

# PREPARING ARTICLES FOR PUBLICATION IN PEER-REVIEWED JOURNALS

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This paper focuses on preparing articles for publication in peer-reviewed journals. Four areas of article preparation are covered:

1. what you should be thinking about when selecting a journal for your paper and at what stage you should start thinking of journals;
2. style guides and the most important things you need to follow in journal style guides;
3. simple ways in which you can improve clarity when writing papers;
4. what happens to your paper once you send it to the journal and the various types of responses you can expect to receive.

## 1. SELECTING A JOURNAL

Many academics write their journal articles first and think about a journal to submit to later. Although this is one way to select a journal, it's probably not the most strategic approach.

Ideally, you should be thinking about the journal you want to submit your paper to before you even write the paper; that is, when you're still conducting the research. Many academics who are very experienced in publishing actually plan the number of papers that they are going to write and the journals that they are going to target while they are putting together the tender and grant applications for funding their research study.

It makes sense to select a journal before you commence writing up the results of your research, given that you can then familiarise yourself with the journal's format before you start to write, thus ensuring that your paper complies with their required format. The journal's style guide, which is covered in more detail later, will also help you to focus your paper and keep it within manageable word limits.

*But how do you select a journal for your yet to be written article?*

Given that there are thousands of academic journals out there of varying levels of quality and reach, there are a few questions you can ask yourself to limit your search.

(i) **Will my paper appeal to a domestic or international audience, i.e. should I be targetting an Australian or an international journal?**

(ii) **What sort of paper am I going to write?**

Will it be a qualitative or quantitative study, a literature review, a brief report, a meta-analysis, or a discussion of a current issue? In other words, what sort of focus/scope am I looking for in a journal? Journal scopes are usually given on the imprint page of a journal. The scope gives information on the specific mission and breadth of the journal, and describes the nature of the research that will be accepted. You need to align your paper carefully with the scope of your chosen journal before you submit it or you will be wasting your time! An example of the scope section of a journal is:

“The *International Journal of Nursing Practice* is a fully refereed journal publishing original scholarly work that advances the international understanding and development of nursing both as a profession and academic discipline. The Journal focuses on research and professional discussion papers with a sound scientific, theoretical or philosophical base.

Preference is given to high quality papers accessible to a wide audience. The primary criteria for acceptance are excellence, relevance and clarity. Papers are published under the following categories: Research Papers, Scholarly Articles, Clinical Reports, International Reviews and Book Reviews.”

[Aims and scope for The International Journal of Nursing Practice. (n.d.).

Retrieved 20 September, 2002 from <http://www.blacksci.co.uk/> ]

- (iii) **Does my paper/research relate only to my discipline or can I look at journals outside my discipline, i.e. who am I trying to communicate with/who is my audience?**

Knowing your audience is an important element not only of selecting your journal, but of writing your paper. Knowing your audience will help you to choose the style of your paper, as well as the language you use. If you have seriously considered your audience, you will be able to write your paper to the level of your audience's expertise. In thinking about your potential audience, consider who is going to be interested in what you have to say. Will the journal you target reach this particular audience? For example, it may be that you are going to write an article on an aspect of nursing practice, which you want as many nurses as possible to read. A good way to reach these nurses might be to get your paper published in the Royal College of Nursing Australia's monthly journal.

- (iv) **What databases is the journal indexed and abstracted in, i.e. how easily will other academics be able to access my article through searches?**

The journal information pages (what's often called the imprint page of a journal) usually list the abstracting and indexing services providing coverage to the journal.

- (v) **What is the journal's impact factor?**

The impact factor is a calculation based on the number of times a piece of research is cited in the research of other academics. Impact factors are published by the ISI (Institute for Scientific Information – issues can be found in the Burwood library at REF 016.5 Ins/Sjc). Basically, the impact factor gives you an idea of the journal's prestige or academic weight. However, you may find that the journal with the higher impact factor may not reach your target audience, so sometimes you might need to consider whether it's more important to you to reach a specific audience or get your research published in the most prestigious journal you can.

- (vi) **Is the journal peer-reviewed (sometimes called "refereed")?**

Most academics will only be interested in publishing in peer-reviewed academic journals and most of the journals you come across probably will be peer-reviewed. However, sometimes the journal information pages can be ambiguous in terms of whether the journal is "peer-reviewed". A simple way

to check is to go to the ISI or Ulrichs databases. The ISI database [www.isinet.com/isi/journals](http://www.isinet.com/isi/journals) lists only peer-reviewed journals; the Ulrichs database [www.ulrichsweb.com/UlrichsWeb](http://www.ulrichsweb.com/UlrichsWeb) lists peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed journals, but indicates which are/are not peer-reviewed.

