developing the confidence to write and put work in the public arena;
- lack of experience of academic writing;
- lack of knowledge of the publishing industry;
- lack of time and encouragement;
- lack of guidance on writing style and proof-reading.

The participants were grouped in a circle, which worked well given the relatively small numbers.

Workshop

This section endeavours to reproduce the workshop in a format that will be useful to people wishing to write for publication. A series of tasks followed by observations is presented. Due to the time constraints it was not possible for participants to complete each of these tasks in the way outlined here.

The workshop opened with a few writing to prompt tasks.

Task 1 – Just write

Pick one of the following prompts and write for five minutes, in sentences not bullets:

- an area of my expertise I would like to write about is…
- the most interesting project I've been involved with in the last two years is…
- my current research interest is…

Observation

Before undertaking the exercise participants were reassured they would not have to share their writing with other members of the group. This allowed people to write without editing or censoring their work. Constant editing can impede getting an article drafted. Most of the participants were surprised at how much they could actually write in five minutes provided they gave themselves permission to write badly. It was stressed that editing and rewriting should come later.

Task 2 – Motivation for writing

Write 50 words in five minutes on why you want to get published

Observation

This task is more focused and had both a time and word limit. Most people exceeded the word limit, a common problem in writing.

Task 3 – Gathering support

Write 50 words for your Director, explaining what you are writing and why your writing is important for the organisation.

Observation

While people often feel their organisation doesn't value their writing, they perhaps aren't vocal enough in articulating to their managers the benefits of their writing for wider organisational goals. It is worth considering how you can align your writing with broader organisational objectives.

Task 4 – Ideas generation

Write your topic in the centre of a piece of paper. Draw a circle around it.
Surround the topic with subtopics. Circle each and draw a line from it to the centre circle. Pick one aspect of the topic to focus on during the workshop.

Observation

Writing projects often fail because they are too broad and/or too ambitious for the time frame. Clustering or mapping creates connections and allows the writer to identify and focus on a particular aspect of a topic. You can return to other aspects for further articles. The more focused and specific a topic is, the better the chance of completing an article.

Task 5 – Defining audience and purpose

Answer each of the following questions in two single sentences.

- What is the purpose of your writing?
- Who is the audience for your writing?

Observation

The most common reason for rejection of articles by journal editors is that they are not suitable for the journal. Knowing your audience and purpose before you start will to a large extent, determine the type of article you write and your choice of journal. As you write your article return periodically to your audience and purpose statement. This will help keep you on track.

Task 6 – Evaluating journals to ascertain topic suitability

Participants were asked to consider the following questions in relation to submitting to a peer-reviewed journal. Due to time constraints participants were advised to complete this task outside the workshop.

- What do the guidelines for contributions stipulate?
- Is some or all of the content peer-reviewed?
- How many issues are there per year and how many of these are themed?
- Who is the publisher?
- What types of material are published?
- Are articles illustrated?
- How many references do typical papers include?
- How long is the average article?
- Are articles written in the first, third or other person?
- Is the tone formal or informal?
- What type of style is used? Are sentences short or long? What length typically are paragraphs? How many headings/sub-headings are there per article?
- Has your topic been covered in this journal before?
- Do you have a new angle?
- Why would this journal be interested in your topic?

Observation

The workshop focused on three titles - Journal *of the Medical Library Association (JMLA)*, *Journal of the*

European Association for Health Information and Libraries (JEAHIL) and *Health Information and Libraries.* The need to read previous issues of the journals and to examine guidelines for contributions was stressed. By reading recent issues of a journal, you can identify topics which have been covered before. Unless you have a new angle on the topic, the editor is unlikely to cover very similar material unless a significant period of time has elapsed. Also, reading previous issues gives you an opportunity to study the style of the journal. Some participants noted that the preparatory work prior to actually writing the article seemed quite extensive. Preparation is vital and can increase significantly the chances of publication.

Task 7 – Sending a query e-mail
Draft a query e-mail to the editor of your target journal
The query e-mail should be brief and ideally use singe sentences
- I am writing an article about…
- I think your readers would be interested in…
- I'm currently working in this area… (Your experience in this area)
- Would you like to see a copy of the article?

