

Publishing non-research papers as a trainee: a recipe for beginners

George S, Moreira K

ABSTRACT

There is an ever-increasing expectation on trainees and junior doctors to publish more. Not all doctors are fortunate enough to participate in and publish high-quality original research. This paper provides some practical tips to trainee doctors, who are novice researchers and who have few or no published papers, on how to publish (not how to write) non-research papers. Although we acknowledge that not all these tips may be relevant to all trainees aspiring to publish, we hope that some of these tips will be applicable to most trainees.

Keywords: publications, research, trainee doctors

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INTRODUCTION

An often-voiced criticism by trainee doctors is the increasing emphasis on publications (in academic journals) in the assessment of their training and career progression. Publications are an easily demonstrable and assessable proxy outcome measure of time well spent in research or its pursuit, and hence their relevance in the assessment of training. This, coupled with the ever-increasing competitiveness for jobs in medicine, is more likely to require trainees to write and publish, whether they like it or not. Of course, some trainees are fortunate enough to work in established research units or academic centres, engage in substantial original research (randomised-controlled trials, case-control studies, etc.) and subsequently publish high-quality papers in “A-list” journals, such as the Journal of the American Medical Association, The New England Journal of Medicine, and The Lancet. However, the vast majority of trainees, although keen to do research, struggle for a range of reasons.

This paper provides some practical tips for trainee doctors, who are novice researchers and who have few or no published papers, on how to publish non-research papers. This is not intended for those who know the “rules of the game” and those who are involved in original scientific research. It has to be emphasised at

the outset that although this paper focuses on publishing non-research papers, we strongly encourage trainees to conduct (and publish) original research as well.

WHAT ARE NON-RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS?

A hierarchy of some of the common types of “non-research” publications (in increasing order of difficulty and impact) is given in Box 1.

Box 1. Hierarchy of non-research publications:

- Letters to the editor
- Book reviews, film reviews
- Case reports/case series
- “Unique” categories (e.g. ten-minute consultation in the BMJ, clinical picture in the Lancet)
- Opinion papers
- Review papers
- Editorials

Letters are by far the easiest (in terms of time and effort) to write, and review papers the most difficult. From a trainee’s viewpoint, the biggest “attraction” of writing opinion papers, special articles or reviews is that such projects do not need ethical approval (and consequently less paperwork and bureaucratic hurdles) and hence can often be completed during one training job (6–12 months). Although this paper discusses only non-research publications, trainees should participate in sound qualitative and quantitative research projects as well. It is also recommended to have a good mix of publications and not just to focus on letters or case reports.

TOP TIPS ON HOW TO GET PUBLISHED

Write more!

This is the first hurdle to be crossed in the pursuit of getting publications. Trainees often bemoan the fact that journals are not trainee-friendly. This is not always true.

- For beginners, it is useful to coauthor papers with senior colleagues so that they familiarise themselves with the steps involved in writing a paper, as well as the process itself.
- Overcoming the writer’s block requires motivation and perseverance; practical tips are provided elsewhere.⁽¹⁾

Addiction Psychiatry,
Birmingham and
Solihull Mental Health
NHS Trust,
Birmingham,
B37 7UR,
England

George S, MBBS,
MRCPsych
Consultant

Moreira K, MBBS
Staff Grade

Correspondence to:
Dr Sanju George
Tel: (44) 121 678 4900
Fax: (44) 121 678 4901
Email: sanju.george@
talk21.com

Work on your writing style

This is an area where it is difficult to be prescriptive as the needs of individual trainees and solutions to particular problems vary considerably.

- It is crucial for beginners to have a good “insight” into their own writing skills, and more so, their weaknesses.
- For those whose first language is not English, more effort may be needed to go into improving their command and use of the language, although by no means should it be considered a major disadvantage.⁽²⁾
- It can be useful to get your papers proofread, if possible, by those who are sufficiently qualified.
- A range of papers, books and courses are available to help with this (Box 2).

