

Writing in Medical Profession

(One reads for himself and writes for others – writing maketh an exact man)

SAFDAR SHAH, SUHAIB UMAR BHATTI, SALOME SUHAIB

Medical writing may be categorized into a number of varieties. Each one of them is written with a specific purpose. Over the period of years their formats have been fairly well standardized. Following are the main varieties of medical write-ups.

1. History taking
2. A letter to editor
3. A case report
4. An original article
5. A review article
6. A historical review
7. An editorial
8. A leading article
9. A biographic note
10. A conference report
11. A review of a book
12. A monograph
13. Synopsis of thesis
14. A dissertation
15. A thesis
16. A book

Before we take up each for discussion I would like to explain few general points as follow:

1. One should have a clear message in one's mind which he/she wanted to convey to a reader.
2. Arrange the ideas in a chorological manner which are arranged in logical way to avoid repetition.
3. One should start up a new paragraph for each new idea.
4. Brevity is the hallmark of good presentation so avoiding unnecessary details makes an article crisp & keeps the attention focused.
5. One should choose the title very carefully it will be indexed by agencies and libraries and defines the limits of field in which you are going to write down. It should be informative, specific, and precise and state exactly what you mean.
6. facts of primary importance should be separated from facts of secondary importance, the discussion and conclusions should be restricted to the facts of primary importance and only passing reference should be made to the facts of secondary importance

7. Writing, revising and re-writing can overcome a number of difficulties and correct avoidable mistakes.
8. The conclusions and recommendations should be in conformity with the results

HISTORY TAKING

This is the opening gate for the new medical doctor for medical writing. Every medical student should seize this opportunity to gain expertise in systematically recording symptoms & signs of a given patient. Good clerking is not only essential for record purpose but also lays the foundation of further medical write-up in later life.

A LETTER TO EDITOR

A letter to the editor is usually written for the following reason.

1. To comment on an article which appeared in the journal, supporting or disagreeing with the author.
 2. To approach a subject or a controversial issue to initiate discussion or taking part in an ongoing debate.
 3. To publish a preliminary work of importance that may not yet warrant a full article.
- A letter to editor should comprise between 300-500 words. The writer should provide supporting evidence for this view and avoid libelous statements.

Format

- a. Start with "Sir". A covering letter is not needed unless you feel strongly that your personal reason for writing should be made known but not published.
- b. Introduction of one sentence explaining reason for writing if it refers to an already published article, only its name should be cited and full reference given at the end.
- c. Main message should be clear and presented with simplicity. It should be explained in three to five sentences to convince others.
- d. One to two references necessary to support your arguments, should be cited and recorded in full at the end.
- e. Conclusion should be given in the last sentence

Department of Urology & General Surgery, Mayo Hospital, Lahore
Correspondence to Dr. Safdar Shah, Assistant Professor Urology,
E. Mail Abeer15@msn.com

A CASE REPORT

It is usually easy to start medical writings by a Case Report of an unusual finding or a rare disease. It is in essence a record of patients clinical notes with emphasis on unusual or rare aspect of the disease supplemented with one or two appropriate photographs or illustrations.

A case report should comprise of 250-500 words. Lengthy case reports contain less relevant material. One or two witty statements may make it more pleasant. But should not point towards the patient or injure someone's sentiments.

FORMAT

A case report may be written in the sequence of history, examination, investigations, treatment and subsequent outcome. The format may be relaxed in favour of brevity and for want of emphasis of salient aspects. The introductions should be brief and any reference held for discussion. Discussion may occupy about half of the article.

A case report should not be taken lightly – some amount of re-writing and revision is required as in any lengthy paper.

AN ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Writing an original article is the most frequent of all medical writings which a young doctor is called upon to do. It is written after conducting an original study or collecting data retrospectively. It may be in the form of drug trial, a trial of an operative technique, an evaluation of a new investigation of any other aspect of a problem. An original article requires a great deal of preparation, a worthwhile material to report and knowledge of the mechanics of writing; it should conform to a basic structure of format. A conventional format is as under.

- a. **Introduction** – Why? State the problem and reasons for conducting the study.
- b. **Material** – Who? What? Experimental models, patients, criteria for selection and exclusion.
- c. **Method** – How? Experimental technique, study design, methods of assessment and tabulation.
- d. **Results** – What inferred?
- e. **Discussion** – What do the results mean and why?
- f. **Conclusion** – What gained, confirms and old fact, confirms an old/new hypothesis, new piece of information added to existing literature.
- g. **Summary** – Abstracted factual information. (This is the most read part of an article, hence demands extra care)

- h. **Illustration** – Hand sketch, original photographs (permission from the patient if identifiable), pie, diagram, graphs. (3-5 numbers is enough)
- i. **Tables** – Preferably with percentages, 3-5 number is enough,
- j. **References** – Use Vancouver style. It should contain author, article, journal, year of publication, volume, pages.
- k. **Acknowledgements** – Thanks for all those who provided technical help & funds.
- l. **Keyword** – About 2-4 essential words which will be indexed.