Finally, when choosing your journal, what you need to consider, is:

**(vii) Am I being realistic?**

For example, if your paper is based on a small, local study of minor significance, it's probably not going to be suitable for a high-profile and high-ranking international journal.

Once you know the type of journal you want to target, it's a matter of talking to your colleagues to utilise their knowledge of journals, doing website searches of journal lists (and accessing individual journal websites to see if the scope of the journal is what you are looking for), or browsing the shelves of the library. Searching websites for journals is a very expedient method of locating potential journals. Even if a journal is not published online, most journals these days have a Web site listing journal scope, instructions for authors and a sample table of contents.

It's important that you build up a knowledge-base and a feel for the journals in your area of research. This obviously involves not only reading the scope sections of journals, but also reading papers from the journals. The authors of one article about writing for publication suggest that academics who plan to publish should regularly read several journals in their own field and at least two from related fields. Finding this sort of time is easier said than done, but if you are going to be serious about publishing, you need to build up a comprehensive knowledge of where the literature's at in your field.

When you do read those journals, you should be looking at the content and style of each journal. By taking a close look at the content, you will be able to determine which subjects are currently of interest and which research topics are generating discussion in that particular journal. Looking at writing style will help you to familiarise yourself with the technical language used in the journal and the level of detail given in papers. Reading other academics' writing will also help you to improve your own writing (and tips on ways in which you can improve your own writing are given below).

## 2. STYLING TO JOURNAL GUIDELINES

A journal's guidelines give all the information you need about writing and presenting a paper.

While editors and reviewers are most interested in the substance of a paper, they can become distracted if you have not followed the journal's style requirements. Your paper might even be rejected straight out if certain basic requirements are not followed. So, basically, you put yourself at a disadvantage if you do not follow journal guidelines when writing your paper.

When broken down, journal guidelines really just provide simple points about how to write your paper. An easy way to attack journal guidelines is, before writing your paper, to go through the selected journal's guidelines and jot down the main requirements you need to follow when writing your article. These will include:

- maximum length of the paper;
- referencing style to follow;
- type and length of abstract to be included (i.e. structured/unstructured);
- whether keywords should be provided;
- how tables and graphs should be styled and presented;
- spelling (i.e. US, British or Australian);
- system of units to use (e.g. SI Units);
- format to use (e.g. typeface, font size);
- layout of the text (e.g. double spacing);
- the process of review that will take place (e.g. if the peer-review process is blind, you'll be asked to make sure you haven't included any identifying features in your paper, and to provide a separate title page);
- author details (e.g. address, phone and fax numbers, email – this might seem obvious, but many people don't think to include such information. And this information is very important because it is used by the editorial office and production office to contact authors – failing to provide it can delay publication of your paper);
- how many copies of ms should be submitted to the journal; and
- where to send the paper.

Given that most of these requirements are fairly straightforward, I have only focused on the first three, which seem to cause the most difficulties for authors: word length; referencing; and abstracts.

(i) **Word length**

There are three reasons – at least that I can think of – why you should stick to journal word limits. The first relates to journal budgets. Basically, it is very expensive to publish a journal. Journal editors, in consultation with their publishing company, will set the page extents for an issue of a journal long before that issue is printed. Because a couple of extra pages in any one issue can totally blow out the journal budget, page extents of issues have to be stuck to religiously. To illustrate, a seemingly insignificant extra 2 pages in a journal issue could blow the budget for that issue out by thousands of dollars if that extra 2 pages pushes the journal into a higher weight category for postage. Each issue might then cost an extra \$2.00 to mail overseas and if you have got a thousand overseas subscribers, the costs obviously add up very quickly.

So, basically, if an editor decides to publish an overly long article, it means that there is less room for other articles in a particular issue because the editor can't simply add in a couple of extra pages. Given that journal editors are keen to publish as many articles as is possible in each issue of a journal, it's unlikely that they will publish your 8000 word article when they could publish two 4000 word articles instead.

The second reason why you should stick to word lengths relates to being concise in your writing, which in turn aids clarity. In every paper you write, you should be aiming to write tightly and to get rid of excess words. From my experience, most papers benefit from rigorous culling. As Strunk and White suggest in *The Elements of Style*, a classic writing text:

“Aim for brevity in your writing. Omit needless words ... A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences.”

