HINTS on Writing for Publication

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Begin with the End in Mind

Before you begin writing give some thought to the audience and purpose of your article. If it is primarily based on practice, it may be best suited to a professional journal. Practice-based journals value experience; articles describe practice and frequently have a straightforward structure telling about an event or a process. Articles can be written in an informal tone, using the first person.

If your article is based on research or a mixture of research and practice it might appeal to an academic/ peer-reviewed journal. Peer-reviewed journals have a longer lead-in time and generally longer articles than professional journals. Tone tends to be formal, but always study the style in the journal you are considering.

The LIS publications Wiki from San Jose University is a good place to identify both peer-reviewed and professional journals. Its focus is primarily North American. The Mulford Health Sciences Library at the University of Toledo provides a useful link to instructions for authors for over 6,000 journals in the health and life sciences. Identify a journal or other publishing outlet before writing the article and study the guidelines for authors. Scan a few recent issues of the journal to get a sense of the style, structure and length of articles.

Before writing the articles submit a query e-mail to the editor. This e-mail should be short and contain three elements. It should tell what you are writing about; what your expertise in the area is and why you think readers of the journal would be interested in your article. While an editor will generally not give a firm commitment to publishing an article based on a suggestion s/he will generally indicate if interested in seeing the completed article and may give a timeframe for submission.

Work from an Outline

Most academic authors work from an outline. The outline or structure is the framework or scaffold on which you build the article. Having an outline allows you order and eliminate ideas. Writing can appear a less onerous process when you can view the structure of a 5,000 word article at a glance. Writing isn't a linear process. Scientists generally begin with the results section. You can write any section (generally not the conclusion) if you have a clear outline.

When considering a structure for a practice-based-article think who, what, when, where and how. From that develop a basic structure. This might be - title, introduction, background/context, case study (what happened?), outcomes, conclusion. Professional journals have an editor or editorial board who make decisions on content. Lead-in-time is frequently shorter than that for peer-reviewed journals. Articles may have some references or further reading. Articles in peer-reviewed journals will generally have title, keywords, abstract (informative or structured), introduction, background/context, literature review, methodology, results/analysis, discussion, conclusion and references. Study the structure of articles in the journal you are targeting. Model your article on articles that work well, bearing in mind that different structures can achieve the same results. Be aware of your audience.

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Write the Article

Some writers draft their article from start to finish without editing. Most of us do a mixture of writing and editing. Writing is a craft, which needs to be honed and developed rather than an art. Don't look for perfection just write, giving yourself permission to write badly. Style and voice rarely come through clearly in early drafts. Trying to polish too early may hamper the ideas phase, the early drafts when you are chopping and changing and just trying to get ideas down on paper or a PC.

Write in short sentences, avoiding complicated sentence structure and long sentences linked by the word "and". Read aloud to get a sense of the sound of your narrative/story. If a sentence seems "clunky" or unnatural when you read it aloud, check the grammar and punctuation. If a sentence seems too long see if you can shorten it without changing meaning. It may be appropriate to divide it in two. If words are repeated and the sentence sounds unprofessional as you read it aloud, then rephrase. There needs to be a unity of thought in a sentence. This may be achieved with one main clause; generally there is only one subsidiary clause.

New paragraphs begin each time you move from one clear idea to another or changes direction. The first sentence or two usually present the topic or theme and the following sentences expand on this. There is a variety of thought on ideal length of paragraphs; again this should be influenced by the journal style. Each paragraph should relate logically to the previous paragraph, as well as to the overall theme of the article. If a paragraph contains more than one main topic divide it. It can be helpful, when editing, to write down the main topic of the paragraph in the margin or at the top of the page. Linking sentences can be added to ensure smooth transitions from paragraph to paragraph. This could be a sentence at the end of a paragraph highlighting what is to come in the next paragraph. Alternatively you could place the linking sentence at the beginning of the new paragraph.

Headings & subheadings act as signposts, breaking up text and making the structure clearer and allowing the reader see at a glance the main themes of the paper. They can also make a manuscript visually more attractive, as does the white space before and after paragraphs.

Once finished leave your manuscript aside for a week if possible, then reread before submission.

Submit the Article

You are never going to be completely happy with your article. Submit it when you are about 85% satisfied. It's likely that the editor or peer-reviewers will ask for changes. Make these as quickly as possible or if you feel a change is not viable/appropriate, explain why. Keep the preprint (pre-refereeing) and the postprint (post refereeing) of your article. Check www.sherpa.ac.uk for publishers' copyright and archiving policies. This will tell you whether you can deposit the article (preprint or postprint) in an institutional or other repository.

Finally, celebrate your success!

A list of books, articles and web resources on writing for publication can be found at
http://www.academicwritinglibrarian.blogspot.ie/p/further-resources.html

Write For HINT!