

# A Guide to Writing Manuscripts for International Peer-reviewed Journals

By Stephen Pinder June 2017

This guide has 3 parts which are writing preparation, content and submission.

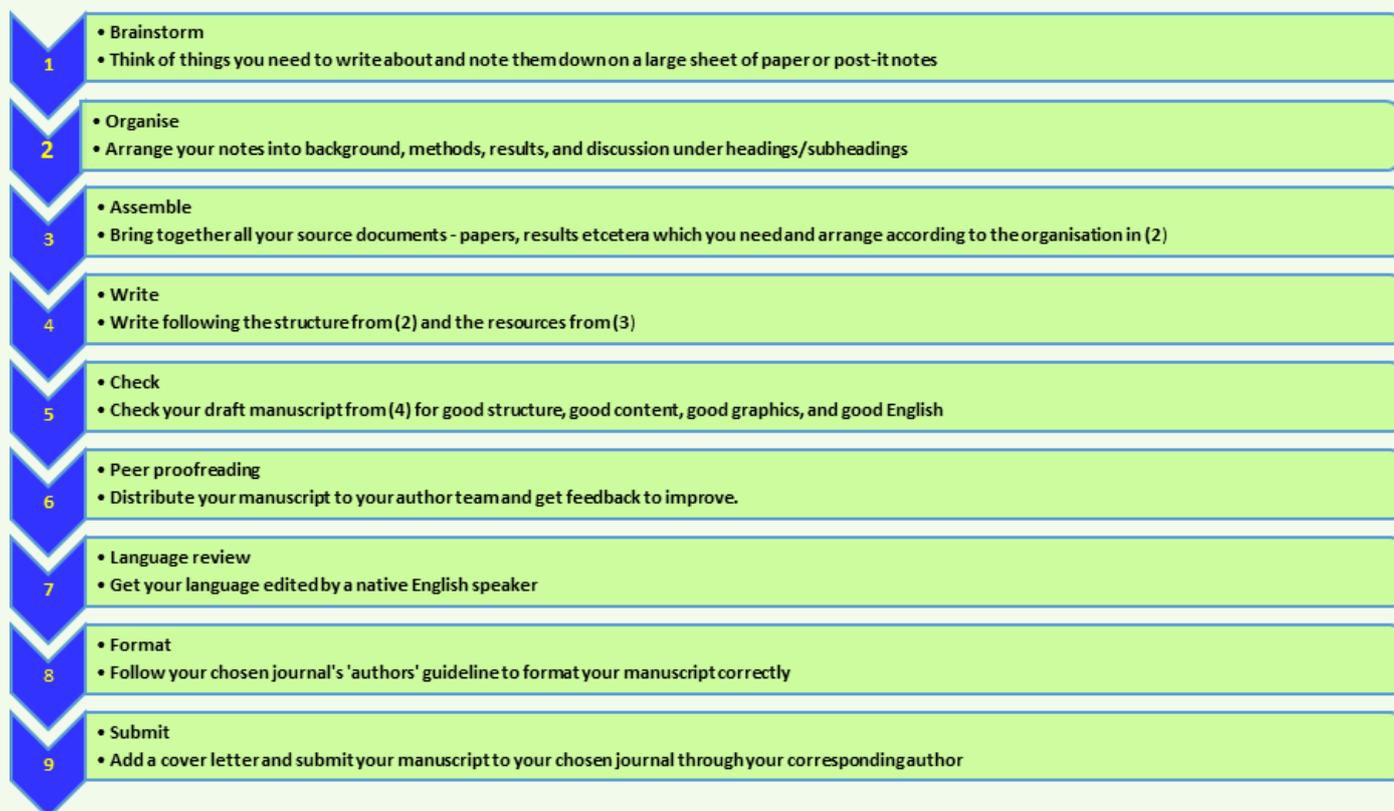
## Part 1: Writing preparation

### Style

Manuscripts are written in academic English. This means trying to use formal, accurate language. Use long forms where possible for academic English instead of short forms like 'that is' instead of 'i.e.'. Formal English means using language structures without idioms, slang or colloquial language forms. Accuracy means carefully choosing vocabulary which gives the clear meaning we wish to convey. It also means choosing good connected language structures, which are not too basic or too difficult to understand. This means we have to consider our readership which could typically be from student to professor. Some authors prefer to write in a personal style like, 'we found that ...' instead of impersonal style like 'It was found that ...' which requires us to use passive voice which is more difficult to understand for non-native speakers of English. Remember the aim of writing our manuscript is to share what we have done with others around the world, so focus on clarity.