The emphasis in an article should be on "Originality" it should not be made a review article by giving all the available literature on the subject. The discussion should proceed sequentially, quoting references for and against the part under discussion and explaining reasons for the disparity. The conclusions should be in conformity with the results of study.

REVIEW ARTICLE

A review article is collection of facts about a particular discovery or any special aspect of it. It should mostly be written by a senior person who has developed special interest in a particular disease. The author should not present his personal views in a review article and present only the established facts, quotes references as and when required.

There is no special sequence or format for a review article although a chronological order gives a clear picture of various developments about the disease. A review article may be written under different heads depending upon the title. A review article is usually written after preparing a talk or a lecture for a scientific conference. A formal conclusion is not necessary. The article may finish at the present day state of knowledge or by giving future prospects of the disease.

HISTORICAL REVIEW

A historical review is a collection of facts about the ancient and remote past of a particular disease. Its style is the same as a review article. A chronological order is mandatory. Each fact must be supported by references and personal opinions should not be allowed to intrude.

AN EDITORIAL

An editorial is usually written by the editor himself, a member of editorial board or an expert on the subject. It represents an overall view of

the problem. There are no exact limits of the length but usually it should cover about one to three pages of the journal, depending on the subject chosen. To compose a good editorial requires more than good literary style and practice on writing short essays, expert knowledge, a sense of history and impartiality are essential. It should present a problem, discuss various modalities of management and select the solution. Which appears the best and most logical. It may raise controversy among its readers and stimulate further research. It should through light into possible future developments in the subject.

A LEADING ARTICLE

A leading article is a prestigious article written by an authority on a subject, it is essentially a review article with emphasis on recent developments and personal experiences of the author. A fore thought into the future development is also incorporated into it. A leading article combines qualities of a high degree knowledge and extreme proficiency in medical writing. The author is at liberty to present results from his personal series as well. The number of references quoted is usually large.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

It is a biography of a scholarly person in recognition of his services rendered to the profession. It is equally applicable to other disciplines of life and not restricted to medical profession. The author should present analytical view of the achievement of the person and should refrain from undue praise, Personal likes and dislikes and non related family issues. In the course of time these biographical notes become part of history hence authenticity of the statements should be above board.

CONFERENCE REPORT

Editors of medical journal may opt to report a conference himself or depute a member of the editorial board to do so; it is an art in its own right. It is not a must to report on every thing, neither is everything worth reporting. One should pickup what is new or controversial and concentrates on these. A few introductory words about the speaker are also useful. One should present a detailed summary of conference. The reporting should be impartial and without favor to any particular speaker. Undeserved praise or unfounded criticism decrease the image of

reporting officer in the eyes of reader and the magazine is likely to loose its authenticity.

REVIEW OF A BOOK

Reviewing a book is one of the most demanding jobs in medical writing. In essence it is a vivid reporting in a few words in an authoritative manner. It should be delegated to senior person with scholarly pursuits and emotional stability. He should have extra ordinary control over his emotions to hide his contrary views without appearing conceited. The review should have highest level of accomplishment and interpretative skills and be able to spare time for his job...

A new reviewer can benefit from writing of professional reviewers on literature which appear in any press very frequently. There is no limit to the length of a review, but on an average 200 to 500 words should be enough. A few guidelines will be helpful...

1. Read the book with perception and make an overall mental picture of the work carried out. Does the author do justice to the topic?
2. Has the author been able to add something new the existing literature?
3. Is it easily readable, factual and informative?
4. Is the main message clear?
5. Are the language, illustrations, tables and legends clear and to the point/
6. Is the sequence logical?
7. Comment about printing, binding, quality of paper and price.
8. Finally what is the recommendation of the reviewer for the reader or the author if any?

MONOGRAPH

A monograph is usually written with a commercial proposition. Its technique is same as of a synopsis or an essay. The format of a monograph is much compressed and simplified with a final word of recommendation based on data presented.

SYNOPSIS OF A THESIS

A synopsis of thesis in an introductory write-up submitted for approval of a dissertation or a thesis and is not written for publication. It should be framed according to the following format.

1. **Introduction** – Two or three sentences to introduce the subject.
2. **Significance** – Which should explain the reason for choosing the topic, the main reasons may be
 - a. A common ailment
 - b. Rare but interesting problem

- c. Inadequately studied aspect of a disease
 - d. An innovation
3. **Method of working** – Which should explain criteria for selection and exclusion, actual execution of the technique, method of assessment, controls, blind, double blind trial, method of tabulation and calculation, use of computers and duration of follow-ups
4. **Copy of the proformas** – That will be used.

Dissertation, Thesis or a Book

A dissertation or thesis is usually submitted for attainment of higher qualification. It may be published subsequently. A book is the most extensive and exhaustive write-up in medical literature. Details about the higher works are beyond the scope of this article.

Writing is an art and with this brief overview the authors wish their readers to learn and enjoy this art of educating others and one's own self.