Writing an article for publication

Many papers have been published in the peer-reviewed academic literature on the basis of thesis or dissertation research. That probably comes as no surprise, and neither would the hard work of revision and rewriting which it represents. But it may surprise you to learn that some postgraduate students have revised a coursework essay or literature review assignment and successfully submitted it for publication. This demonstrates the significance and originality of the work that is often being done as part of postgraduate course assignments. For that reason, some lecturers use the writing of a journal article as an assignment vehicle, as a way of encouraging students to get into the ‘publishing space’.

So writing a journal article is not beyond the realms of possibility for any postgraduate student. These notes are intended to assist you in that process, whether for assignment purposes or for submission to a journal. We will consider the key features of effective journal articles, and the process of preparing a manuscript for submission to a journal.

Article purpose

As with any academic writing, a clear purpose is one of the keys to success in writing a journal article, and it is essential that you have a clear sense of your purpose early in the writing process. Being able to write down a purpose statement for yourself can help enormously by setting a very clear goal for the writing task. Some authors will write the purpose statement on a note and attach it to the computer screen so it is an ever-present reminder to focus on the task at hand. It helps them to avoid digressions. Here are some examples of purpose statements from published articles which show how useful it is to be able to nail down the purpose of the article as precisely as possible:

“In this article we analyze longitudinal data from a nationally representative panel of college entrants to examine multiple factors associated with degree completion.” (Attewell, Heil, & Reisel, 2011, p. 537)

“The aim of this article is to present an educational resource for nursing students, which illustrates the differences between Husserl (descriptive) and Heidegger (interpretive) phenomenological philosophy through the description of two peer reviewed nursing articles that employ either phenomenological approach in a nursing educational setting.” (Reiners, 2012, p. 1)

“There is one other feature of this purpose statement that is paramount in writing an article for publication. The most important quality that editors look for in a manuscript submitted to a journal can be summed up quite succinctly as “Some unique contribution, however
small” (Halpin & Halpin, 1986, as cited in Henson, 2005, p.95). It is that original aspect of your work or your thinking which you must focus on in defining the purpose of your paper.

In a very interesting and useful book reflecting on the personal demands of Writing for scholarly publication, Huff (1999) writes about defining the purpose of an article as:

- joining an intellectual conversation;
- identifying a small number of key papers/authors participating in that conversation;
- aiming to influence the conversation through your contribution to it; and
- identifying the major points you wish to make on that basis.

Thinking in these terms also helps you to define your audience. It then helps you to recognise what it is that you have to say to that audience. What is the original contribution you can make to this ongoing conversation?

Selecting a journal
With a clear purpose for your own writing in mind, you should select a journal that embraces that field and the relevant audience. You should “consider the unique ‘flavor’ of the journal you hope will publish your work” (Huff, 1999, p. 52), because there are different types of academic journal. Many journals focus mainly on primary research studies and theoretical papers, but some journals cast the net wider, publishing articles, reviews, debate and scholarly comment. Thus, the nature of your paper will also influence your journal selection.

It is a good idea to look at recent issues of each possible target journal to identify the topics and themes that represent the ‘current conversations’ taking place in that journal and among the readership of that journal. Make sure these issues have been produced under the current editor, as a previous editor may have wanted to address different topics.

You may also consider finding out about upcoming ‘themed issues’. Many journals publish one or more of these per year. Henson (2005) suggests you have a much greater chance of being accepted if your article fits the brief of a ‘themed issue’.

Finally, you should obtain a copy of the journal’s manuscript instructions so you are clear about requirements as to length, content, structure and so forth. Being clear about these requirements early on saves a lot of tiresome and often rather difficult rewriting later on. These instructions are usually found on the journal’s website.

Title/abstract/keywords
These three elements, which we tend not to focus on too much with coursework assignments, are of great importance when preparing an article for publication. Analysis of
online behaviour indicated that “Google and Google Scholar ... account for 60% of referral traffic to SAGE Journals Online” (Sage Publications, 2014, para. 1). With this knowledge in mind, the way that Google tends to present search results becomes significant. Therefore, “The better you write your abstract, the better chance you are giving your article to appear high up in the search results rankings. ... Researchers will rarely investigate beyond the first 20 results from Google” (Sage Publications, 2014, para. 11).

So you need to consider: What are the three or four key descriptive words and/or phrases that epitomise your article? These should appear in the abstract and keywords list, and at least one of them should be in your title.

**Title**
A good title makes an impact and “sells” the document to your potential reader. Readers searching databases often scan titles in results lists to select the articles to look into further. So it is helpful if you:

- are positive, brief and specific; and
- incorporate key words and phrases — if possible, begin with one of them.

It is best, where possible, to avoid uninformative stereotypes:

- “The influence of A on B”.
- “Some aspects of ...”.
- “Comments on ...”.

Certainly, you should not intimidate your potential reader by using obscure language (Day, 1998).

