

2000

Journal publications: writing tips & authorship guidelines

Sallie Newell
Southern Cross University

Publication details

Newell, S 2000, *Journal publications: writing tips & authorship guidelines*, report prepared for Northern Rivers Institute of Health Research, Lismore.

ePublications@SCU is an electronic repository administered by Southern Cross University Library. Its goal is to capture and preserve the intellectual output of Southern Cross University authors and researchers, and to increase visibility and impact through open access to researchers around the world. For further information please contact epubs@scu.edu.au.

Journal Publications: Writing Tips & Authorship Guidelines

Sallie Newell, Health Promotion Unit, NRAHS

PART 1: WRITING TIPS

Step 1: Deciding Where to Send your Paper

Before you start to write your paper, you need to decide which journal you're writing it for so that you can:

- Tailor your writing (especially introduction and discussion sections) to the target audience – eg: health promotion workers, education sector, policy makers, etc.
- Ensure your paper conforms to the journal's formatting requirements (eg: word length, margins, font size, layout, number of tables, etc) from the very beginning – saving you a lot of time down the track.

Deciding on a journal for your paper can be a bit tricky, especially if you haven't written many yet. As a general rule, papers describing the results of intervention studies or systematic reviews are more likely to be accepted by international journals than those reporting only descriptive or baseline data, unless it is the first in its field. You can submit your paper to only one journal at a time and they can take 6 months or more to review it – so, making the right decision in the first place can save a lot of time. The main questions to ask yourself are:

- What type of people do I want to get this message out to?
- Is the message relevant for an international audience?

Then it all comes down to a fine balance between getting your paper in as good a journal as possible (aimed at the relevant target audience) while minimising time-wasting, disheartening rejections.

The easiest way to decide is to send an outline of your planned paper to a wide range of journals for consideration – with a cover letter acknowledging that you realise the full paper will still need to undergo the full peer-review process even if they indicate an interest. This outline doesn't need to follow any formal guidelines and can be longer than a standard journal abstract (try to stick to a one page maximum though). If you email or fax your outline, you should get replies from most journals within a couple of weeks (often less) – not all will reply but these are probably sending you a message too. By sending your outline to a broad range of journals (including some you'd only dream of publishing in) and seeing their responses, you can pick the best journal (see the Citation Impact Factors folder in the Evaluation Resources filing cabinet) with a positive response – and usually avoid rejections altogether! Remember to consult with your co-authors and get everyone's agreement on the outline **before sending it off** to journals.

Step 2: Getting Started

OK, so now you know which journal you're writing for but there are still a few other useful things to do before you start writing:

- Remind yourself that paper writing is a technical skill – it doesn't signify anything special about your ability or understanding of the research.
- Remind yourself that paper writing is an exercise in communication – so make it simple, easy to understand and offer a clear message. Think about what your chosen journal's average reader **needs to know** rather than what you could tell him or her. Many papers fail because they don't make clear what they're trying to say – this is especially the case for papers from complex projects. You need to decide on a basic one sentence message for each paper and ensure only those parts relevant to that message are included in that paper.
- Read the journal's "Instructions to Authors" thoroughly, making a rough note of all the key points (eg: maximum word length and number of tables/figures; margin, font and other formatting restrictions; specific information to be included in the title page; the required order of the text sections of the paper; any special referencing instructions; any specific statements to be included in the cover letter; etc).
- If you haven't published in a given journal before, it can be helpful to look over some articles from recent volumes to get a feel for its preferred layout, writing style and sections to emphasise.
- Set up your paper's basic Word file to fit the basic formatting requirements you noted from the journal's "Instructions to Authors" – ie: margins, font, text spacing, etc. As another time-saving device, it's also wise to set up the heading levels for your paper at this stage (eg: centred, bold & underlined for Level 1; left-aligned, bold & underlined for Level 2; left-aligned, bold & italicised for Level 3; etc) – then you need only apply them as you write, rather than trying to remember how you did them earlier in the paper. You may also like to set up the authorship information coversheet (see HPU's Authorship Guidelines document) and the title page at this stage.

