A Journal Pertaining To College Students

COLLEGE
STUDENT
JOURNAL

THE COLLEGE STUDENT JOURNAL

BASIC ADVICE FOR MANUSCRIPT PREPARATION
FOR JUNIOR FACULTY MEMBERS
AND GRADUATE STUDENTS

ERNEST W. BREWER
DORA MARMON
JAMA McMAHAN-LANDERS
The University of Tennessee

Although publication of scholarly articles yields numerous rewards, the journey to becoming published can be quite stressful. Preparing a manuscript for scholarly publication requires extensive time and effort. For new and future faculty, the task can be especially daunting. Approaching writing as a process simplifies the task. This article provides some basic advice to guide prospective authors through the three stages of the writing process: pre-writing, writing, and re-writing.

Most college educators are well aware of the benefits of publication. In addition to such extrinsic rewards as merit pay, tenure, and promotion, many authors have cited immense personal satisfaction as an important outcome of their writing (Henson, 1995; McConnell, 1999). Furthermore, the very act of writing is beneficial because it provides a means to organize, refine, and evaluate ideas (Henson). Publication of ideas and research findings promotes the sharing and advancement of knowledge. However, despite these evident advantages, many researchers and prospective authors approach writing with antipathy and fear.

Junior faculty members, new to positions in higher education, often struggle to achieve balance and proficiency in the various roles (e.g., teacher, service provider, researcher) they must perform. Because publication record has been a core criterion for decisions regarding promotion, merit pay, and tenure at most research universities (Papp, 2000; Rodgers & Rodgers, 1999), the pressure to produce high quality written work can be especially intense. The looming possibility of an editor's rejec-
tion adds to this pressure; nearly two-thirds of journal editors surveyed by Henson (2001) reported rejection rates of over 65%. Moreover, the extensive time and effort required to prepare a manuscript for publication can frustrate and dishearten many novice writers. The purpose of this article is to provide some basic advice for new and future faculty members who are struggling to produce publishable manuscripts.

Although the article is meant to serve as a guide to the writing process, it should be noted that it is not a panacea for all writing difficulties. Our aim is to clarify many basic writing elements that we-in our combined 50-plus years of writing and editing experience-have found often interfere with effective written communication. Gaining an understanding of and developing a plan to address these elements can free you from encumbering details, thus giving you more time to focus on conducting high quality research. To do this, we recommend approaching writing as a process. Approaching writing as a process-albeit a reiterative process-simplifies the task. There are three stages in this process: pre-

16

writing, writing, and rewriting. Within each stage, there are multiple steps. A discussion of each stage and the steps that compose it follows.

Pre-Writing Stage

The purpose of the pre-writing stage is to help you organize your ideas before beginning to write. Effort expended at this stage pays off later in the process.

Identify the topic. Identifying a topic can be the most difficult step in the writing process (Gay & Airasian, 2000). When choosing a topic, it is important to remember that the writing process can be long and intense. Therefore, it is vital to choose a topic that is interesting to the writer. The topic also should contribute something substantial to its field. Possible sources for topics include theories found in literature, extensions or replications of previous research studies, and personal experiences or observations. In addition, your dissertation could serve as a starting point.

Another source for topics is other professionals in the field. Ask a senior professor or colleague. In addition to offering suggestions, an experienced peer might be willing to co-author an article. It is advisable to co-author an article with someone who has a proven track record for publication. Also, inquire of editors about forthcoming special themed issues of journals. Henson (1995) noted that editors reported receiving fewer submissions for themed issues. Thus, you could improve your chances for acceptance by submitting an article when there is less competition.

Envision the audience. Some published authors have considered the most impor-

tant principle for effective writing to be audience awareness (DeVillez, 2001; Maxwell & Cole, 1995). Knowing precisely for whom you are writing is essential. In many cases, this entails gaining knowledge about the population that comprises the readership for the journal or publication to which the manuscript will be submitted. Often the best way to do this is to read extensively in the chosen publication, paying close attention to the topics included and to the level of technical language used. Doing so will enable you to ascertain the degree to which the publication is specialized to a particular population. If a journal is highly specialized, it is appropriate to write about a highly specialized topic. Likewise, a journal geared toward a more general audience would require a more general topic. You also should note how topics are addressed in the chosen publication. If the chosen journal primarily publishes empirical research findings, you would not want to submit a qualitative research report.

It is also important to note whether a journal is refereed or non-refereed. Novice writers should consider submitting articles to non-refereed journals where standards may be less strict. After gaining skills and confidence, it is recommended that you submit articles to refereed, top-tier journals in your field.

It does not matter whether the idea for the topic or for the audience comes first. You could have the idea to write an article about a practice you have instituted in your classroom and then decide to address the article to other educators in the same field. Or, you could hear about an upcoming conference for educators in a particular field

and then decide to write an article about a classroom practice for that conference. Either way works; the key is to make sure that topic and audience are complementary. Then, keep both topic and audience in mind as you continue through the writing process.