Observation
Editors generally respond very quickly to query e-mails, and will generally give a reason if the suggested article is not suitable for their publication. Frequently editors provide useful suggestions regarding potential content, approach and deadlines. Editors often prefer to get query e-mails, rather than unsolicited manuscripts.

Task 8 – Finding a title
Developing a working title for your article
Observation
While titles frequently change, a working title helps give direction and focus. Examine the titles which have been used in previous articles relating to your topic. Study the titles of articles in the journal you are targeting. Are they short, snappy and informative or longer and more formal? Previous titles indicate the preferred style of title. It is vital your final title reflects the content of the article and encourages the reader to continue. Many people may not look beyond the title in making a decision as to whether to read an article.

Task 9 – Writing an abstract
Draw up a structured abstract for your article in not more than 120 words.
Observation
Participants were given examples of both informative and structured abstracts. Quite frequently structured abstracts are used in health sciences journals. They include objectives, methods, results and conclusion and may have other headings. An informative abstract is a concise summary of an article. When writing an informative abstract it is useful to give some thought to verbs. Some of the following verbs are stronger than others – asks, argues, covers, demonstrates, describes, discusses, elucidates, evaluates, examines, expands, explains explores, identifies, maps, offers, outlines, presents, proposes, promotes, reports, reviews, shows, suggests, summarises, surveys, synthesizes. Study the verbs in your abstract. Do they accurately convey, in an engaging way, what the article does?

Task 10 – Finding keywords
Consider what terms/keywords your article might be retrieved via a database search. Assign five keywords to your article.
Observation
While not all journals require keywords, it was agreed that having to assign keywords focuses on content. These keywords may be the main way your article will be retrieved. Sometimes journals stipulate a source for keywords e.g. MeSH terms where possible for JEAHIL.

Task 11 – Structuring
Draw up a structure for your article. List the main sections and approximate number of words in each section. Begin each section with the following: "This section will cover…"
Observation
People frequently throw themselves into the task of writing, without giving sufficient thought to structure. Structuring allows the writer to sift and eliminate ideas, order and contextualise ideas, view the article at a glance and to work on different sections.

Sample structures from the three journals were examined in the workshop
1. *Health Information and Libraries Journal,* title, abstract, introduction, setting, methods, outcomes, key messages (including implications for policy and implications for practice), references
2. *Journal of the European Association for Health Information and Libraries (JEAHIL),* title, abstract, keywords, introduction, main argument /case, discussion, conclusion, suggested reading
3. *Journal of the Medical Library Association (JMLA),* title, abstract, introduction, highlights and implications (boxed), background (includes literature review), methods, results, discussion and conclusion, references

Task 12 – Writing the article

Return to the structure and write in sections. Write the section you feel most comfortable with first. Frequently this is the description of the research and the methods used. Don't begin to rewrite until you've completed a first draft. It is at the third and subsequent drafts that you need to consider style.

Observation

Constant editing impedes actually impedes getting your thoughts down. The following points are useful once the first draft is written. The first draft is always quite rough and generally will not have a conclusion. Ideally, new paragraphs begin each time you move from one clear idea to another. Each paragraph should have one major theme or idea. The first sentence usually carries the idea in any paragraph. Paragraphs should have a logical sequence, each new one advancing ideas in previous paragraphs. Headings and subheadings break up text and make a manuscript visually more attractive. They allow the reader to see at a glance the themes and structure of the paper. It is helpful to have at least one heading per page; however the best guide is your target journal.

Task 13 – Being your own critic (this task was not included in the workshop, but will be useful to people with articles nearing completion)

Use the following checklist (adapted from Health Information & Libraries journal) before final submission. These criteria – relating to structure and content – are likely to inform the peer-reviewers decision.

Structure
- Is the title suitably informative?
- Is an abstract included?
- Are keywords (if requested) included?
- Is it clear what the theme of the paper is?
- Does it adhere in length and structure to the guidelines stipulated by the journal?
- Are the objectives of the work clearly stated?
- Are the methods clearly described?
- Are the results concisely presented?
- Does the author refer to relevant papers in the literature review?
- Is there a discussion of the results and the implications?
- Is the bibliography complete and up to date?
- Does your article adhere to the citation style stipulated by the journal?