Step 3: Working out What the Paper is About

Before you start writing anything, think through the following questions:

- Why did you do the study or literature review?
- Why is it new?
- What did you find that was interesting?
- What is the take home message of the paper?

As your first writing step, write down the aims of the study or review (or the subgroup of them you plan to write about in this paper), making them as explicit and as detailed as possible. Next, draw up some results tables to match these aims (again, be as detailed as possible) and put your data into the tables. Then, jot down some key bullet points that will form the thrust of your introduction & discussion sections – keep it brief at this point and don't spend too much time on it.

Now is a good time to circulate and discuss this paper outline with your co-authors – to save time, it's best not to write anything more until you've done this and gotten agreement about the paper's direction.

Step 4: Writing

The old-fashioned KISS (keep it simple, stupid) principle applies to all forms of writing – don't be tempted to use overly complex language just because you're writing for a scientific journal. Keep the following general tips in mind whenever you're writing:

- If you can think of a shorter and simpler word for, or way of saying, something, use it. With many journals having quite restrictive maximum word lengths, this allows you to say more and allows your readers to understand more. Excessive use of complex, jargonistic words can also be interpreted as the author having insufficient understanding of something to explain it more simply.
- Keep sentences and paragraphs as simple as possible – this improves the flow and ease of reading the paper.
- Use plenty of sub-headings throughout your paper – as well as helping you to structure your paper, this also allows your readers to easily identify areas of particular interest.
- Be consistent – in everything but especially in your heading styles, table layouts, terminology, referencing and ordering of sub-sections within the main sections of the paper.
- Most journals now accept papers written in the active voice – ie: “We found that ...” rather than “This study found that ...”. Again, this style minimises the paper's word count and maximises ease of understanding, as well as tending to come more naturally to most writers. Even if you take the trouble to write in the passive voice, many journals will copyedit it back to the active voice.
- Take care with your spelling, punctuation and grammar – or get your co-authors to check it thoroughly if this isn't your strong point. Lots of basic grammatical errors can be interpreted as authors lacking attention to detail or respect for the reviewers' time and can, therefore, put reviewers offside and make them more critical of the content of your paper than they would otherwise have been.
- Avoid using any but the most commonly-accepted abbreviations – readers who have to keep thinking or referring back to see what you're talking about can soon lose interest in the paper altogether.
- Always keep your audience in mind – how you write up any study, including which information you emphasise, will vary depending on who you are writing it for.

One of the most common mistakes when writing papers (or reports) is mixing types of information across the key sections. Each type of information has a specific place in any document:

- **Introduction** – information about why you did what you did.
- **Methods** – information about what you did & how you did it.
- **Results** – information about what you found.
- **Discussion** – information about what your findings mean and what implications they have – for practice and further research.

People vary about which section of the paper they like to begin with but it's often easiest to start with the **METHODS SECTION**. This should contain information about the sample, the setting, the design, the procedures, the measures, the analyses and the ethics approval processes – in such a way as to allow the reader to replicate the study. You should make sure that the headings you use in the methods section line up with those you plan to use in the results section. Don't include anything in the measures that you're not going to talk about in the results. Find a model of somebody who has published a paper that is similar in design to yours and model what you do on this paper. Take care to simply state what you did in this section – don't be tempted to start including what you found (even your response rates) – save this information for the results section.

Next write the **RESULTS SECTION**. Make sure you consult with your Evaluation Officer while you are writing this section of the paper – or you may even be able to persuade them to write it. The structure of the results section should match both the aims and the methods section. Each aim should have its own separate section in the results and these should be presented in the same order as the aims were raised. The first part of any results section should always be a description of the sample achieved, including response rates and, where appropriate, a comparison of the sample's representativeness of the population targeted. Take care to simply state the results you found in this section – don't be tempted to get into discussion about their strengths and weaknesses yet – save this for the discussion section.

