



In the Bookstores...Not Just Another "How To"

by Karen Shashok

George M Hall, editor. How to Write a Paper. London: BMJ Books, 1998. ISBN 0 7279 1234 8

The publishers who not long ago gave us Tim Albert's *A-Z of Medical Writing* are again to be congratulated for this compact but informative guide to preparing manuscripts for medical journals. All 18 authors are UK-based (and seven of them were affiliated with the same journal at the time the book was written), so users of this book should be aware that the views offered are mainly British. Nevertheless, this caveat in no way limits the usefulness of the first 11 chapters of the book, which deal specifically with scientific papers. The UK affiliations need only be taken into account in considering the opinions expressed in the final 7 chapters, most of which are devoted to wider issues of biomedical publishing not directly related to writing and editing.

Originally intended for non-native English-speaking authors, this book found an unexpectedly large audience within the UK, according to the editor's preface to the second edition. The reasons for this success are clear. Each of the first 11 chapters offer clear, practical advice on what to include, and where, in order to produce successful manuscripts. The final seven chapters (with the exception of Chapter 16; see below) look at the mechanics of biomedical publication, and centre on just the issues authors are likely to be most concerned about. The tips are offered in frank, direct language with plenty of imperative verbs that make it clear what should and should not be done, and few words are wasted. Most of the chapters are short and to the point, and most include a few well-chosen tables or boxes that make the main messages easy to identify, assimilate, and put into practice. Many chapters conclude with a succinct list of references or a brief list of recommended reading. This format is perfect for harried authors who just want to know, with as little fuss and theory as possible, exactly what they should do.

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The topics covered in the first 11 chapters are The structure of a scientific paper; Introductions; Methods; The results; Discussion; Titles, abstracts, and authors; References; How to write a letter (a very useful chapter on a type of manuscript that had not previously received the attention it deserves in "How to" books); How to write an abstract for a scientific meeting; How to write a case report; and How to write a review.

Chapter 4, which deals with the Results section, deserves special mention for its instructional value. Chapter 11, on review writing, is a bit long on opinion regarding such things as peer review, editing, and the origins of review articles, and a bit short

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on up-to-date practical advice on literature searching and current approaches to

systematic reviewing. Some of us would probably not agree fully with the recommendation in Chapter 7 to use and cite only articles from journals indexed in *Index Medicus*. Because of the possible over-representation of USA journals in Medline¹, and because of some of the biases inherent in the inclusion criteria used by the National Library of Medicine to select journals for coverage, exclusion of a journal from Medline cannot be assumed to mean that the excluded journal publishes substandard science. But overall, these first 11 chapters, along with Chapter 16, titled "Style – what is it and does it matter?" (the only chapter, by the way, that offers advice about the actual process of writing and revising), are a fine source of information and help.

The final chapters explain some of the mysteries of how journals operate, and together form a useful introduction to medical journal publishing. The topics covered are The role of the editor; The role of the manuscript editor; What a publisher does; Who should be an author?; Ethics of publication; and The future – electronic publishing. However, users of the book should be aware that much of the material here is opinion, not knowledge, and that positions on ethics and electronic publishing change almost daily as new evidence comes in. Readers looking for recommendations on what to do if they are involved in an ethical quandary may find they need to look harder for specific advice than they did in the earlier chapters. And they may well be confused by the conflicting recommendations on how to decide authorship. Whereas Chapter 17, on ethics, recommends that the criteria published in 1997 by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors be followed (Table 17.4, p. 127), Chapter 15, on authorship, states: "Rigid, unenforceable, and widely ignored definitions should be abandoned " (p. 113), in what is clearly a critique of these very criteria.

Users of the book should be aware that much of the material in later chapters is opinion, not knowledge, and that positions on ethics and electronic publishing change almost daily.

To more effectively reach its original readership (non-native users of English), it might be helpful to qualify some of the culture-related assumptions and values that appear throughout the book, and to edit the language in a few places to do away with overly idiomatic constructions. Meanwhile, this collection of practical advice and professional debate can be recommended not only to authors, but also to author's editors, reviewers and editors who want a plain-talking, highly informative introduction to biomedical manuscript preparation and publication in the UK.

Reference:

1. Waheed AA. England and US corner the journal market (Correspondence). *Nature* 2000;405:613

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