### Writing Process

To produce a good manuscript you need to follow a process. Use the process diagram below.



At points 2 or 3 you may find you need to add or cut something out. At points 5 or 6 you may need to go back up to revise your manuscript and then work down the process chart again.

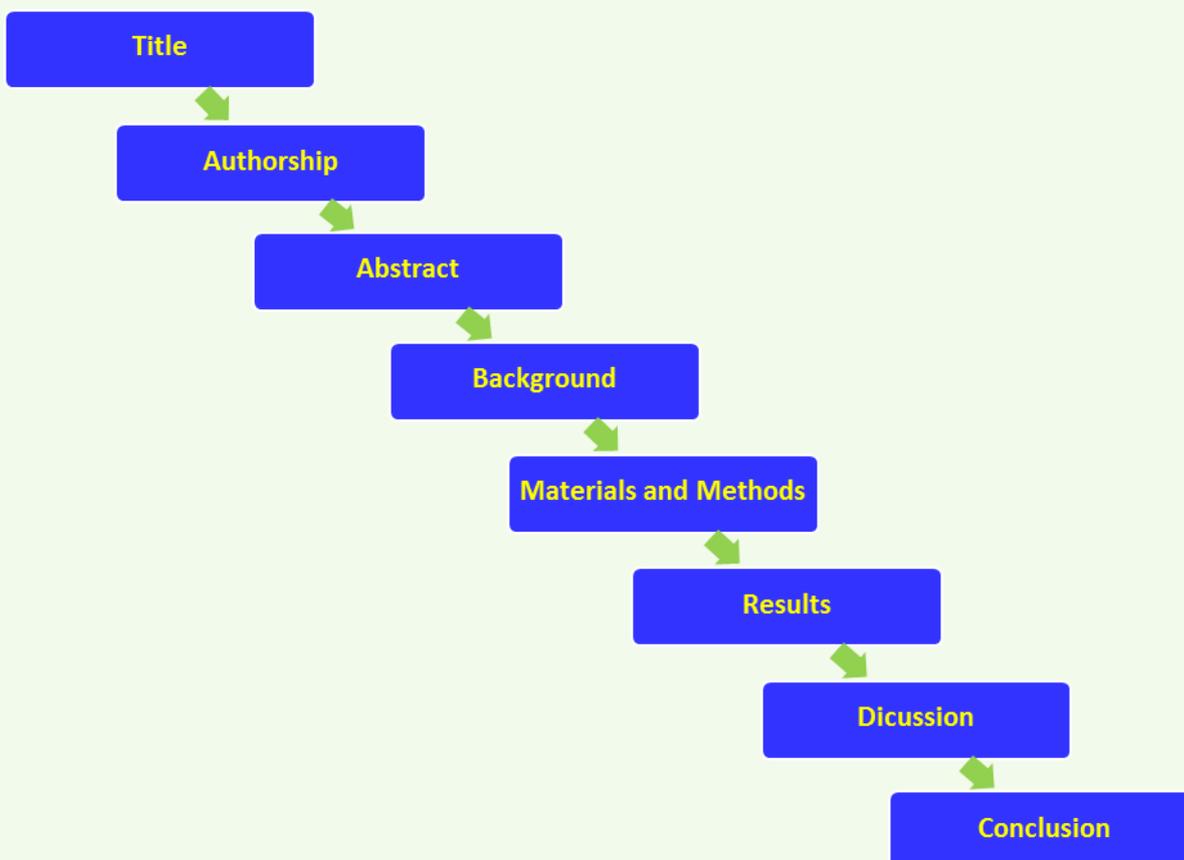
## Language—sentences and paragraphs.

You need a have a good sentence structure. This is typically two clauses joined by a conjunction. Sentences which are too short do not read smoothly, whereas sentences which are too long are difficult to understand. Aim for a mix of compound and complex sentences.

Sentences are arranged into paragraphs. English paragraphs start with a topic sentence which gives the topic and main idea of the paragraph, but no details. This is followed by supporting sentences which add points to support the paragraph topic which can include, details / explanations / examples. Finally, we close a paragraph with a concluding sentence, which should not introduce any new point.