Remember that each table should make sense on its own (use footnotes as necessary to achieve this) and should be referred to in the text. It is also important that the corresponding text highlights the key results from the table and doesn't just restate all the details – the table should provide that and the text should describe the message you wish the reader to get from the table. When preparing tables, ensure ALL non-standard abbreviations are explained in footnotes and be consistent about the way data are presented within & across tables – eg: use the same number of decimal places for all percentages. You should also consider whether some of your results may be better presented in a graph than in a table – but never use 3D graphs as they can be confusing to interpret.

The results should be structured in the same way as the methods – eg: if you said you were measuring five different sorts of behaviour in the methods, then make sure the results are organised to reflect the five different sorts of measures, in the order they were described in the methods section. When you think you've finished, return to your aims to doublecheck that what you've written in the results matches up. Remember to refer back to your key notes from the journal's "Instructions to Authors" for any special instructions about formatting any results tables. Most journals request that tables and figures not be incorporated into the main body of the paper at this stage – rather, they prefer each table/figure to be produced on a separate page at the end of the paper, with an indication of where you would like each placed in the main body of the text (ie: "INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE").

Next comes the **INTRODUCTION SECTION** – it's useful to think of the introduction as guiding the paper's readers through a series of logical questions to the conclusion that your study was important, necessary and likely to contribute to knowledge in the area. Some key things to remember are:

- Structure the introduction so it gradually cones down from a general beginning to the very specific question you're concerned with:
 - Begin with a paragraph indicating why the health issue is important.
 - Explain why your particular question is of interest and what practical benefit will be gained from answering it.
 - Review any studies done previously in the area and indicate why your study is new or an improvement on previous work.
 - Conclude with a statement clearly but succinctly summarising your study's aims.
- Make sure it is appropriate for the audience you're addressing – the same paper may well need quite different introductions depending on who it's aimed at (eg: health promotion workers, education sector, policy makers, etc).
- Ask yourself which points are obvious for this audience and which need stressing and write accordingly.

Next write the **DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION SECTIONS**. The discussion will work best if you use a format like the following:

- Briefly summarise the most important findings of your research – don't restate all your results.
- Then discuss any methodological issues (strengths and weaknesses) of your research. It is important to raise any issues that may be considered limitations (whether you consider them to be so or not) and to discuss how they may have impacted on your results, or their interpretation, and any steps you took to minimise their impact. Don't be tempted to hope that you can get away with hiding or not mentioning a particular problem – it inevitably leads reviewers who do notice it to think that either you missed it or considered it unimportant or that you thought they wouldn't be clever enough to pick it up – both of which can create a very negative impression in the reviewer's mind. It is also important to highlight any strengths of your research – eg: first or largest study of the issue, first Australian data, etc.
- Next discuss how your results relate to what others have found in the previous research discussed in your introduction – do this for each of your study's aims in the order they were presented in the methods and results sections. Bear in mind that you shouldn't introduce any new references in this section of your paper – any studies you wish to compare your results to should be discussed in your introduction. Pay particular attention to ways in which your results differ from the previous research – speculating about potential reasons for any such differences.
- Finally, discuss the implications of your results – what recommendations (eg: changes to clinical, methodological or research practices) do they suggest? What further research would be useful in the area and how could it improve on your methodology?

The discussion should lead the reader naturally to the conclusion of your paper – the one sentence take-home message that you started writing with. Ensure that you bear your study's limitations in mind when formulating the conclusions – nothing annoys reviewers more than over-enthusiastic conclusions which are not supported by the data presented.

Next, write the **ABSTRACT SECTION** – checking back to your key notes from the journal’s “Instructions to Authors” for any specific instructions regarding formatting and length. Most journals now require “structured” abstracts, prompting you to include information about your study’s background, objectives, design, sample, setting, intervention, main outcome measures, results and conclusions. Even when a structured abstract isn’t required, it is useful to mentally work through these sorts of headings to ensure the relevant bits of each section of your paper are included. Remember the abstract is the first, and often only, impression readers get of your paper – so you want to ensure you get your message across clearly.

Finally, write the **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS SECTION** – this is discussed in more detail in the HPU’s “Authorship Guidelines” document but should acknowledge individuals and organisations (including funding bodies) that have helped with the research but did not warrant authorship.