[Strunk W, White EB, *The Elements of Style*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1972.]

The third, and perhaps most important, reason why you should stick to word lengths and not go over them by several thousand words is that nobody will want to read your paper: not the editor of the journal, who probably has a pile of papers sitting on the desk to get through; not the reviewer, who does not get paid to review your paper and is probably going to be doing it out of work hours; and not the reader – your carefully targetted audience.

A quick tip on sticking to word limits is to do a plan so you do not go over the limit. In other words, allocate a certain amount of words for each section in a paper before you write the paper. For example, for a 4000 word paper you might allocate 800 words for the Introduction, 1000 words for the Methods, 800 words for the Results, and 1400 words for the Discussion. If you then find that you have written 1000 words of the Introduction before you have even mentioned your aims, you know you have gone off the track and can start cutting before it becomes too painful.

## (ii) Referencing

There are basically two types of referencing to which you will be asked to adhere: the Vancouver system or the Harvard system (also know as the author–date system). As most readers will be familiar with these systems, I will not explain them here. If you are not familiar with them, there are plenty of style guides in the library where you can look them up, such as the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (5th edition, 2001), which has a good explanation of the author–date system, or the Australian Government Publishing Service's *Style Manual For Authors, Editors And Printers* (6th edition, 2002), which gives explanations of both systems.

I will cover a couple of tricky aspects of referencing, though, as I am asked about these quite often.

The first is what to do about unpublished material. Unpublished material, such as articles that have been sent to a journal but not yet accepted for publication or another academic's data that has been given to you as personal communication, should not be included in the reference list. You can include this information within the text, as follows:

*example of unpublished material:*

Smith found similar discrepancies in a study of 20 dementia sufferers (J.K. Smith, unpublished data, 2001).

*example of personal communication*

Smith found similar discrepancies in a study of 20 dementia sufferers (J.K. Smith, personal communication, 2001).

Another problematic aspect of referencing is how to reference information downloaded from the Internet. The 5th edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* has 14 pages on referencing different kinds of Internet information. However, I'm only going to cover journal articles accessed via the Internet given that this is what most academics will be referencing in their papers.

*For an Internet article based on a print source* (and currently most articles retrieved from online publications are exact duplicates of the print version, at least in the health and behavioural sciences), you can reference the online article in the same way that you would the print version, except that you would add "Electronic version" in brackets after the article title, as in the following:

e.g. Parker, G., & Roy, K. 2001. Adolescent depression: A review [Electronic version]. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 35: 572–580.

*For an online article that you think is different from the print version* (e.g. the format is different or page numbers are not indicated), you also need to add the date on which you retrieved the document and the URL.

e.g. Moodie, R., & Borthwick, C. 2001. Word limits are changing. *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*, 12. Retrieved 22 November 2001, from [http://vhpx.vichealth.vic.gov.au/hpja/2001\\_2/20.html](http://vhpx.vichealth.vic.gov.au/hpja/2001_2/20.html).

*For an article in an Internet-only journal*, you should style the reference in the same way as the previous example, except that instead of using volume numbers, the online journal might use a different numbering system.



It is important that you pay attention to the referencing style of the journal when writing or formatting a paper. You should endeavour to copy it as closely as possible and include all of the necessary information. Missing information will result in delays once your paper has been accepted for publication, as will use of the incorrect system of referencing.

### (iii) **Abstracts**

Given that the abstract or summary may be all that most people will ever read of a paper, it's surprising that so little attention is paid by authors to writing the abstract. Writing a clear, concise abstract that accurately presents the essence of your paper will take time and thought. I have come across many abstracts that have obviously been cut and pasted from parts of the main text, and as a result have read poorly. If readers find your abstract to be unclear, they will be disinclined to read the rest of the paper.

So, what should an abstract include? It should include the purpose of the study; a brief description of the methods used; the key results; the main conclusions; and possibly some recommendations, depending on the journal requirements. I would suggest that a good way to learn to write an effective abstract is to read some sample abstracts from the journal you are targeting. This will also give you an idea of the style required (i.e. whether the abstract should be structured or unstructured, or whether recommendations are required).

## 3. **IMPROVING THE CLARITY OF YOUR PAPER – 10 SIMPLE TIPS**

### (i) **Avoid wordiness in writing**

Your aim should be to keep sentences short and to the point. The word “short” is fairly subjective but, basically, if you find yourself with strings of 60 word-sentences, you are being too verbose.