Box 2. Self-help:

- Read books and articles on the topic (see Appendix 1).
- Attend courses (e.g. those run by the Society for the Study of Addiction and “Publish or Perish” [www.publishorperish.co.uk]).
- Read BMJ Careers (Appendix 1).

Look out for trainee editor posts

This provides an opportunity for the post-holder to be actively involved in the various stages of publishing; i.e. writing, commissioning articles, peer reviewing.

- It gives valuable insight into the structure and functioning of the editorial board of the journal, and this is a tremendous learning experience.
- Working with senior clinicians and academics is the ideal start to one’s academic career. Such a “behind the scenes” exposure to their working style improves the publication potential of what you write.
- Journals like the Psychiatric Bulletin appoint trainee editors every two years or so, and an expression of interest to the editor (via email) is a useful starting point for trainees interested in the job.

To collaborate or not?

Large-scale, multicentre projects, by definition, involve collaboration. However, most of the “non-research” publications discussed here can be achieved singly or jointly, best decided by one’s individual preference and style of working.

- If you are working jointly, remember to take the lead in organising and motivating coauthors to see the project through to completion. Be clear about

the order of authorship from the start to avoid misunderstanding later on.

- Beware of coauthors who are disorganised and hard to track down.

Read extensively and be familiar with the formats and categories in different journals.

As a rule of thumb, trainees should aim to regularly read at least two general medical journals and 2–3 subspecialty-specific journals.

- The more you read, the more you become familiar with the format, categories and content of various journals.
- Once sufficiently familiar with what’s publishable in different journals, you can “target” specific journals for your papers to enhance the chances of acceptance for publication. Some academics even argue that it is good practice to have a journal in mind even before you start working on a paper. It is akin to movie scriptwriters having a cast in mind (to play the characters) as they write the screenplay.

Start with new journals

It is useful to look out for new journals in the relevant subspeciality. Although these journals may not have very high impact factors, they tend to have higher acceptance rates and may be a realistic starting point in one’s publishing career.

The “reverse approach”

Conventional wisdom would suggest that one first completes a research project, then writes it up and then sends it to a journal for publication. However, a more time-efficient and “risk-free” approach that can be used by trainees in the initial stages of their writing careers is what we have termed the “reverse approach”. The steps involved are shown in Box 3. This particularly applies to review papers and other non-research publications that can be commissioned by editors.

Box 3. The “reverse approach”:**Steps**

- I. Decide to write for a particular journal.
- II. Identify a subject that is interesting, topical and has not already been written about.
- III. Finalise the topic.
- IV. Choose a coauthor (where applicable) and write up a protocol.
- V. Contact the editor (with the “pitch”) and get the paper commissioned (with some luck).
- VI. Write! And submit on time.

Choosing the right journal

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Is the topic of interest to a national or international audience?
- Is it better suited for a general medical or specialist journal?
- What is the journal's impact factor (IF)? As a general rule, the greater the IF, the more widely read and cited is the journal's content.⁽³⁾

Other tips

- Work as a trainee in academic or research posts.
- Establish links with the local University.
- Express an interest in writing to key people and senior academics.
- Volunteer to be a peer reviewer for (new) journals.
- If possible, find a senior figure in medicine to mentor the development of your publication strategy (personal communication, Griffith Edwards, 2006).

OTHER MISCELLANEOUS PUBLICATIONS

- These include short pieces and columns for medical newspapers, such as the Hospital Doctor and the BMA News.
- Senior trainees (with adequate time, motivation and guidance) working in groups can also attempt to write book chapters, examination preparatory guides and even short textbooks.

CONCLUSION

All in all, it is important to remain optimistic and focused. It is often possible to get papers published if you have written something interesting and chosen the right journal. Nobody (or very few) takes off on his publishing career with a publication in the BMJ. Start with lower IF journals, master the art and science of writing and publishing, and then set your goals higher. We acknowledge that not all these tips may be relevant to all trainees aspiring to have their articles published. Nonetheless, it is hoped that some of these tips will be applicable to most trainees. This paper is not intended to simplify the complex science of original research or the complex skill of getting papers published. Good luck!

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Appendix I: Recommended reading list.

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