Articulate the purpose. After deciding upon a topic and an audience, you next must decide for what reason the audience should know about the topic. For most scholarly writers, the purpose often is to disseminate research findings. Other purposes might be to describe the steps in implementing an original learning strategy or to challenge an idea or a practice. Articulating the purpose permits you to identify the type of writing that should be used and also aids in the next step, crafting the thesis statement.

Craft the thesis statement. The thesis statement should "act like mortar, holding together the various bricks of a paper, summarizing the main point...and pointing toward the paper's development" (Leander, 2000, p. 663). Because so much depends on the thesis statement, you should take special care in constructing it. It contains the general topic plus the limiting idea. For example, if the topic is promoting healthy lifestyle choices among college students, the limiting idea might be instructional strategies. The thesis statement should be crafted to suit the purpose of the article, and it should guide the development of the rest of the paper.

Outline the major points. In this step, you identify the main points to be included in the paper. Constructing an outline serves two main purposes. First, it provides you with a clear idea of what is to be

included in the content of the article as well as with a plan for organizing the content. Second, it provides you with the means to assess whether or not the developed idea is consistent with the original intended topic and audience. If it does not, you should either revise the original topic and audience or gather additional information that better addresses the original topic and audience and use that information to revise the outline.

The outline can be as formal or as informal as you wish. It may consist of a format complete with Roman numerals for main ideas, capital letters for ideas under the numerals, and so forth; or, it may be as simple as ideas jotted down on paper and arranged in order of presentation in the paper. The format is a matter of taste. After constructing an outline for the article, you have a guide for gathering information about the topic.

Gather information. The next step in the writing process is to gather information about the chosen topic. Research for an article could include various sources such as books, empirical studies, theoretical articles, and personal interviews. Including research from other writers in an article strengthens it by providing supporting details and by adding credibility.

The intended audience for the article in large part determines how much and what kind of information you gather. Although a topic might be interesting to several different types of audiences, the information desired by each audience might differ. An important distinction to make is whether practitioners or researchers make up the audience. Whereas practitioners might have more interest in practical elements that

they can implement in their classrooms or workplaces, researchers might be more interested in the *why* or *how* of an issue. Thus, for an article aimed at practitioners, you might focus on locating examples or case studies. In an article for researchers, you might focus more on building a theoretical framework.

Writing Stage

Authors write first drafts of articles to get their ideas on paper. At this point, you need pay little attention to technical or grammatical details. In fact, you do not even have to start at the beginning of the article; you can start at the point where you are most comfortable and build from there. The focus is simply on writing. For writers who feel intimidated by putting words on paper, continuing to approach writing as a process can help. Begin with the smallest steps in the process and proceed. Following are some considerations for a writer who is beginning the first draft of an article.

Choose simple, precise words. Numerous authors have stressed the importance of clarity to effective writing (Henson, 1995; Knight & Ingersoll, 1996; McConnell, 1999). Clarity begins with choosing the appropriate word. Many novice writers assume that big words mean big ideas. This is not true. Big words often serve only to obscure meaning. Instead of using a word that could make readers stop and think about the word, choose the word that gets the point across most directly. Instead of writing *modification*, use *change*; instead of writing *endeavor*, use *try*.

Although using simple, direct words vastly improves writing, a word of caution should be noted: You should not choose words that result in loss of meaning. Albert Einstein once said, "Things should be made as simple as possible-but not simpler." Do not sacrifice accuracy for simplicity. Instead, choose words that convey the most precise meaning in the simplest, most direct manner.

Construct solid sentences. After choosing the most direct words, the next step is to use them in well-constructed sentences. A well-constructed sentence is one that clearly communicates an idea. Effective writers do not pack as many words as they can into a sentence; rather, they combine carefully chosen words in a concise, organized manner. Henson (1995) pointed out that the best way to do this is by keeping the subject and the verb in close proximity. In other words, the reader should not have to hunt for the subject of a sentence. It should be up-front, and the verb that indicates what the subject does or what happens to it should be along with it.

Write effective paragraphs. Think of paragraphs as the building blocks of the article. DeVillez (2001) pointed out that each paragraph is a miniature piece of writing. Phrased another way, "Each paragraph should be able to be read and understood in isolation from the rest of the manuscript" (Knight & Ingersoll, 1996, 209). It has a beginning (usually the topic sentence), a middle (supporting ideas presented in a logical order), and an ending (closing statement). Effective paragraphs have unity and coherence. That is to say, each focuses on a specific idea and is clearly and logical-

ly organized.

In addition to recalling the general structure of the paragraph, you also should consider the special importance of some paragraphs. These are the abstract, the introduction, and the summary paragraphs. An abstract is "a brief, comprehensive summary of the contents of the article; it allows readers to survey the contents of an article quickly, and...it enables abstracting and information services to index and retrieve articles" (American Psychological Association, 2001, p. 12). For empirical studies, abstracts report the research problem, hypotheses, population studied, methodology, and findings of the study. Because the abstract summarizes the entire work, it should be written last.

The introductory paragraph introduces the thesis of the article. It also must capture the interest of the audience. Authors often achieve this by relating interesting facts or other background information designed to entice the reader to continue reading. The final paragraph of each major section and of the entire article restates the main ideas, conclusions, or personal opinions of the author. This is also the place to present a plan of action or recommendations for future research.

