

*Golden Jubilee*  
50 years of publication

# Nurturing young writers: sustaining quality, not quantity

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## ABSTRACT

**The exponential growth in scientific journals and advent of the electronic era have led to such information overload that the sustainability of credible and quality publications is more urgent than ever. Editors and academics who commit themselves to nurturing young writers need to reaffirm their focus on quality rather than quantity of papers. Bearing in mind that publications should firstly be founded on good science, there are several approaches in helping the uninitiated develop and hone writing skills. Academic journals faithfully publish instructions to guide potential authors on the preparation and submission of manuscripts. For those with a gift for writing, this may suffice to start them soaring in their writing career. Others find the hands-on approach of writing workshops more effective in clarifying the rules of the writing game and dispelling the fear of writing. Workshops are good at demonstrating the basics, but the forging of a good writer is a long process in which a mentor can play an invaluable role. A nurturing mentor-mentee relationship should not be a stifling one, but one that leads, grows and finally liberates an independent writer. It is inevitable that the nature of scientific publications will change over time. Nonetheless, the sustainability of quality journals will remain linked to the continual generation of writers who uphold scientific truth and good writing values.**

**Keywords:** authorship, medical mentors, medical writing, scientific writing, writing workshops

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Some days, I wake up holding my head, wondering how to cope with the news, the dashing here and there to meetings, the ever-demanding mobile phone, the diary that has no respect for quality time. Life has become so complex and

multifaceted, it is a rare day that has only a straight and simple story to tell. Information input into our lives is tremendous, and “information overload” aptly describes a prime characteristic of modern life. As more data is generated, the managing of data has become more difficult, necessary and demanding.

So too with scientific publishing. Since its first appearance in the 1700s, there has been an exponential increase in the number of scientific journals to an astounding one million by 2000.<sup>(1)</sup> With the advent of electronic publishing, the worldwide web and blogs, access to information has grown beyond imagination. In the light of this, is there any need to encourage more writers? Do we need more journals, more papers, more information?

For those of us in the writing business, it is sacrilegious to consider that we should stop publishing. Much has been said about the need, purpose and benefits of publication, about it being the natural conclusion in the research and discovery journey, allowing new findings and ideas to be shared, challenged and verified before adoption. Research and publication are essential factors in the equation for progress. In medical science and practice, this ultimately converts to lives lost and saved, health, wealth and how humans care for each other.

The crux of the matter is not publication or information per se, it is managing information: sifting the true from the false, the useful from the trivial and effectively driving messages home. How this may be done would be grounds for many long discourses and workshops, but most of us, consciously or subconsciously, find a way to handle it. Editors and academics, in particular, face this dilemma constantly. This article only addresses one angle to the problem.

Stephen Lock, a past editor of the British Medical Journal, wrote that “Editors survive by accepting good articles.”<sup>(2)</sup> Good journals are sustained by good articles, and sustainability, as is true of almost all facets of life on Earth, is about survival. Hence, editors are obsessively interested in two things: sound research and effective writing. I am sure that the editor of the Singapore Medical

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Journal is no different. The Effective Medical Writing series carried by this Journal over the past two years bear poignant witness to efforts made to improve the quality of journal articles.

Many of us have made conscious commitments towards the sustainability of our environment. Sustainability is also applicable to all aspects of our professional life, whether it be producing medical students, training specialists, running a clinic, controlling a pandemic or strategic planning for the competitive future of our universities and corporations. Nurturing the young is fundamentally about sustainability and ensuring the capability to endure and cope with the future. Along this vein, nurturing young writers is about sustaining the credibility and quality of publications. I believe that editors, senior academics and researchers should commit themselves to this, because they are in the best position to make a difference.

### ENQUIRY AND INSTRUCTION

*“Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man.”* – Francis Bacon

It is not surprising that the means to help the uninitiated develop and hone writing skills fall along similar lines to most other skills. As in many fields, those wanting to know how to do something, usually start by enquiring into the experiences of those who have gone before. Instruction manuals and guidebooks serve such enquiries and can be quite effective. Academic journals faithfully publish “Instructions to Authors” on how to prepare and submit a manuscript – the equivalent of a guidebook on performing a specific task, be it operating a machine, tackling a fish or cooking a gourmet dish. Books on how to write, and editorial serials on effective writing, have similar usefulness to reference monographs and text books.<sup>(3)</sup> Writing is an exact science, and the scientific papers of today are required to conform strictly to journal requirements. However, not everyone learns well from written instructions, and not everyone can take to reading long and detailed instructions and guidebooks. The number of papers that editors continue to receive, and which do not conform to the technical requirements of their journals, tell on just how little attention some writers pay to instructions. We have to recognise that more needs to be done than just providing instructions. Just as in bringing up a child where many approaches have to be taken for him to learn and grow, so too with the development of writing skills.