How do you keep sentences short? By being concise and getting rid of excess words. Take these examples of unnecessary and redundant language:

e.g. “We sought to explore...” – why not “We explored...”?

e.g. “There have been a number of studies that have identified ....” – why not “Several studies have identified”? (from 10 to 4 words, plus clearer expression)

– or even “Studies have identified”?

I know that in many of the overly long papers I get, the authors have spent many words going off the track. You need to remember that you do not have to say everything about your chosen topic, but should be confining yourself to what is relevant to your audience.

**(ii) Keep jargon to a minimum**

Any article for publication in a peer-reviewed journal should be written so that it is understandable to an intelligent reader who is not a specialist in your particular field.

Try not to use too much jargon, especially if you are targeting a multi-disciplinary journal. Ask yourself, “Will the average intelligent reader understand what I’m trying to say?” Of course, all professions have jargon so it cannot always be avoided, but wherever possible, you should try to write in plain English. Your aim in writing the paper in the first place is to communicate your message or ideas and writing in accessible language will mean that your ideas are disseminated to a wider range of people than if you were to write in a highly jargon-laden, technical style. Most journals, however specialised they may be, will not accept articles that are only able to be deciphered by a small group of people.

**(iii) Make sure pronouns are unambiguous**

This is one of the most common problems I come across when editing papers. For those of you who need a recap, a pronoun is a word that takes the place of a noun (e.g. this, that, it, his, her, them). An antecedent is the word that the pronoun refers back to.

e.g. *The decision* is significant because *it* reflects the splits developing within the groups.

“It” = the pronoun

“The decision” = the antecedent

The antecedent for the pronoun is very obvious in this sentence. However, papers can become very confusing if the antecedent for each pronoun is not obvious.

e.g. After the company sold the complex, *it* went bankrupt.

What went bankrupt – the company or the complex?

“It” is the pronoun, but we do not know what the antecedent is.

A common example I find is where authors introduce a study by another researcher in one sentence, then ambiguously use a pronoun in the next sentence.

e.g. Markez (1999) conducted a study designed to gain insights into the nature of stressors experienced by soccer players. The range of stressors identified in *this study* is similar to the results of other studies.

Does “this study” refer to the Markez study or to the author’s study? It would have been very simple to clarify this:

e.g. Markez (1999) conducted a study designed to gain insights into the nature of stressors experienced by soccer players. The range of stressors identified in *the Markez study* is similar to the results of other studies.

Your reader should not have to search previous text to determine what your pronoun refers to. Each time you use a pronoun, check that it’s very clear what you are referring back to.

And while I’m on the subject of pronouns, it’s important to note that a pronoun also needs to agree in number (i.e. singular or plural) with the noun that it’s replacing:

e.g. *The patient* will be unlikely to disclose personal information if *they* do not trust the interviewer.

Wrong because “the patient” is singular but the pronoun “they” is plural. In this instance you could either make the antecedent plural:

e.g. *Patients* will be unlikely to disclose personal information if *they* do not trust the interviewer.

or change the pronoun to the singular:

e.g. *The patient* will be unlikely to disclose personal information if he or she does not trust the interviewer.

**(iv) Use the definite/indefinite article correctly**

The indefinite article – “a” – is used to introduce someone or something for the first time.

e.g. A study was conducted by Brierly and Jones...

This implies that it's the first time that you have mentioned that study in your paper.

The definite article – “the” – is used to refer to one or more people or things that have already been mentioned or that are assumed to be common knowledge

e.g. The study conducted by Brierly and Jones...

This implies that you have already mentioned the study earlier in your paper.

It can be very confusing to readers if “a” and “the” are incorrectly used!

**(v) Don't use anthropomorphism**

Anthropomorphism is a literary device used to attribute human characteristics to non-human things. It is not appropriate in an academic paper. Some examples of the type of anthropomorphism I see in papers are:

– “The study said...”

– “Environmental designs will need to consider ...”

Obviously, a study cannot speak and an environmental design cannot consider... so these types of statements need to be rephrased:

– It was apparent from the study...

– Researchers planning environmental designs will need to consider...

**(vi) Avoid shortcuts in writing**

By avoiding shortcuts in writing, I'm referring to practices such as:  
 – the use of sub-headings to inform the text that follows

e.g. *Making a copy*

This involves making an exact replica of the article....

This is a lazy approach to writing, and can result in ambiguities.

A better approach is:

e.g. *Making a copy*

Making a copy involves making an exact replica of the article....

Headings should be used to direct the focus of the writing and to direct the reader through the article; they should not be used as a substitute for text. If you are not sure whether your headings are substituting for text, try getting rid of the headings and see if the article still makes sense.

