Using Reporting Guidelines to Draft Research Articles: A Step-by-Step Guide

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## The writing process

If you have ever taken a holiday, you will know there is a good way and a bad way to pack a suitcase.

The bad way is to fling things in, as and when you think of them. Often rushed, the disorganised packer gets stressed, struggles to close their bloated bag. Upon unpacking, their clothes are creased, possessions jumbled, and their toothbrush is forgotten at home.

An organised packer has a process. Often this begins with a list, laying everything out in front of you, then carefully deciding which items belong in the suitcase, which will go in carry-on, and how clothes can be folded to minimise space and creasing. The organised packer feels relaxed and enjoys their journey in the confidence that they’ve forgotten nothing.

Writing academic articles is a lot like packing a suitcase. The author has to cram a lot of information into a small space, without crumpling the message they are trying to convey. Reporting guidelines act as the packing list, and the process we describe below covers the act of collating your stuff (information), laying it out (on the page), deciding what goes where (reorganising), and then finally, packing (writing a first draft).

### Step 1: Get the appropriate writing guide

Download the writing guide for the reporting guideline that matches your study design. For reporting guidelines not featured on this website, you can make your own writing guide based on their available resources by searching [our database](#TODO).

### Step 2: Collate information

Gather your research materials (e.g., your notes, data, analyses, protocol)

For each section in the writing guide:

* Note answers to all prompting questions
* Document any information that cannot be included and why
* Identify information that would benefit from visual presentation.
  + Draft tables.
  + Collate figures that already exist. If custom figures need to be made, note down what information they should convey.

### Step 3: Content Organization and Prioritization

By now you may already have a target journal in mind. Review their author instructions for word limits, figure/table allowances, and supplementary material policies.

Begin reorganising your notes into a structure that fits your narrative and priorities. You might prefer to do this in a new document, or to delete the provided writing guide section titles and prompts. Group your notes into paragraphs. Some authors like to assign word limits to paragraphs or sections at this stage. Consider adding topic and linking sentences to the start and end of each paragraph. This helps creates flow.

When organising content, consider how important the information will be to most of your readers. Prioritise information you expect most readers will find important. Content you expect only a small section of your audience will seek out can be placed later in your writing, allocated less space or, if necessary, be placed in supplementary material. Do not delete any information – although *you* may consider it unimportant, every item in a reporting guideline is important to *somebody*.

By now, your notes should be grouped into paragraphs, separated into main text and supplementary materials, and be filled with all of the information, data, and sources you’ll need to write. You should have drafted your tables and planned your figures.

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| Tip |
| Now is a good moment to get feedback from a colleague. Your notes will be brief and rough, but someone familiar with the work will be able to check your proposed structure and content. |

### Step 4: Writing the First Draft

Once you are ready to start drafting, open a new document. Your writing guide is probably very long by now, so writing in a new document means you can maintain focus without deleting notes.

We suggest you begin by drafting the Methods section as this is generally the easiest to get started with, then the Results before the Introduction, Discussion and, finally, the Abstract and Title. When drafting, try not to use your delete key. The aim is get words on the page, no matter how messy they are. If you get stuck on something, consider using a placeholder (like #TODO) and come back to it later.

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| Tip |
| This is another good moment to get feedback from colleagues. Ask whether the structure and flow makes sense. Tell them that it’s only a first draft, so you don’t need them to edit your spelling, grammar, or clarity. |

### Step 5: Revision and editing

Review the draft for logical flow between sections.

Edit your text to make it clear, concise and engaging.

Once the text is ready to submit, complete the reporting checklist for the reporting guideline you used.

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| Tip |
| Consider asking a colleague to complete the reporting checklist for you. This will allow you to check whether your interpretation of the guidance requirements matches theirs, and whether you have presented information clearly. They can do this as part of a final round of feedback, where they do a more detailed edit of your writing. |

Add the completed reporting checklist as a supplement, and ensure you have credited the reporting guideline, checklist, and writing guide.

### Submission

Include your completed reporting checklist as a supplement when you submit to your chosen journal. If your target journal/funder do not accept supplementary material, you can upload your checklist to a repository like the OSF and cite it.

## Training and resources

The EQUATOR Network provides training on writing research articles and applications. We have training on:

* Writing processes
* Concise, clear, and compelling writing
* Writing using reporting guidelines