### GETTING STARTED THROUGH A HANDS-ON APPROACH

*“Tell me, I’ll forget. Show me, I may remember. But involve me and I’ll understand.”* – Chinese proverb

Following instructions may seem fine, but we cannot learn if we do not understand. Discussion and practice are fundamental to the learning process. When it comes to writing skills, workshops are extremely useful because they provide instructions, explanations, practice and interaction. I conducted my first scientific writing workshop in Kuala Lumpur in 1989 with the help of Professor Stephen Lock, then Editor of the British Medical Journal. This was organised under the aegis of the Malaysian Society of Pathologists with the objective of improving the quality of manuscripts submitted to the Malaysian Journal of Pathology. I have not looked back since, and now, teaming with other local medical and science editors, regularly conduct several workshops a year.

Workshops obviously vary according to target groups, but the basic framework should comprise short, pertinent, instructive talks punctuated by small group exercises which drive home the points raised in the talks. At the end of each exercise, it is important for all break-out groups to meet and share the results of their writing efforts. It is this sharing and critique process which best brings out the realisation that there can be many ways of presenting a finding or expressing an idea, but some are more effective than others. Table I shows a typical workshop programme which covers the essential components of a scientific paper, effective presentation of data and the editorial process. Always allow time for questions and answers (Q & A). Pointers on how to deal with revisions and rejections are useful ice-breakers. The opportunity to drive home authorship responsibilities and ethical practices in research and publication should not be missed; these are always hot topics during Q & A time.

Feedback has convinced me that writing workshops do drive home, reasonably effectively, an understanding of the structure of scientific papers, i.e. the “rules of the writing game.” More than that, the practical and hands-on approach of such workshops helps dispel the fear of writing and can actually move quite a few to start on their first paper. I find that a session devoted to the critical review of draft manuscripts from participants can be quite valuable in helping some achieve successful publications. Among postgraduate students and young researchers, there may also be an additional need for workshops on research methodology and statistics. This is equally important in the nurturing process. Good science provides the foundation for good scientific publications.

In Malaysia, the demand for writing workshops has increased over the years. In the past, such workshops have catered largely to universities and research institutions where publication is a key performance indicator. More recently, the Ministry of Health of Malaysia has also committed itself to research and publication, adding

**Table I. Basic framework of a scientific writing workshop.**

Content	Medium of delivery
Evolution and purpose of publications.	Lectures, Q & A
Basic structure and types of scientific papers.	
Writing the title, title page, abstract and keywords	Lectures followed by small group exercises, large group discussions, Q & A
Text writing: Introduction, Materials & Methods, Results, Discussion, References	Lectures followed by small group exercises, large group discussions, Q & A
Scientific language and writing style	Lecture, Q & A
Effective use of tables and figures	Lectures followed by small group exercises, large group discussions, Q & A
Data analysis and statistics	Lectures followed by small group exercises, large group discussions, Q & A
How to submit a manuscript	Lecture, Q & A
Understanding peer review and the editorial process	Lecture, Q & A
Dealing with rejections and revisions	Lecture, Q & A
Authorship responsibilities and publication ethics	Lecture, Q & A
Review of draft manuscripts	Individual presentations followed by large group discussions, Q & A

considerably to the demand. Editors and academics who conduct writing workshops will have their hands full, but will doubtlessly rise to this challenge as improving the general quality of writing directly impacts on the quality of journals.

#### **MENTORING AND A GUIDING LIGHT**

*"It's not too late at all. You just don't yet know what you are capable of."* – Mahatma Gandhi

Writing workshops get you started by showing you the basics. The few who have the gift for writing quickly see the light and take off from there. In fact, most born writers do not attend workshops at all. They just learn the rules of the writing game from the "Instructions to Authors" and then soar off. Nevertheless, writing workshops are hugely popular and reflect the existence of a great deal of information that can be published and a great desire to do so. Writing is recognised as the most difficult of the language skills of reading, speaking and writing. More cannot write properly than read or speak properly.

