Lesson 4. General writing tips

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Preparing to write your paper

The best preparation you can do when preparing to write your paper is to:

1. spend a good amount of time mapping out or outlining what your main points are; and
2. identify the journal you want to submit to before you begin writing.

We covered how you can outline your main and subpoints in some detail in the first lesson of this module. If you want to revisit this activity, go back to that lesson and practice outlining your main and subpoints and writing paragraphs and sentences at your own pace.

You can go through this resource in any of these languages: English, French, Spanish or Vietnamese. Use the language drop-down setting near the top left corner (next to 'INASP Moodle') to change the language. Translation from English to the other languages is automatically done by Google Cloud Translation. INASP is not responsible for the quality of the translated content.

Check the journal guidelines for authors

One way to make sure that your paper is not rejected straight away by the journal editor is to **check the journal guidelines for authors very carefully throughout the writing and submission process**.

One of the most common reasons for your paper not being accepted for peer review by a journal is that it has not been written with that particular journal in mind. When you write a paper without a journal in mind, and without checking its guidelines, it will be too generic.

A common myth when writing a generic paper is that generic papers can be easily and quickly edited to fit any journal guidelines. This is not true! If you don't read the author guidelines carefully, you will have to rewrite and restructure:

- the overall focus of your paper from, for example, an original research article to a case study
- your word count for the whole paper, or of any given section of the paper, for example, the abstract
- the types of headings and subheadings you can use
- the format and file size of any tables and figures
- the referencing style

You may also have to provide additional information or documents on:

- copyright waivers and signatures of co-authors
- where the reader can access any datasets or supplementary information
- funding statements
- ethical approval forms

Rewriting a generic article to fit with the journal requirements will therefore take up a lot of your time!

Do it right the first time

"I can tell you that the editor can tell immediately whether or not you've followed their guidelines, and if you haven't, they'll often think, 'Well this person is not serious enough for [our] journal, why bother publishing [it]?' So, do it right the first time."

--Dr Tony Reid, Medical Editor, Médecins Sans Frontières.

[Take a look at this video from the SORT-IT course,](#) featuring Dr Tony Reid. The first 8 minutes cover how to pick a journal, types of articles and the importance of following author guidelines. Dr Reid also talks about writing for clarity (21.30 mins in the video). It's always useful to hear an editor's perspective!

Best practice: know your journal guidelines before you submit!

Top tip: Watch out for poorly worded author guidelines. Sometime crucial information for authors is hidden in a long paragraph or may be vague.

Activity

Take a look at this extract below from the authors guideline from the *Journal of International Development (Wiley)*. Click on the phrases or sentences that contain instructions or useful information (hint: there are a total of 6). When you select an appropriate phrase or sentence, a comment will appear in the box below.

IMPORTANT: All papers will be acknowledged on receipt by email and will receive preliminary editorial review within four weeks. Papers of high interest will be sent out for external review. We aim to notify authors of acceptance, rejection or need for revision within four months of submission. Recently, due to the high volume of submissions and demands on referees, it may not always be possible to meet this target, but we aim to have your manuscript reviewed within six months.

File Types. *Preferred formats for the text and tables of your manuscript are .doc, .docx, .rtf, .ppt, .xls. LaTeX files may be submitted provided that an .eps or .pdf file is provided in addition to the source files. Figures may be provided in .tiff or .eps format.*

Note that all this information about the submission process appears on the journal's website **before** you get to the specific author guidelines. The entire paragraph is about what will happen **after** you have submitted your paper. Although it doesn't tell you about specific author guidelines, it does provide important information about likely timescales. If time is a factor for you, this information will help you decide whether this journal is right for you.

Spot all the instructions

Activity

Here is a further extract from the author guidelines from the *Journal of International Development (Wiley)*. Click on each distinct instruction that you can spot. Sometimes a single sentence may contain more than one instruction! If you click on an instruction, it will get highlighted and an explanation will appear in the box on the right. At any point you can click the reset button below to start over.

Reset

Manuscript Style. The language of the journal is English. All submissions including book reviews must have a title, and have a margin of 3cm all round. Illustrations and tables must be on separate sheets, and not be incorporated into the text.

IMPORTANT. This journal operates a double blind reviewing process whereby the Reviewer is not aware of the Author's identity. In order to facilitate this please follow the instructions below very carefully. Ensure your manuscript text does not contain any direct reference to you or your co-Authors. Upload the main text of your manuscript with the file designation Main Document. The title page should contain just the title and keywords. Upload a secondary title page as a separate document, with the file designation Title Page. The secondary title page should contain the article title and full names and address of all authors, including email, telephone and fax, of the author who is to check the proofs.