Step 5: Seeking Your Co-authors’ Comments

Now you should have a full draft ready for circulation to your co-authors – here are some tips to ensure you get the most from them:

- Make sure you have completed an authorship information coversheet (see HPU’s Authorship Guidelines document) indicating:
 - The journal you’re submitting the paper to – so your co-authors can comment on whether the way the paper is written seems appropriate for the target audience.
 - Who the authors are and the intended order – this should already have been agreed among yourselves but it is best to restate it with each circulation of the paper.
 - The stage of the paper’s preparation – ie: outline, first draft, final draft, etc.
 - The types of comments you want – with first drafts, you should encourage your co-authors to be as critical as possible as it’s better that one of them picks up a problem than that the paper is rejected down the track. You should also indicate if you’d like a particular co-author to pay special attention to certain areas of the paper or to insert additional information relevant to their expertise.
 - When you want the comments returned by – 2 weeks is a standard turnaround time for reviewing a paper.
- Remember to use at least 1½ spacing throughout the body of the paper - so your co-authors have room to make comments.

Step 6: Incorporating Your Co-authors' Comments

For maximum time-efficiency, it's best to wait until **ALL** co-authors' comments are in before thinking about how to incorporate them. When they are all in, sit down with a clean printout of the paper and work through page by page, checking all the reviewers' comments for that page simultaneously – and marking any changes you think should be made on the clean printout. As the primary author, it's up to you to review each co-author's comments and decide whether to incorporate them (ie: if you agree they will add to the paper or help clarify a section) or whether to stick with your original version (eg: if you feel the co-author has misunderstood or that you already have the information in the paper). In cases where the latter applies, it is worth reviewing how the information is presented – if one of your co-authors, who are familiar with the project, missed it, reviewers may well too.

It's worth considering what to do when you get conflicting comments from your co-authors – eg: one co-author is telling you to make a section longer, another to make it shorter and a third to cut it out entirely. This is an indication that this section of the paper has some problems and your co-authors are suggesting different, and perhaps equally effective, ways of modifying them. You should take all their comments on board and then decide yourself how best to fix that section.

When you've worked through all co-authors' comments on the entire paper, use the now written-on clean printout to produce the revised version and recirculate it to your co-authors for further review. At this stage, it's a good idea to use the authorship information coversheet to highlight the main changes made (ie: the sections needing most attention in re-reviewing the paper) and indicate reasons for any major suggested changes you haven't made – this can save time and, possibly, frustration on everyone's part.

Step 7: Tidying Up

When you've achieved a final version acceptable to all co-authors, there are often still quite a lot of little things that need to be done to prepare the paper for submission:

- Check back to your key notes from the journal's "Instructions to Authors" and complete any outstanding formatting tasks.
- Check that your references are formatted as requested (ie: Harvard or Vancouver style) – for ease, all references should be incorporated using the Endnote system (see the Endnote Instructions for how to do this), which allows you to apply a reference style to match the journal you're submitting the paper to.
- If the journal has a "Submission Checklist", make sure to work through it thoroughly – some journals will return papers without review if everything is not in accordance with their instructions.
- Make sure you provide the right number of disk and/or hard copies of the paper.
- Make sure your cover letter is formatted as required by the journal, including any specifically-requested statements. Always include a last sentence saying why you think this paper will be relevant and interesting to the journal's audience.

And at last, it should be ready to go – CONGRATULATIONS!!!! Remember to circulate the final version to all your co-authors so they always have the latest version of the paper.

Step 8: Responding to Reviewers' Comments

Some time later (often many months), you'll receive a response from the journal – this can take various forms, each of which carries a message and different implications for getting the paper published:

