Ten Useful Tips for Writing a Successful Manuscript

An important skill for a successful career

FOR BEGINNERS

Everyone Writes Differently

Assuming the science is novel and significant:

– Find your most effective routine.

– Approach applies to report/term paper writing as well.

By Ho-Leung Fung, Ph.D.
1. Pick one or two target journals.

READ THE AUTHOR INSTRUCTIONS.

– Mentor’s recommendations
– Journal scope—Have similar articles been published?
– Impact factor
– Audience
– Reputation for fairness
– Time to decision
2. Begin by organizing your thoughts.

– Identify your talking points.
– Write them down, as and outline, bullet points, or flow chart, etc.
– Review and revise as you proceed.
3. Your writing order is different than that of the finished manuscript.

- Writing order
  - Tentative tables and figures (Based on talking points)
  - Results
  - Conclusions
  - Materials and Methods
  - Introduction
  - Discussion
  - Title
  - Abstract

- Final product
  - Title
  - Abstract
  - Introduction
  - Materials and Methods
  - Results (tables and figures)
  - Discussion
  - Conclusion
4. Use simple, straightforward language, the correct tenses, and mainly passive voice.

– Avoid flowery and self-flattering language.
– One idea per sentence.
– Past tense to describe results.
– Active voice is okay sometimes (e.g., We examined...).
5. Good writing comes from rewriting—at least for 99.9% of us.

- Review your drafts at least several times.
- Make changes in each draft, including structure, flow, and transitions.
6. Don’t plagiarize.

- Definition (from Merriam-Webster): “To steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one’s own; To use (another’s production) without crediting the source.”

- Most manuscripts are now checked for plagiarism with high-tech software.
7. Proofread and revise.

- Do it over and over again. A good manuscript can undergo up to a dozen drafts.
8. Have others proofread your penultimate draft before submission.

– Recruit your colleagues and friends to read your draft.
– Consider ALL suggestions and potential criticisms.
– Even if you disagree, you should revise the manuscript to anticipate these problems.
9. Don’t fight with reviewers or editors.

- Be responsive and polite to their suggestions. After all, your goal is to publish a paper, not to win an argument.
- Find ways to accommodate suggestions.
10. Don’t get discouraged by rejections. Some classic papers have previously been rejected.

– Allow yourself to be emotional: Rant, curse, cry if you must, but only for a day or two.

– After that, be cool and detached.
  • Identify weaknesses.
  • Consider new experiments.
  • Rewrite to remove weaknesses.
Good luck!