Another shortcut to avoid, and this is a particular hate of mine, is:

– writing in an abbreviated form or using bullet pointed lists where prose would be more appropriate. Not only won't you get published if you take this approach to writing, but you will look like you cannot be bothered making the effort to construct coherent sentences and paragraphs. Bullet points can be useful in planning a paper, but long series of them are inappropriate in academic writing.

**(vii) Be consistent**

When writing your paper, try to stick to the one term to describe groups of people; that is, don't jump from "subjects" to "respondents" to "patients" to "clients" as this is confusing to the reader.

My biggest concern in matters of consistency, though, is when the aims of a study change throughout the paper. For obvious reasons, this is disastrous. I know that many writers try to avoid being repetitive with their aims, but many inadvertently change the meaning of their aims or purpose when they rephrase the text. It's likely that you will repeat your aims three times in your paper: in the abstract, in the introduction and in the conclusion. I would suggest that you repeat your aims word for word in those instances rather

than risk altering the meaning of your aims. Better to be a little repetitive than careless – and you will look careless to anyone reviewing your paper if your aims alter throughout the paper.

And on the subject of aims, if you say you are going to do something in your aims, make sure you do it and make sure that this comes across clearly. I have read several papers that promise a lot more than they deliver due to inconsistent writing on the part of the author.

**(viii) Use the appropriate tense**

The *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* contains concise advice on the use of tense in academic articles:

- Use the past tense (e.g. “Jones *showed*”) or the present perfect tense (“researchers *have shown*”) for the literature review and for describing your procedure if the discussion is of past events – but stay within your chosen tense.
- Use the past tense (e.g. “depression *decreased* significantly”) to describe the results of your study.
- Use the present tense (e.g. “the results *indicate*”) in the discussion to discuss your results and to detail your conclusions. Using present tense in the discussion section allows readers to join you in your deliberations of the results.

[American Psychological Association, *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 5th edn, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001, p. 33]

Whatever you do, do not write about the study as if you are just about to conduct it (i.e. don't use the future tense). It's assumed by readers that you are writing your paper after the study has taken place and that you are describing things that occurred in the past, not that will occur in the future.

- e.g. “Our sample will consist of 25 women...” = incorrect  
 “Our sample consisted of 25 women...” = correct

**(ix) Avoid generalisations**

Generalisations are often used in papers based on qualitative studies

e.g. “The respondents said they were distressed ...”

This leaves you asking the question, “Did they all say this or did only some say this?” Statements like the above should be qualified so that the reader knows whether in fact all respondents made a certain comment or only some.

**(x) Be aware of time factors**

I have put this tip in because I often come across sentences where the time references do not add up. You need to be careful when using terms like “recent/recently” and “over the past decade” as these terms date.

e.g. Recent research has indicated..... (Smith, 1995).

Obviously, 1995 is not “recent”, so the sentence would need to be amended to:

e.g. Research has indicated..... (Smith, 1995).

**\*Bonus tip**

Avoid finishing your paper with a long, clichéd, jumbled or sentimental last line – readers are left with a better impression if you finish with a short, clear sentence.

Following the above tips when writing a paper will help you to ensure that your paper is clear and that readers will be able to read through your paper without having to stop to work out what you are trying to say.

Once you have finished writing, it is invaluable to get a few of your peers to read your paper and give you feedback. Your peers will be able to advise whether your research is contributing something new to your field, whether your data makes sense, whether there is a better way to approach your analysis etc.

#### 4. WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU SEND YOUR PAPER TO A JOURNAL

There are four possible responses that you could receive from a journal's editor after your paper has been through that journal's peer-review process:

**(i) the paper is accepted as it is (very rare);**

**(ii) the paper is accepted on the proviso that minor revisions be made** (i + ii together = about 20% of papers);

**(iii) the paper is rejected as it is because it needs some major revisions** (most usual response – about 60% of papers); the letter you get from the editor will indicate that with major revisions, the paper might be accepted (although it would have to go back to the reviewers). If this happens, do not be discouraged. Address the reviewers' comments (even if you do not make all of changes, justify why you are not changing certain things in accordance with reviewers' comments) and send a detailed letter back to the editor; and

**(iv) the paper is rejected outright** (about 20% of papers). If this is the case, take the reviewers' advice (if you consider it to be reasonable), and then submit your revised paper to another journal. And, again, if this happens, do not be discouraged as it may well be that you have aimed too high in sending your paper to a particular journal, or misjudged the journal's areas of interest.

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