## Part 2 : Content

Your manuscript needs to have the following parts:



**Title:** Try to think of an inspiring title. A title needs to accurately describe the content, and be interesting to motivate someone to read. Look at the keywords /important words in each part of your manuscript and build your title around these keywords. Try to choose a wording which shows how your research is different from what has already been done. Try to avoid using short forms or abbreviations in a title.

**Authorship:** The authorship lists the authors who contributed to the manuscript. It also shows the affiliation of each author to their institute. For postgraduate students this should include the institute in which they are studying for which the manuscript is part of their training. The corresponding author and contact information should be shown.

**Abstract:** The abstract and title are what are read first when your manuscript arrives at the journal and the first consider or reject decision is likely to be made on the title and abstract alone. The decision about whether your manuscript is interesting for the journal's readership is first made on the title and abstract. Therefore, your title needs to clearly and concisely summarise your manuscript and show how it adds on to what is already known. The abstract needs to stand alone and not reference the main text, because the abstract is open access when your manuscript is published. Try to avoid using abbreviations in your abstract. You must strictly follow the journal's authors' guideline for the structure and word limit of abstracts. You need to describe each part of your manuscript in just 2 to 3 lines in your abstract.

**Background:** The background gives general information about your research study. The most relevant literature to date should be summarised. It is often useful to provide a selection diagram to show the flow of study selection. You must not cut and paste, or your manuscript may be rejected because of plagiarism. You need to rephrase using your own words. You should show the gap in knowledge of the subject which led to the need to conduct your research. This should lead to the development of your research question. The research question(s) needs to be clearly stated, as well as the primary and secondary objectives of your study to answer the research question. The background will use past tense for finished studies and present perfect for several studies leading from the past to the present.

**Materials and Methods:** The materials and methods explain how you conducted your research study. Enough details should be provided to enable another researcher to copy what you did. You should follow the PICO guide - Population, Intervention, Comparison and Outcome(s). You need to explain the steps of your study and it is often helpful to include a concept diagram. The type of study design needs to be explained and it is desirable to include the reason for your study design. The setting and subjects used in your study need to be described, together with an explanation of how your sample size was calculated. The inclusion and exclusion criteria applied in selection of subjects should be described. You need to clearly state that your study has been approved by the institute's ethics committee. You have to show how the data for your study was collected, and explain how bias was avoided. The method and software used for data analysis should be explained. The materials and methods is normally written in the past simple tense.

**Results:** Present your study results as found. Do not leave out null or negative results. The presentation of results should be clear and concise. Most important results should be described in words (those which answer the research question(s) and objective(s)), and all results summarized in tables/charts. Choose the best graphics to illustrate your results. Make sure your graphics are clearly titled and referenced by your text. The results are normally described with the past simple tense.

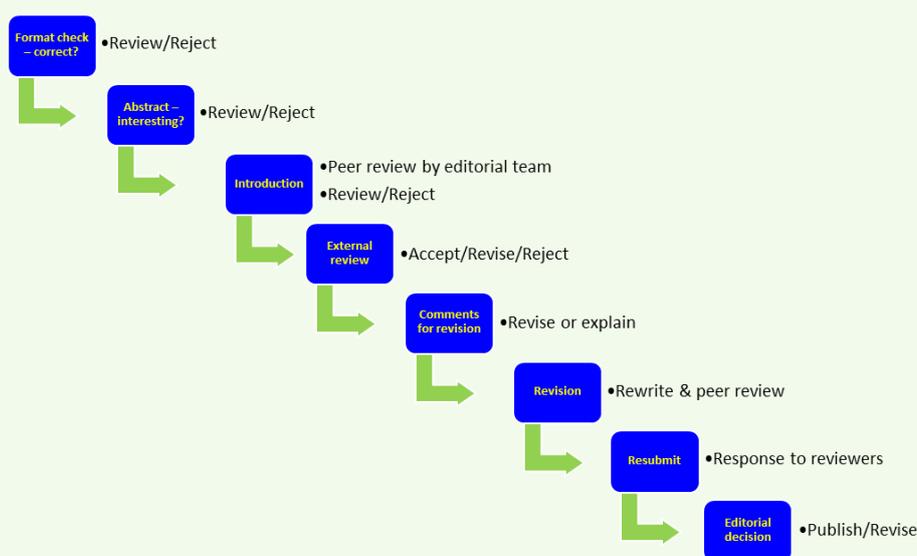
**Discussion:** Answer your research question(s) and explain their application supporting with numbers/percentages where necessary. Any null or negative findings should be discussed and explanations offered. These should use the past simple tense. Interpret the study findings explaining what they mean and provide reasons to support your explanation. Try to think of questions readers may wish to ask about your findings and answer them. This discussion is normally provided in the present tense. Explain the strengths of your study and what new knowledge we have. At the same time you have to be honest about the limitations of your study. Explain how/why these limitations occurred. Use the present simple tense for your strengths and limitations, but past simple for the limitations of previous studies.