- ***Straight rejection without any reviewers' comments*** – usually indicates that the paper was not really appropriate for that journal's audience (ie: poor journal selection) and may not have even been sent out to reviewers. Alternatively, it could indicate that the abstract and introduction were not suitably tailored to convince the editor of its relevance to the journal's audience. As the primary author, you should decide which you think is more likely – either way, exactly the same paper may well be accepted by another journal. If it's a tailoring issue, you would need to review the paper's abstract and introduction before resubmitting to a similar journal.
- ***Straight rejection with reviewers' comments*** – indicates that the paper was considered appropriate for the journal's audience and, therefore, sent out to reviewers. However, something about either the paper or the reviewers' comments has led the editor to reject it – the reasons should usually be clear from the reviewers' and/or the editor's comments. Again, you'll need to decide why you think the paper was rejected and modify it, and/or your journal selection, accordingly.
- ***Noncommittal invitation to revise the paper*** in accordance with the reviewers' comments – usually indicates that the journal is interested in the paper but is concerned by something in the reviewers' comments. In this case, you need to work through the reviewers' comments and decide, for each comment, whether to modify that part of your paper or whether to counter-argue why you have not. Either way, you need to prepare a detailed response letter (see below for extra advice on this), specifically restating and indicating your response to / how you have addressed each comment from each reviewer. If you've never prepared a response to a journal before, ask someone who has for a look at some of their responses to get a feel for it.
- ***Tentative acceptance*** if reviewers' comments are addressed – usually indicates that the journal wants to publish the paper but wants to see how you respond to the reviewers' comments. Again, you need to work through the reviewers' comments and decide, for each comment, whether to modify that part of your paper or whether to counter-argue why you have not. Either way, you need to prepare a detailed response letter, specifically restating and indicating your response to / how you have addressed each comment from each reviewer.
- ***Outright acceptance*** with no changes requested – is not very common and indicates you should go out and buy a lottery ticket or have a big celebration with your co-authors!!!!

Some additional tips for preparing journal response letters are:

- No matter how rude the reviewer's comment, always stay polite in responding to it.
- Use bullet points or number the comments from each reviewer.
- Don't be afraid to point out if a reviewer has misinterpreted or missed something – they're only human too.
- Don't be afraid to ask for more information about comments you don't understand – respond to what you think the comment means but express your confusion.
- When considering how to respond to any individual reviewer's comment on a given issue, also consider what the other reviewers said about that issue – eg: if Reviewer A says your introduction is too long but the other three praise its thoroughness, pointing this out can form the basis of your response to Reviewer A's comment.

Of course always keep your co-authors up-to-date with any correspondence from journals and to circulate and get agreement on any revisions and responses to reviewers' comments before replying to the journal.

PART 2: AUTHORSHIP GUIDELINES

Why Do We Need Guidelines for Authorship?

- Presenting information from our health promotion activities and projects in reports, peer-reviewed journals and at conferences are important ways of disseminating our results to our peers, as well as to the broader community.
- Authorship on such publications (reports, papers or conference presentations) can be seen as a right and a reward for staff members involved in projects but also carries with it a number of obligations. This document aims to outline these rights and obligations, as well as providing a framework for discussions, decisions and dispute resolution regarding authorship on any particular publication.
- Many journals and conferences now require submitting authors to include specific statements confirming that internationally-agreed guidelines^{1,2} have been followed in determining authorship, as well as in conducting the project. The criteria for authorship outlined below will ensure we meet these guidelines.

1 "Joint NHMRC / Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee Statements and Guidelines on Research Practice" (<http://www.nhmrc.health.gov.au/research/nhmrcavc.html>).

2 International Committee of Medical Journal Editors' "Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals" (<http://www.thelancet.com/newlancet/any/author/body.uniform1.html>).

When Should Discussions about Authorship Happen?

- To ensure maximum benefits and minimum grievances, discussions about authorship, using these guidelines, should begin at an early stage in a project and certainly as soon as any publication of information, results or materials from the project is being considered and prior to any publications (even abstracts) being submitted.
- Any decisions about authorship should be reviewed whenever there are staff or task allocation changes among the project team.
- All authorship discussions should involve all project team members, by telephone or email where face-to-face discussions are not feasible.

