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## **10 Tips for a Better Manuscript**

### **1. Create an outline before starting the manuscript.**

Never underestimate the importance of planning! The outline will be your guiding light as you write your manuscript. It will keep you focused and will save you time. The outline should include and briefly describe:

- a. The purpose of the study (the research question)
- b. The study design (randomized, controlled clinical trial, prospective, retrospective, etc.) and the statistical methodology
- c. What your study revealed
- d. Why the study is important and adds to the literature
- e. Shortcomings or limitations of the study
- f. Other research that needs to be done
- g. The study conclusions

### **2. Assign responsibility.**

For papers with more than one author, the contributions to the manuscript from each author need to be clearly defined. For example, one author may be primarily responsible for writing the Methods section and conducting the statistical analysis; another may focus on the literature review, and another on developing the Discussion section. However the work is divided, it needs to be clear who is responsible for what.

Identifying the contributions of each manuscript author is becoming increasingly important, as more journals are requiring the contributions of each author be identified upon submission of the manuscript.

### **3. Choose the right journal for your work.**

Improper selection of a target journal for submission of a manuscript is a common reason for rejection. The odds of getting your manuscript accepted will be higher if you target a journal properly. An excellent way to help determine whether or not a manuscript is a good fit for a particular journal is to read the instructions for authors. All journals provide these on their websites.

**4. Conduct a thorough literature review.**

It's important to conduct a review of the literature before you start writing the paper. One important reason for this is to avoid investing time and effort writing a paper only to find out the topic has already been covered extensively.

Reviewing the literature will show you where there are gaps in research and reporting. It will provide ideas for different angles you might want to take with your paper. Be sure to include articles that seem to contradict your thesis. You will need to either refute the claims in those papers or acknowledge their veracity.

**5. Know your audience.**

Write and communicate in the format that connects with your key readers. What engages a surgeon audience will most likely differ from what engages an audience of engineers, and that will differ from what engages an audience of sales representatives.

**6. Develop a clear hypothesis (research question).**

One manuscript should address one primary research question, and that question should be clear by the end of the Introduction. A clear research question helps keep both writer and reader focused throughout the paper. A secondary research question can be included if necessary, but it must be clear how the secondary question relates to the primary question.

**7. Write one paper in one paper.**

One difficulty some authors have is limiting the amount of information delivered in one manuscript. All the information contained in manuscript must in some way relate back to the research question. If it doesn't, that material should be removed and may perhaps serve as the basis for another manuscript. Adding extraneous information into a manuscript, no matter how interesting it may seem, distracts the reader from the main purpose of the paper.

**8. Include the essential information only.**

Deciding what information to keep in or leave out can be difficult, particularly when there is a lot of relevant information to include. However, all journals have word count limits, and you may not be able to include as much information as you would like.

There are a few ways to approach this. One way is to rank the importance of each set of information you want to include on a scale from 1 to 5, with "1" being absolutely critical to

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include and “5” being nice to have but not vital. Start by removing all the “5” information. Next, remove the “4” information and continue until your word count falls within the limit. Another way is to consider dividing your paper into two papers, Part I and Part II. For example, if the Methods section is complex, it may be able to stand as a paper on its own. The study findings could be reported and discussed in a second paper.

## **9. Communicate with clarity and simplicity.**

There are two statements from George Orwell’s 1946 essay, *Politics and the English Language*, that will always hold true:

- Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

Readers appreciate a clear, succinct writing style. Further, many English language journals are read by people whose first language is not English. Keep it simple; Watson and Crick did. Their 1953 groundbreaking manuscript on DNA was slightly over one page long and included a total of 6 references.

## **10. Conclude by answering the research question.**

The goal of a manuscript is to answer the research question as clearly and efficiently as possible. Be sure you do it! The last paragraph of the manuscript should leave no doubt about the conclusion the authors have drawn regarding the research question. The last sentence of the manuscript should be strong, clear, and memorable—it’s the bow on the package!