



Brief Setting

by Tim Albert

Taken from the book: A-Z of Medical Writing, by Tim Albert, Radcliffe Medical Press, 2000.

Brief setting One of the great mistakes we make when writing is to start too early, without really knowing where we want to end up. Some people start by writing lists; others go straight to a word processor and start writing down what comes into their heads. I recommend an alternative process, originally recommended in *Medical Journalism, the writer's guide*, in which I advise that the first thing to do is to draw back from writing - and think very carefully about what you want to do. By all means let your writing be a voyage of discovery, but at least look into the existing charts before you set out.

I call this stage 'setting the brief'. It involves taking time to think about what you want to do. You may be able to do it in less than a minute; with more difficult pieces of writing you may need days or even weeks. As long as it remains rumination, not procrastination, you should not worry. As for what you need to think about, these are contained in the following five points.

1. **Message.** Work out the most important thing you want your readers to take away from your writing. This is the message, and should take the form of a simple sentence of about 10 words. For instance: 'Wearing sandals with socks reduces the incidence of athlete's foot'. The key is to introduce a verb ('reduces', 'increases', 'does not affect', etc) which gives it direction. It will also distinguish it from a title, which (in journals) usually consists of a string of nouns ('Footwear apparel and fungal infections of the skin and nails of the feet: a randomised placebo-controlled trial') that will not make a suitable starting point. Do not settle for a question: if you do not yet have the answer, do more research or more thinking or both.
2. **Market.** Decide for whom this message is intended (audience) and how you intend to get it to them. Be specific: the more tightly defined your audience the greater your chances of success. If you want to write an article, define which journal (*The Lancet*, for instance, or *Country Life*?). If you are writing a report justifying the purchase of an expensive piece of equipment, write for the main player in the decision-making committee. If you are writing a procedure for a new clinic's appointment system, write for those who have to carry it out. If it looks as though you will have to please two separate audiences at the same time – such as a report on the latest research for members of a patient group and interested doctors, then write two different reports.

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3. *Length and other aspects of style.* Now work out what you need to please your audience. Decide on the length of the piece of writing, measured in words or paragraphs. This should not be determined by how you rate the importance of the topic (or happen to know about it), but on what the market should bear.
4. *Deadlines.* Set the date by which you need to finish the writing. Then work backwards, inserting second-level deadlines for the major steps you need to take on the way.
5. *Payoff.* Define how you will judge the success of your writing. Too often we judge it in terms of half-remembered notions of literary criticism. Now we are established in our careers, we should regard writing as a tool not a test, and therefore judge success not by the details, but by whether our writing has enabled us to achieve what we set out to do. For instance, if we are trying to attract a £1million grant, and we manage to do so, our writing has succeeded, irrespective of whether we have split the odd infinitive. Similarly, if we are trying to get a paper published in a prestigious journal and it is accepted, we have also succeeded (and subsequent gripes from rivals should be seen in this context).

Take your time over brief setting. You may not believe it at the time, but having a clear idea on the above five questions will make all the difference to what you are setting out to do. Consider the following examples, both on the subject of socks, shoes and athlete's foot.

- *Task 1:* "A research letter for *The Lancet* showing that sandals and socks reduce the incidence of athlete's foot. This will be based on the multi-centre SOLE trial and will comprise 500 words. The article will be written by August 1, revised by August 15, sent out to co-authors on September 1 and submitted on September 21. The writing will be considered successful when the editor accepts it for publication".
- *Task 2:* "A report for the management board arguing that sandals and socks should be issued to all staff in order to reduce the incidence of athlete's foot. The primary audience will be the director of human resources. The report will consist of one sheet of A4. The first draft will be completed tomorrow, and revised the following day. The writing will be considered successful when staff get issued with their regulation socks and sandals".

A useful trick is to make sure that others, such as bosses and co-authors, who may subsequently want to comment on your piece of writing, see these details before you start. Don't wait for the finished piece: show them the brief. Agreeing on the message and the market at this early stage can save endless arguments later on.

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