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A 5-Step Guide for Writing a Clinical Case Report

Why write a case report?

Case reports are valuable additions to the literature. They can describe important scientific observations that are unusual or might be missed in a clinical study. Examples of case report topics include:

- Uncommon clinical observations
- Unusual combinations of medical conditions in one patient
- Adverse responses to standard treatments
- Clinical observations that might challenge an accepted theory or practice

1. Identify the target journal.

After identifying a topic for a case report, select the journal to which the case report will be submitted. This needs to be done early in the process, because the way the case report is written needs to be aligned with the instructions for authors of the target journal.

- Reading the instructions for authors of the target journal will not only help you organize your case report properly, but will also help you determine whether or not the journal you've selected is a good fit for your case report.
- It's also helpful to read a few case reports from the target journal to get a sense of the topics, form, and flow of the case reports the target journal publishes.

2. Obtain signed consent.

Signed consent needs to be obtained for any patient included in a case report, and anonymity needs to be provided to the greatest extent possible. Many institutions have prewritten consent forms for this purpose.

- Check with the medical administrator of your facility to see if your institution uses a standardized form to obtain consent from case study patients.
- Journals require that copies of the signed consent form(s) be provided along with the submission.

3. Conduct a literature review.

The literature review serves multiple purposes. It will help you identify other published observations similar to yours and will help you identify gaps in the literature relating to your topic.

- It may also reveal that your observations have already been reported on several times, in which instance you need to decide whether or not your case study will add anything new to the literature.

4. Develop the sections of the case report.

Typically, a case report will have the following sections.

- Abstract
- Introduction
- Case presentation
- Discussion
- Conclusion
- References

Abstract: The Abstract is usually very brief, frequently around 100-150 words. The format and length of the abstract for your target journal will be defined in the instructions for authors for that journal.

Introduction: The Introduction begins with a brief overview of the larger problem under which the case falls and is supported with references from the literature review.

- The final statement of the Introduction should state specifically the issue or observation addressed by the case study.
- The last sentence may also include a one-sentence description of the patient (or patients, if you're reporting on a series) and their condition.

Case presentation: This is where the case details are discussed. It's typically written in the following order.

- Patient demographics and medical history
- Physical exam, relevant tests and results
- Initial diagnosis and treatment
- Outcome
- Limitations of the study and their possible influence on the outcome
- Progress as of latest follow-up visit

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Discussion: The Discussion is the crux of the case report. It should contain information about the following.

- How the current literature relates to the case (background, comparison of differences/similarities with regard to the case, and the possible reasons for those)
- What makes the case unique
- Theories as to why the patient did or did not respond as expected to treatment
- Recommendations and conclusions

Conclusion: The Conclusion is the location for the key message you want readers to leave with. It often contains only 1 or 2 sentences. Recommendations can also be included here.

- Some journals don't have a separate Conclusion section, and the last paragraph of the Discussion contains the recommendations and key takeaway message.
- The instructions for authors of your target journal will identify the preferred style for that journal.

References: Refer to the instructions for authors of your target journal for the formatting style used by your target journal. This will include information on whether references should be listed in order of occurrence or alphabetically, and will indicate how the citations should be entered in the manuscript (superscripted, bracketed, etc.).

5. Helpful Hints

- The use of figures, graphics, illustrations, and tables is especially helpful in case reports, as these mediums can communicate a lot of essential data in a limited space. This helps enhance the clarity of the case report and is particularly useful when word count is limited.
- Ask a colleague to review your case report. They can verify that you've included all the important elements and that the flow is logical. They can also offer suggestions for improvements.
- It's easy to miss minor errors in a document you've been focused on for any length of time. Ask someone to review your case report for formatting and spelling errors.