**Abstract**
An abstract

- summarises the entire document concisely;
- contains substantive (meaningful) information;
- often (but not always) a single paragraph – around 8-10 sentences or 150-200 words (the journal manuscript instructions will give the exact requirements); and
- emphasises the key descriptive phrases.

Most importantly, make your original contribution as clear as you possibly can. However, you must go a little beyond the statement of purpose. The classic mistake in abstract writing is describing the article structure without providing any details of the content. This is the challenge of abstract writing – how to say a lot in a few words.

Usually it is best to write the abstract last of all, as this will ensure your abstract fits the article; writing an abstract before the article itself has come into existence can be a
challenging exercise, although some writers find it helps them to plan their writing because they have to think through the logic of both the structure and the content.

Some journals employ a structured format with a series of headings in the abstract; again the manuscript instructions will make clear if this is the case.

Keywords
In selecting the keywords to attach to your article, it is useful to ask yourself: What words and phrases would you enter in a search engine if you were searching for your own article? At the same time, you know the article and the subject area very well, so you also need to keep your audience in mind and think about how someone less familiar with the topic of your article might approach a search. It can be helpful to take a look at the keywords used on other similar papers in your field of interest – what is the language being used to capture the essence of the subject? Another possibility is to choose keywords by re-iterating the three or four most significant/relevant words and phrases from your abstract.

Note: Google will notice if you overindulge in repetition and will assume you are doing so in order to manipulate search results; hence Google may un-index your article (Sage Publications, 2014).

Introduction
The first few paragraphs are the most important (and often the most difficult to write) in the entire article. But an ancient saying attributed to Pythagoras suggests that “The beginning is half the whole.” In other words a good introduction does much of the job of winning your reader over: providing context and the rationale for the work, defining the focus and setting the tone, style and pace of the article.

The introduction also serves to introduce the writer to the reader, usually in quite subtle ways, through the approach to the topic, the style and the language used. In some disciplines though, there may be an explicitly personal introduction where the writer positions herself or himself in relation to the subject matter of the paper.

The “moves” in an introduction
Swales and Feak’s (1994) analysis of a generic research article indicates a successful introduction to an article must fulfil three functions, or “moves”:

Move 1: Establishing the territory. This is achieved by showing that the general subject area is important in some way. Swales and Feak (1994) call this “claiming centrality”.

There is an important issue to be noted here in that the means of “claiming centrality” varies across the disciplines. For most scientific and technical disciplines, the literature is reviewed in the introduction, in order to establish the centrality of
the topic. However, in the humanities and health science disciplines, a detailed literature review section is quite separate from the introduction. Therefore the introduction in these disciplines tends to focus more on the socio-cultural or historical background to the subject as the means of establishing the centrality of the topic. Some key items of literature might well be included in an article introduction, but only in brief.

**Move 2: Establishing a niche.** You must indicate a gap in the literature, or an area into which the existing knowledge can be extended. This move is seen by Swales and Feak (1994) as the most important element of the introduction as it establishes the motivation for the study.

**Move 3: Occupying the niche.** The purpose of the paper should be stated, showing how you will fill or begin to fill the gap you have identified. You might also make a cautious statement about the value of the work, particularly if original research is being presented. The principal findings or conclusions might be outlined; Swales and Feak (1994) suggest that this would be excessively repetitive if the paper possesses an abstract, because the findings will be indicated in the abstract and detailed in the discussion. Finally, the structure of the paper might also be indicated, particularly for longer papers.

*Capturing the reader’s interest*

A good introduction to an article addresses the selected topic with some originality; in other words, it is interesting. This is the point at which you are most free (and most likely) to engage the reader’s interest. Thinking of all the academic work you have read – and written – what engages your interest most successfully?

**Organising the body of the article**

Primary research reports often follow the so-called IMRaD format:

- Introduction
- Methods
- Results
- Discussion

Other types of article still require a robust, logical and coherent structure, just like an essay assignment. And again, just like assignments, journals also impose word-count limits. The habits you have cultivated in writing assignments transfer directly into writing an article for publication. Organising the body of the article therefore needs to be focussed on:

- achieving a defined purpose within a specific word count; and
- developing an appropriate structure that is suitable for that purpose and word-count limit.
Figures and tables

In the sciences, and in engineering and technology subjects, many articles make use of figures and tables, particularly if you are dealing with numerical data. Any set of numbers with more than three items may benefit from being displayed in either a table or a graph. However, Day (1998) argues that there is no reason to “regurgitate reams of data just because you have them” and you should only include a table if you are convinced that “repetitive data must be presented” (p. 61).

You should also give some thought to the arrangement of information in a table to make it as accessible as possible. For example, can the reader quickly see the inherent logic in the way the table is constructed and easily make sense of what the table communicates? Also remember that it is easier to read comparable data if they are arranged vertically in a column rather than horizontally in a row (in the same way that it is easier to add a vertical column of figures than a horizontal row of figures). The point here is that, as the author or researcher, you may be familiar with the subtleties but the reader has probably not met the data before. The presentation has to make the data immediately accessible.