Abstract: Supply an abstract of up to approximately 100 words for all articles [except book reviews]. An abstract is a concise summary of the whole paper, not just the conclusions, and is understandable without reference to the rest of the paper. It should contain no citation to other published work. Include up to 8 keywords that describe your paper for indexing purposes.

Include the name(s) of any sponsor(s) of the research contained in the paper, along with grant number(s).

Articles must not exceed 8,000 words. Short Notes or 'Field Reports', which summarize a finding in not more than 1,000 words, are particularly welcome. Review articles are also encouraged, but must not exceed 10,000 words. (All word count limitations include the abstract and references, but exclude tables.)

Spelling should follow that of the Oxford English Dictionary or Webster's Third New International Dictionary.

The author guidelines then go on to list the preferred reference style, the format and dpi for illustrations, and instructions for dealing with proofs.

Now take a look at the guidelines from *Public Health Action*, published by the *International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease*. Notice how different both sets of author guidelines are. Reading and understanding author guidelines for your chosen journal is therefore very important, as they all differ.

Activity

Print out the journal guidelines of your chosen journal and highlight each of the specific actions that you have to do from formatting through to submission. Is there anything about the guidelines that is unclear? If so, make sure you contact the editorial office in good time to ask for any clarifications. Take some time to look through the submission page of your chosen journal, as this often contains additional information that may be not included in the author guidelines, for example, file sizes of diagrams, costs of colour pages, whether you need to upload PDFs or Microsoft Word documents, etc.

Why knowing your journal helps you write effectively

Knowing which journal you want to submit to allows you to read articles published by that journal and absorb the writing style of that particular journal. When you read other articles in your chosen journal, pay careful attention to the language that is used and ask yourself: *Can I write in the same way effectively? Or do I need help with trying to write in the same style?*

Often, continually reading articles from your chosen journal will help you take in and understand that particular writing style, which you can then apply to your own writing.

But remember, only practice will make you better at writing! 🙂

Writing and managing drafts

As authors we put pressure on ourselves to produce the 'perfect' paper on the first attempt. This is impossible, so give yourself a break and stop putting pressure on yourself!

Drafts are an important part of the writing process, as they allow you to get feedback on the sections that you are currently writing.

How many drafts does it take to write a complete paper?

More than 1! But this has to be done efficiently and correctly.

We recommend maintaining a good labelling and filing system for your drafts (as well as for your data). [Stanford University Library](#) has some helpful guidance for managing data, choosing file names and tracking different versions of your paper. You can apply much of their advice to your research project too.

Editing while drafting versus editing after drafting

While it's tempting to edit each sentence straight after you write it, this will only slow you down. We recommend writing each of your main points (using the exercises in the first lesson) and completing each section of your paper **without editing as you go along**, so that you have **a complete draft of your paper before you start editing**.

Editing your paper after you have completed a full draft will help you get a more accurate picture of the structure and flow of your argument. It will also help you identify any linking sentences you need and any main and sub-points that are unclear, absent or repeated.

Finding time to write

Writing sprints

Writing sprints are timed writing sessions, and the time limit ranges from 20 minutes to 1 hour. You may know this as the [Pomodoro Technique](). Many authors find writing sprints useful as sprints allow you to forget about editing as you go along, as you end up concentrating on getting all the information you need onto paper quickly.

Difficult parts

Some sections of your paper will be easier to write than others, so if you get stuck on a particular section or sentence, then leave a gap and move on to something easier.

Finding the motivation to write

Even the most experienced writers, such as fiction authors, struggle with motivating themselves to write. Take a look at this blog from James Clear on the *Daily Routines of 12 Famous Writers*, and you'll notice that the key for motivating many successful writers is to create:
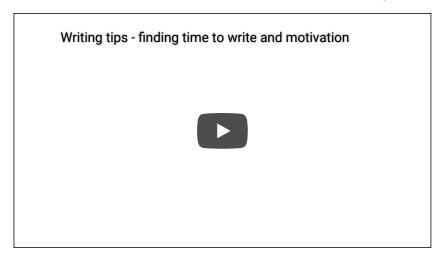
1. an ideal environment for writing; and

2. a healthy routine that works for them.

Video

Take a look at this video of AuthorAID mentors **Kate Maxwell and Petra Boynton** offering their writing and motivation tips:

Writing tips - finding time to write and motivation

▶

What is the ideal writing environment for you?

Maybe you need a quiet space? Maybe you like to work very late at night? Maybe you like music in the background while you write? Maybe you're able to find 30 minutes each morning before work to write? Whatever your routine, you should experiment with writing in different environments, writing at different times of the day, and writing within shorter or longer time limits.

Experiment with different writing environments and time limits. Reflect and jot down what have you learned about your ideal writing environment.