

Writes of Passage: Writing an Empirical Journal Article

This article provides advice about preparing research reports for submission to professional journals in general and Journal of Marriage and Family in particular. In addition to working through all the major parts of a research paper, I provide some general advice about writing, editing, and revising. The article is intended to help new professionals improve the quality of their journal submissions and the likelihood of successful publication.

Writing research articles for professional journals is an art requiring good research skills, a clear sense of problem, and strong writing and editing skills. Assuming that years of graduate school have provided good research skills, I focus on the other requirements of writing a research article. My advice reflects the issues I most often raise when I review articles and 30 years of experience writing (and revising) research articles. I review guidelines for the major sections of the typical empirical research report and conclude with some suggestions about writing professionally. The emphasis is on writing for *Journal of Marriage and Family (JMF)*, but the general principles apply across journals and substantive areas.

WORKING THROUGH A RESEARCH PAPER

The format for a research paper is not set in stone. Each research problem is different, and

the organization of the paper will depend on whether it is exploratory research rather than theory testing. In addition, authors have some latitude in developing a personal style. Generally, however, each article needs an introduction, a literature review, a statement of the problem, description of method, results, and conclusion. The organization of the piece, the titles of various sections, and the relative weight of these sections vary from paper to paper and from journal to journal, but some general guidelines apply to reports of qualitative and quantitative research.

Abstract

An abstract should summarize your study. In a few short sentences, it should state the research hypothesis, the sample, sample size, data used, and the findings. A starting sentence such as "Using data from a national sample of n women interviewed by telephone in 2002, we examine the relationship between x and y " will allow you to squeeze a lot of information into a few words. In a bare-bones fashion, without hyperbole or exaggeration, state the findings of the study. Examine prior issues of your target journal for abstract style and be sure to comply with the maximum length specified by the journal (120 words for *JMF*).

Introduction

The introduction is critical to capturing the reader's attention and setting the tone for the paper. In approximately a single page, it should specify the research question, the data to be used, and the strengths of the design, and it

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