For numerical data, another question might be whether to use a table or a graph. A graph demonstrates a trend, while a table gives specific data. It is rarely necessary to present the same information in both a table and a graph, so you need to determine what information is required in your discussion – trends or specifics. If you do decide to present a graph, the key to success is keeping it as clear and as simple as possible. A clutter of lines, points and colour and a complex key to symbols only serves to put a reader off.

Other visuals, such as flow charts, diagrams, can capture help to articulate a concept that is very difficult to convey in words alone. And some forms of qualitative research use tables and charts to help organise thematic analyses. Nevertheless, as with the presentation of numerical data, the effective use of these tools does require some thought. As Briscoe (1990, as cited in Day, 1998) remarks, “The most common disaster in illustrating is to include too much information in one figure. The more points made in an illustration, the more the risk of confusing and discouraging [the reader]” (p. 74).

For any figure or table that you use, it is important to ensure there is a clear connection between the text and the figure or table, so that the reader knows the point at which the figure or table is most relevant to your thinking. So do include a cross-reference, eg, “As can be seen in Figure 2” or “(see Table 4)”. However, the text should never merely repeat the information in a figure or table, but should comment upon it. The text should draw the reader’s attention to the key trend in a graph, the significant elements in tabulated data, or the important features in an artwork.

Conclusion

We sometimes speak of “conclusions” (plural) in the sense of deductions, generalisations or other inferences drawn from your work. These matters are often considered in the
discussion section. However, the sort of “conclusion” (singular) being considered here refers to the ending or closing section of an article. In this sense of the word, a good conclusion

- gives a sense of closure by demonstrating (often through a brief summary) that the stated purpose has been achieved;
- reinforces the significance of what has been achieved; and
- demonstrates a wider perspective on the work by connecting back to the more general context from which it arises.

The conclusion is the “bottom line” of your work, and will often be read early on by anyone skimming your article. You want such a reader to decide to read the article in full, so your paper should finish on a strong note. In creating a strong finale, you should avoid ending your article with a quote from someone else – finish in a way that leaves your own voice resonating in the reader’s mind.

References
Do make sure you follow the referencing style of the journal. There are hundreds of particular styles so using some referencing software such as EndNote can make this task much easier.

Journal style
Do make sure you follow the manuscript style of the journal/publisher. These instructions can be very detailed; for example, Sage Publications (2011) has a 16-page house style manual that authors must refer to. If you do not pay attention to these instructions, you may give an editor a reason to reject your article.

Other – more general but still useful – sources of information on writing for publication in academic journals include the American Psychological Association (APA) (2010) *Publication manual* (as well as the rules of APA referencing, this book includes a detailed explanation of the APA ‘house style’) and the University of Chicago Press (2010) *Manual of style*. Both of these books are available in the AUT library.

A recommendation, or how to avoid common mistakes
Common mistakes in articles submitted for publication, based on feedback from editors (Henson, 2005), include:

- lack of substance;
- failure to write simply and clearly;
- lack of familiarity with the journal’s purpose and its readers;
- wrong manuscript style; and
- grammatical errors.
To help you avoid these pitfalls, Henson (2005) recommends getting two or three colleagues to read the paper before it is submitted, to pick up on all the things that you cannot see yourself in your own work (this is good advice for any writer). You don’t have to accept all suggestions but the feedback will get you to think further about aspects of your paper. If you are willing to invite meaningful feedback and discussion on the points noted above, it will without doubt improve your article.

Peer reviewers’ feedback
One of the most feared aspects of offering an article for publication in an academic journal is the anonymous peer review process that is used to validate the quality of published work. There are usually at least two reviewers. The feedback you receive from them can be quite personally challenging:

- reviewers can have completely opposite responses to your paper;
- the feedback can be “robust” to the point of rudeness; and
- the feedback can feel quite arbitrary.

But the feedback can also be generous, supportive and very insightful.

Take some time after receiving the reviews to let the feedback sink in and try to detach yourself from the personal aspects of your own response. After a while it is likely that you will see that the feedback is useful, and your article will be enhanced by reflecting upon it. It is also pleasing that someone in your field of study has voluntarily taken the time to read your article carefully and give their opinion.

Based on the peer reviews, the response from the journal editor may be to publish without changes. This is very rare. Or the response may be to give you an opportunity to resubmit after having made changes. This is a fantastic result and you should always resubmit, even though you may feel the reviewers have asked you to make substantial changes.

If you don’t get the chance to resubmit, use the reviewers’ comments to tighten up the paper and then submit it elsewhere. This is a very common experience and is all part of intellectual development. If you are rewriting your article based on reviewers’ suggestions, remember this is still your paper, your ideas and your argument: keep your voice strong and make sure that what you write and how you write is authentic to you.
Further reading

More valuable information on writing for publication can be found on the AUT Library website at http://aut.ac.nz.libguides.com/getting_published.

A range of writing resources can also be found on the Student Learning Centre’s website; go to http://www.aut.ac.nz/student-learning and click on “Learning Resources”.

References


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