Criteria for Authorship and Acknowledgment

- Each author on a publication (be it an abstract or a full report, journal article or conference paper) should meet **ALL FIVE** of the following criteria:
 - 1) They made a substantial contribution to the project's (or publication's) conception and design **OR** to the analyses and interpretation of data;
 - 2) They drafted the publication **OR** critically reviewed &/or revised its intellectual content;
 - 3) They approve the final version of the publication to be submitted;
 - 4) They agree to take responsibility for (first author) **OR** to critically review (co-authors) any requested revisions to the publication in a timely fashion;
 - 5) They can take public responsibility for and publicly defend the contents of the publication.
- No-one eligible for authorship, as defined above, should be excluded, without their written permission.
- As many journals discourage having large numbers of authors, a group name may need to be used where more than six authors are to be included. As this makes it difficult for individual authors' contributions to be indicated in their CVs, project teams should try to avoid this situation wherever possible.
- People eligible for authorship may decline but they may not withdraw or withhold any information provided to, collected or analysed for the project.
- General supervision of the group (without adequate project involvement) or participation solely in the acquisition of funding or the collection of data **does not** justify authorship.
- All authors should ensure that others who have contributed to the project but do not warrant authorship against the above criteria (eg: research assistants, statisticians, clinicians, etc – although each of these may be authors if they had adequate involvement) are recognised, via acknowledgment in the publication.

Order of Authorship on Publications

Order of authorship on any publication should be a joint decision of all authors, based on these guidelines:

- Usually, the first author would be the person who has contributed the most work to that publication – ie: written all or most of it. The remaining co-authors should be listed in order of their contributions relevant to the content of that publication – eg: where a publication focuses on the implementation of an intervention (as opposed to the evaluation of its effectiveness), those most involved in developing the intervention would usually feature higher in the author list than those most involved in its evaluation.
- Where a project is likely to result in a number of publications, the order of authorship will usually vary between the publications, depending on each's focus. Wherever possible, all project team members should have the opportunity to act as first author on at least one publication.
- For publications forming all or part of a postgraduate thesis, the student would usually be the first author and write most or all of the publication. However, where a student doesn't want to produce publications from their thesis, supervisors or other project team members may take on the writing and first authorship.

Responsibilities of First Authors

As well as, usually, writing it, the first author of any publication also has a number of other responsibilities:

- Ensuring all agreements regarding authorship are documented – in meeting minutes &/or by using the attached coversheet on all drafts of all journal articles.
- Ensuring any publication is prepared in accordance with any relevant guidelines (eg: a journal's "Instructions to Authors", many of which can be accessed via CIAP).
- Ensuring all potential authors get the opportunity to honour their contribution – ie: sending them drafts for comment, with reasonable timeframes for response (2 weeks is usually considered reasonable although shorter periods may be negotiated for abstracts & outlines or where only minor edits have been made).
- Reviewing and incorporating, where appropriate, all co-authors' comments on each draft of the publication and recirculating it until all authors are satisfied with the final version.
- Ensuring all abstracts and final versions of manuscripts are circulated to the DPH Director before being sent off to journals and/or conference committees.
- Ensuring funding bodies, those providing technical assistance and any other relevant organisations' and individuals' contributions are recognised, via acknowledgments in the publication.
- Acting as the first point of contact for any correspondence or enquiries about the publication and ensuring co-authors are adequately informed or consulted about them, where appropriate.
- In the case of journal articles, coordinating any revisions/responses to reviewers that are required prior to publication – again, all drafts of any revisions/responses should be circulated to all co-authors with their comments reviewed and incorporated until all authors are satisfied with the final version.

It's also important to realise that getting a paper published takes a long time from when you submit it (often 6 – 12 months or even more!) and, as first author, you'll need to spend time responding to reviewers' comments, editing, proofreading & liaising with journal staff throughout this time. Given the time delays, these tasks may be needed after you have moved on from your current position and may need to be completed in your own time – an issue to consider when planning papers.

How Will Authorship Disputes Be Resolved?

- When authorship disagreements arise, project team members should try to resolve them themselves.
- When an agreeable solution cannot be reached, all potential authors should meet together with the Manager of the Health Promotion Unit to attempt to resolve the dispute.
- If this results in no agreement **OR** if the Manager of the HPU is among the potential authors, the team should meet together with the Director of the Division of Population Health to resolve the dispute.