**Discussion / Conclusion:** Some journal prefer a separate conclusion and some prefer it to be at the end of the discussion. You need to explain to your readers how to use your finding and apply to current practice. Explain clearly what target population and settings your results can be applied to. Some studies only have internal validation and no or limited external validation. This should be in the present simple tense. If you are discussing further research to further clarify the research question then try to be specific about what type/size of study is needed, but do not try to sell future research. Your readership are health care specialists not a grant committee. The further research can be discussed with future tenses.

## Part 3

### Submission for Publication

The process of submission for publication has the following steps.



Before you can send your manuscript to a journal you have to format your manuscript according to the author's guideline of the journal available on that journal's website. When your manuscript arrives at the journal the editor of the day will check if it meets the journal's format requirements. If your manuscript does not satisfy the journal's formatting requirements it is likely to be rejected without further review.

After the format check the editor of the day will read the abstract and decide if your manuscript content is interesting for that journal's readership. If the manuscript does not match the interests of the journal's readership it will be rejected. If your manuscript is considered interesting it will go to the journal's weekly review.

All correctly formatted interesting manuscripts received will be circulated to the editorial committee to read and in the weekly review the editorial committee will discuss each manuscript and decide which to send to external reviewers. If a manuscript is not selected for external review it will be rejected.

Manuscripts are normally sent to 2 to 3 external reviewers for comment. These reviewers are chosen as experts in the areas of interest covered by the journal. Each reviewer will have 2-3 weeks to read and prepare comments and return to the editorial committee. The editorial committee will then decide either to accept your manuscript, request you to revise according to reviewer's comments or reject. In case of request to revise or reject, the external reviewers' comments will normally be provided to you. If your paper is accepted you may be asked if you want it to be open access which may incur a fee. Open access papers are much more likely to receive citations, because they are available to a wider readership.

When you receive a request to revise your manuscript from a journal, this normally means that they have an intention to publish your manuscript, if it can be brought up to the journal's standard. The journal will normally give you a deadline to complete your revision of your manuscript. You will be provided with the comments from the reviewers to help you in your manuscript revision. You should revise your manuscript according to the reviewers' comments or explain why you do not want to revise.

Often if reviewers see non-native speakers names in the authorship, they automatically request an English check, so the time for this should allowed for in your work plan to revise and resubmit by the deadline. If your manuscript is revised, you should also allow time to circulate and approve the revised manuscript among your author team.

Normally in addition to returning your revised manuscript the journal will require you to respond to the reviewers' comments describing how you have satisfied each comment, or explain why you do not want to revise that point. You may request an extension to a deadline with an explanation, but a journal may or may not agree to extend a deadline.

After you return your revised manuscript to the journal the most likely result will be acceptance, although it is possible that they may request further revision of some point, which they feel has not been fully satisfied. The journal will upon acceptance, usually inform you of the expected publication date and ask if you want to make your manuscript open access. Normally only abstracts are publically available and full manuscripts available only to journal subscribers or on a fee basis. If your full manuscript is only available to journal subscribers then it will receive less citations. To increase the number of citations you make your manuscript publically available by making it open access. For open access most journals ask you to pay a fee.

## **Notes**

- 1) Your manuscript must be approved by your adviser team before submitting to a journal for publication.
- 2) All contact with a journal for publication of your manuscript should be through the corresponding author.
- 3) You should aim for publication of your manuscript after successful defense of your thesis topic and registration of your thesis topic.
- 4) You should ensure that the journal to which you submit your manuscript is acceptable for part of your postgraduate training.
- 5) Some journals will make a charge if there is colour on a page of your manuscript, because this increases the printing cost of the print copies of the journal. Therefore, you may wish to avoid use of colours.