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## Reporting guidelines to the rescue?

Concern over reporting quality crescendoed through the eighties and early nineties as systematic reviews became more common. Responding to calls for “strategies”, “guides”, and “lists” to help authors prepare their manuscripts, a group of methodologists, trialists, and editors met in 1996 to create the CONsolidated Standards of Reporting Trials (CONSORT) statement [1]. CONSORT is a set of recommendations detailing what information authors should include in clinical trial reports. It comprised an article describing how it was made, a checklist, flow diagram, and (after an update in 2001) and ‘Explanation and Elaboration’ publication [2]; [3].

CONSORT proved influential, and other groups quickly developed guidelines for different research types. Reporting guidelines are like a theme and variations, where CONSORT forged a path others have followed with varying fidelity (See [Table 1](#tbl-rgs)). Most have acronym names. Most were first published as a journal article describing their development. Some, but not all, have checklists and elaboration documents. Some guideline developers publish resources as separate documents, others put them all into a single journal article. Guidelines are developed by different groups, with different composition (possibly including methodologists, editors, clinicians etc) and in different ways (e.g., some by delphi consensus). Although most follow CONSORT’s approach of presenting recommendations focussing on reporting above conduct, guidelines differ in how forceful their recommendations are and whether they also seek to influence design.

Table 1: A selection of highly cited reporting guidelines

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Guideline acronym** | **Definition** | **Applicable study type** | **Publication year** | **Development article?** | **Fillable checklist?** | **Explanatory document?** | **Other resources** | **Influences design?** |
| CONSORT | Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials | Randomised controlled trials | 1996 #REF updated in 2001 #REF and 2010 #REF | Yes | Yes | Yes, as a separate article | Flow diagram  Website  COBWEB writing tool #REF | No |
| PRISMA | Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses | Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses | 2009 #REF  Updated in 2021 #REF | Yes | Yes | Yes | Flow diagram  Website | No |
| ARRIVE | Animal Research: Reporting of *In Vivo* Experiments | Publications describing research involving live animals | 2010 #REF  Updated in 2020 #REF | Yes | Yes | Yes | Website  Action Plans  Compliance questionnaire | Not explicitly, but does contain design guidance |
| SRQR | Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research | Qualitative health research | 2014 [4] | Yes | No | Yes, as supplementary material that is hard to find |  |  |
| e.t.c. for all guidelines mentioned on EQUATOR’s home page  #TODO |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

There are now over 500 reporting guidelines, representing the collective work of thousands of academics. The best-known guidelines are endorsed by large numbers of medical journals and the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, and are amongst the 1% most highly cited publications indexed by Web of Science [5].

## The EQUATOR Network unites the reporting guideline movement

As reporting guidelines grew in number and the problem of poor reporting gained recognition, Doug Altman saw the need to catalogue reporting guidelines and form a community. He united academics from around the world to form The EQUATOR Network, often simply called EQUATOR, standing for Enhancing the QUAlity and Transparency Of health Research. It was the first coordinated attempt to combat poor reporting systematically and on a global scale. One of EQUATOR’s core objectives was to create a database of reporting guidelines, accessible via their website where researchers will also find training and information about developing guidelines.

1. Begg C, Cho M, Eastwood S, et al (1996) [Improving the Quality of Reporting of Randomized Controlled Trials: The CONSORT Statement](https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.1996.03540080059030). JAMA 276:637–639

2. Altman DG (1996) [Better reporting of randomised controlled trials: The CONSORT statement](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.313.7057.570). BMJ (Clinical research ed) 313:570–571

3. Altman DG, Schulz KF, Moher D, Egger M, Davidoff F, Elbourne D, Gøtzsche PC, Lang T (2001) [The Revised CONSORT Statement for Reporting Randomized Trials: Explanation and Elaboration](https://doi.org/10.7326/0003-4819-134-8-200104170-00012). Annals of Internal Medicine 134:663–694

4. O’Brien BC, Harris IB, Beckman TJ, Reed DA, Cook DA (2014) [Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research: A Synthesis of Recommendations](https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0000000000000388). Academic Medicine 89:1245–1251

5. Caulley L, Cheng W, Catalá-López F, Whelan J, Khoury M, Ferraro J, Husereau D, Altman DG, Moher D (2020) [Citation impact was highly variable for reporting guidelines of health research: A citation analysis](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclinepi.2020.07.013). Journal of Clinical Epidemiology 127:96–104