Content

Does the paper provide anything new, either in the way of evidence or interpretation to what is already known in the field?

- Does it present ideas of interest or practical use to personnel in the particular field?
- Does the paper discuss an issue of current concern in the field?
- Are the arguments sound?
- Does the experimental data support the conclusions drawn?
- Are there gaps or omissions in the coverage, data, logic, or presentation?
- Is the paper well written and the data clearly presented by means of appropriate tables, graphs or diagrams?
- If numeric data or mathematical calculations are included, are these correct?

Task 14 – Submission and peer-review

When you are reasonably happy with your manuscript, put it aside for a week. Reread it. Do a final edit. Reread and submit.

Observation

The above took the form of a discussion rather than a task. When you submit your article to a peer-reviewed journal your article should be acknowledged and then it will be sent for peer-review or else rejected by the editor as unsuitable. If sent for peer-review it may take some time for a decision to be made. The response will be one of the following

- Accept as it is;
- Accept with minor revisions;
- Accept with major revisions;
- Reject.

If you are asked to make revisions, send a letter of acknowledgement and state the expected date you will return the revised paper. Make the changes quickly and resubmit. If you feel that some of the suggested changes are unreasonable/unworkable explain to the editor why you feel this way. However, in the main you will have to adhere to the suggestions of the peer-reviewers.

Task 15 – Drawing up a writing plan

Draw up a ten bullet point writing plan with specific goals and dates.

Observation

Having a plan to return to from time to term is helpful and motivations. Participants were also encouraged to join an academic writing blog, I recently established www.anltcwriters.blogspot.com

Feedback

The responses to two questions which participants answered, in writing, after the workshop are given below.

1. *In what way has the workshop helped you?*

Spurred me on to get started with writing and allowing my first drafts to be awful.

Given me confidence to start writing.

Excellent references & blog is a great support.

Today has helped me focus my ideas and got me thinking about a potential topic.

Talking to others has helped me realise that others have the same fears that I do.

Helped me formulate a strategy for publishing material.

To set myself goals and to structure information.

Taught me to write first and edit later.

The exchanges with other participants were useful.

This worship helped me to clarify how the structure of articles is important.

Helped focus my mind and inspired me to return to something I had been putting off.

Encouraged me to consider expanding into academic publication and motivated me to sit down and write.

2. *What support do you need to develop your writing for publication?*

I need to be given space and time at work to write.

I need advice on my writing and whether it is viable academically or not.

I do not have any institutional support for writing. Writing for publication is entirely up to me – it would be nice to have more institutional support.

I need supervisor support.

I need clear/accurate information.

I need help in getting an article accepted.

I need to make time to write.

I need coaching and more training, particularly to help find good subjects.

Possible collaboration to begin with before expanding into solo work.

Discussion and Conclusion

The workshop provided health sciences librarians with an opportunity to learn skills and share experience. While people found the half-day event useful, there is a need, articulated in the feedback, for ongoing support in terms of both actual writing and organisational encouragement. Regarding the latter, the fact that the eight attended the workshop would indicate some level of organisational support for academic writing.

Participants in the workshop were given the URL of an open blog I created to encourage academic writing among librarians. (anltcwriters@blogspot.com). To date the participants have not posted any messages. This may indicate the need for a more specialised blog, dealing solely with writing in the health sciences.

Health sciences librarians have the opportunity to publish in both the specific journals relating to health science librarianship, general academic and other library journals and the literature relating to the various health sciences and related disciplines. Academic writing offers an excellent avenue to share experiences, develop ideas and practice and network with colleagues. Collaborating with academic, clinical and research colleagues as co-authors or as contributing authors offers a significant opportunity for health sciences librarians to write for presentation and publication. Librarians increasingly collaborate with colleagues in teaching and research projects and play a leading or contributory role in delivering the outcomes and/or evaluating and presenting the results. These activities include research related evidence-based practice support including literature searching underpinning general and systematic reviews. In universities, libraries are active in designing and delivering information skills at under-graduate and research levels. Increasing interest in the field of bibliometrics may also yield potential for collaborative research and publishing.

There is significant interest among health sciences librarians in writing for publication. The workshop and this article were formed to help develop that further and particularly to encourage those who have not yet published.