Because of their one-off and brief nature, workshops cannot ensure that participants will successfully publish. The forging of a good writer is a far longer and more painful process. If there is nothing to sustain and inspire the fledgling writer, he will often fall at the wayside.

Most writers of my generation, who started before the era of writing workshops, would remember someone to whom they owe their first paper. This would usually be an older and wiser colleague, someone who taught them the first steps in the writing process and the fine usage of scientific language, someone who patiently sifted every word and questioned every concept until clarity shone through, someone who demanded revision upon revision until perfection was reached, before allowing submission of that first precious paper. I had the good fortune of such a

mentor. A good mentor is worth more than any workshop – a mentor inspires and sustains beyond that.

Like parenting, mentorship requires commitment, a giving and liberating spirit, and is based on the ability to nurture the mentee through a changing relationship. Shirley Peddy in her book "The Art of Mentoring", describes three steps: "lead, follow and get out of the way."<sup>(4)</sup> The young mentee requires leadership from the mentor – he benefits from advice, counsel, being guided on how to tackle a task or handle a problem. When the mentee is ready to try out his own way of handling a task, a good mentor should be able to step back and "follow". By following, he lends support and encouragement to help the mentee mature and do things his own way. Finally, a good mentor "gets out of the way" when the mentee is ready to be independent. Hence, a nurturing mentor-mentee relationship should not persist as a dependent or stifling one, but should be one that grows and then sets free the next generation. Recognising the effectiveness of mentorship, many universities have writing mentorship programmes to assist young faculty with writing for grants and publications.

But why be a mentor? With the myriad demands of modern life, not many would consciously want to take on such a commitment. Yet there will be some for whom mentoring comes naturally, and gifted mentors make a huge difference to their organisations in developing and retaining talent. In the process of giving, committed mentors find many forms of satisfaction and contentment: the pride and joy of facilitating a protege's personal and professional growth, enrichment of their own lives as "by their students, they are taught," and the creation of a lasting legacy through the values and vision they pass on.

#### **NURTURING FOR QUALITY, NOT QUANTITY**

While much has been said about helping younger

colleagues write and publish, I would like to emphasise that nurturing young writers is not about the creation of more publications. It is about sustaining the credibility and quality of publications. Hence, in the process of guiding the young to write, it is important not to, ourselves, lose our way. Teaching the mechanics of writing is easy. But what is most crucial is the inculcation of good values in writing – which is not so easy. Many of us do not have the heart to point out to a young writer that his work is really too trivial or inconsequential to be of any use to the scientific world. We take the easy way out – help him polish his paper and hope it somehow gets published. But at some stage, we must take a stand for quality and press home the following messages:

- (1) Do not publish if there is nothing worthwhile to share. Be proud of what you write. Do not add rubbish to the scientific pool.
- (2) There is both a science and an art to writing.<sup>(5)</sup> It does not suffice to just follow the rules and convert data into sentences, tables and figures. Good writing has the reader in mind. Readers do not just (mechanically) read, they seek meaning in what they read. Messages that are not absolutely clear and easily understood will be misinterpreted or missed altogether.
- (3) Do not compromise on ethics. Do not sell your soul for a publication. It will come back to haunt you.
- (4) A good scientific paper has to be firstly based on good science. No amount of clever writing can repair a flawed study.
- (5) Always check your data. Always read through what

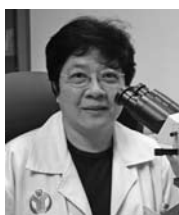
you have written several times. Do not gloss over obvious deficiencies – these will be picked out by reviewers and boomerang back to you.

- (6) Reviewers and editors are nearly always right. Take what they say seriously and profit from their wisdom.

With the advent of the electronic era, publication has entered a phase of exhilarating speed, multimedia capabilities and limitless accessibility. In fact, anyone can now post his views or publish his own papers, unbridled and unchecked, in cyberspace. One wonders whether the era of peer-reviewed publications is in descent. I do not doubt that, eventually, the face and language of scientific publications will change, for such is the nature of life and the dares of the human spirit. What is taught in today's writing workshops may become irrelevant, but then, they too will evolve back to relevance. Of greatest concern remains how we weather the storm of information overload, and hold true to a system that will bring out truth amidst fiction and falsehood. Nurturing future generations of writers who will uphold scientific truth is very much the heart of this matter.

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