By carefully arranging words, sentences, and paragraphs, you develop a written manuscript. The next stage in the writing process is re-writing.

Re-Writing Stage

The purpose of the re-writing stage is twofold: revising the structure and concepts and correcting technical errors. Before beginning this stage, you should put the article aside for a few days and then re-read it. Having one or more colleagues critique the article can be helpful as well. This is not the time to be hypersensitive! Consider all recommendations before making final decisions.

Revise structure and concepts. The purpose in revising an article is to improve the clarity and the flow of ideas. At this point you should consider improvements in word choice, need for transitions, and balance of ideas. You might find it necessary to add transitional sentences to improve flow, or you might even move information from one paragraph to another. The key is making sure that the article is easily comprehensible.

Correct technical errors. Technical errors generally fall into two categories: grammatical errors and errors related to editorial style guidelines. Grammatical errors include mistakes in punctuation, word choice, and spelling. A second reader can be helpful in checking for these mistakes. Another indispensable tool for authors and editors is a comprehensive grammar and usage text, such as the *Hodge's Harbrace Handbook* (Hodges, Webb, Miller, & Horner, 2001). Although grammar, punctuation, and usage are treated in publication style manuals, they are explained much more thoroughly in grammar texts and guides.

To aid in correcting technical errors related to editorial style guidelines, you should obtain both the editorial guidelines for the particular journal to which the manuscript will be submitted and the style manual used by the journal's editors. These guidelines provide specific directions for dealing with such issues as how to cite references, when to use numerals and when

to write numbers out in words, how to express measurements, how to format tables and figures, and whether to write in first-person, second-person, or third-person. A multitude of small details must be taken into account to produce a publishable work, and editors truly appreciate writers who are cognizant of addressing these details. Thus, familiarizing yourself with style and editorial guidelines can take you a long way toward producing high quality written work and putting you in an editor's good graces.

After you have revised the structure and concepts and have corrected technical errors, you should again put the manuscript aside for a couple of days before doing your final proofreading. This is your last chance to "tweak" the manuscript to make it acceptable for the journal you are submitting it to for publication. Ask yourself questions like, "Is the tone appropriate for the chosen journal?" You should aim for striking the same degree of formality found in articles published in the journal. Moreover, you should pay close attention to consistency. If you are unsure of how to address any grammatical or technical issue, you should make sure that you have at least been consistent in your treatment of the issue. Also consider such issues relative to consistency as using terms in the same manner throughout the manuscript and using a consistent style for headings. Through careful, thorough proofreading, you can reduce many errors and vastly improve your chances for publication.

Final Thoughts

Ethical principles must guide every aspect of professional writing. Although there are many ethical considerations, Woolever (1999) concisely summarized them into four categories:

1. Do not suppress knowledge or data that does not favor the author's purpose. Although the temptation may be great to hide information or to leave it out altogether, doing so is equivalent to lying.
2. Do not exaggerate favorable data.
3. Give readers a clear understanding of what the information means.
4. Respect copyrighted information. An example of a violation of this principle would be taking other people's writing and incorporating it into your documents without giving credit. (pp. 465-66)

Researchers, practitioners, and theorists contribute much to the bodies of knowledge in their disciplines when they publish their work. We hope this article will encourage its readers to share their findings with others through professional writing, but we cannot promise that all writing efforts will be rewarded with publication. As noted earlier, many journals have high rejection rates. For those writers who receive rejection letters, we offer three simple words of advice: Don't give up! Although one journal may have rejected an article, another may publish it. If a rejection letter comes with recommendations for improving the article, carefully consider these recommendations and make corrections. If a rejection letter urges re-submitting an article after revising it, by all means do so. With perseverance and determination, you can reap rewards from writing.

References

American Psychological Association. (2001). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (5th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

DeVillez, R. (2001). *Writing step by step* (9th ed.). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.

Gay, L. R., &. Airasian, P. (2000). *Educational research: Competencies for analysis and application* (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Henson, K. T. (1995). *The art of writing for publication*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Henson, K. T. (2001). Writing for professional journals: Paradoxes and promises. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 82, 765-768.

Hodges, J. C., Webb, S. S., Miller, R. K., & Horner, W. B. (2001). *Hodges' Harbrace handbook* (14th ed.). New York: Harcourt.

Knight, K. L., & Ingersoll, C. D. (1996). Optimizing scholarly communication: 30 tips for writing clearly. *Journal of Athletic Training*, 31, 209-213.

Leander, K. M. (2000). Laboratories for writing. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 43, 662-668.

Maxwell, S. E., & Cole, A. (1995). Tips for writing (and reading) methodological articles. *Psychological Bulletin*, 118, 193-198.

McConnell, C. R. (1999). From idea to print: Writing for a professional journal. *The Health Care Supervisor*, 17(3), 72-85.

Papp, K. K. (2000). Reflections on academic duties of medical school faculty. *Medical Teacher*, 22, 406-411.

Rodgers, R., & Rodgers, N. (1999). The sacred spark of academic research. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 9, 473-492.

Woolever, K. R. (1999). *Writing for the technical professions*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman.