Writing for publication: increasing the chances of success.

An Interprofessional Education and Practice Guide

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# **Abstract**

# The aim of this paper is to help all writers improve their chances of success in having papers accepted by academic peer-reviewed journals, including the *Journal of Interprofessional Care.* We discuss the importance of reading both in your own discipline and also more widely across disciplines and fields of study. There are sections on the attributes of good authors, how to choose a journal, types of articles that are published and the structure of these, the contrast between research and evaluation, and how to plan a paper. We stress the importance of reading and complying with a journal’s author guidelines and answering the ‘so what’ question by the end of the article. There is more detail about the main elements of a paper and what should be included in the introduction, methods, results (findings) and discussion to improve the quality. As well as content we also focus on the style of writing, drawing on the field of linguistics in addition to grammar. We finish with a description of the submission and review processes, why papers may be rejected and how to manage decisions on papers.

# **Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to help writers improve their chances of success in having papers accepted by academic peer-reviewed journals, particularly those that publish content related to interprofessional education and practice and who have less experience of being published. The content is drawn from the literature and our long experiences of writing, being rejected, editing, and educating about scholarly writing and getting published. Experienced authors, researchers and health professionals rarely have their work accepted without needing revision. Indeed, as associate editors, we have seen papers from previously published authors that have neglected to follow journal guidelines and require multiple changes. Therefore, this Interprofessional Education and Practice Guide is not solely for novice authors. We focus on the writing up process rather than research or evaluation approaches. However, good papers do require well-thought out studies and therefore we do consider this aspect of increasing the chances of article acceptance.

There are many reasons why health professionals, educators and academics wish to publish papers. For some a publication record is an important factor influencing promotion and scholarly recognition; but publishing may also give a sense of completion at the end of a project and enable others to benefit from your work. While not all articles advance knowledge in terms of research findings, in the interprofessional practice and education literature well-crafted evaluations of interventions for patients and learners are important to help answer questions such as what works for whom and in what contexts (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). We believe there is an ethical imperative to share such work.

There are diverse outlets for written material depending on its nature, the intended readership and the reason to publish. In this article we are concentrating primarily on writing for scholarly peer-reviewed journals in the interprofessional field such as the *Journal of Interprofessional Care (JIC).* This guide also complements the *JIC* guide that focused on the process of writing as an interprofessional team (Vogel et al., 2018). We recommend that authorship of papers with an interprofessional focus should be an interprofessional collaboration.

We are at a time of great change in the publishing world due to the open access movement (Science Direct, nd) and, while the number of journals globally is growing, it is becoming harder to be accepted in the quality journals of a particular field. By quality here, we mean those journals with a large readership and a high impact factor as evidenced by the number of subscribers and the number of downloads and subsequent citations that papers achieve. The current acceptance rate of *JIC* is around 25% (Xyrichis, personal communication), meaning that three quarters of all papers that are submitted are rejected. While these figures may seem challenging, there are certain strategies that authors should consider to increase the quality of submission and therefore the likelihood of success.

An extremely important message to stress is that to write well, you need to read, both broadly and specifically, as well as learning what choices are available when you write. This is not only to gain a good understanding of what is being published in your field but also to get a sense of the cadences of language and the structure of text. In our experience, even senior colleagues do not always write clearly and well. In 1964 the author Joseph Garland was quoted as saying ‘*The principle of good writing is trying to make oneself understood by the greatest possible number of readers*’ (Garland, 1964, p. 423). In addition: read the journal that you are planning to submit to and its author guidelines. Of course, while good writing is necessary, it is not sufficient – the paper needs to have a compelling topic and narrative. Think of this as content, what you write and process, how you write it. There has been a shift in expectations for academic writing in the last decade, which we will consider below. Above all, remember that you need to tackle the ‘so what?’ question that editors and reviewers will pose.

**The attributes of successful authors**

Cargill and O’Connor (2009) have identified five strategies for improving one’s chances of being published:

* Becoming a peer reviewer for journals and colleagues
* Planning studies and writing to meet the criteria of editors and peer referees
* Selecting the most appropriate journal and following its author guidelines
* Asking colleagues to read work critically before submission
* Using the journal reviewers’ feedback to improve the paper.

These strategies reinforce the message about reading but also stress the necessity to seek and to give feedback on your own and others’ work. Journals are always looking for good reviewers so think about nominating yourself to become a reviewer if you are not already involved.

**Choosing a journal**

There are many factors to consider when choosing where to submit (Paltridge & Starfield, 2016). Obviously, your preferred journal must publish papers on your topic or area of study. For *JIC,* articles have a primary focus that includes ‘interprofessional’ in some form or other, though we have seen papers submitted that do not fit the consensus definition of interprofessional. It is a peer reviewed subscription journal therefore there is no fee to publish as readers, rather than authors, meet the costs. Many subscription journals do offer authors a choice of paying to have their article free to view – this may of course increase readership. Open access journals are free for readers but charge all authors on acceptance of their work. So, you should consider if you have funds for open access (this can be up to US$2,000). Fees for publishing may be included in research grants, or agreed by academic university departments, but as we know, educational research is poorly served in terms of grant or other funding (Archer, 2015).

Other important metrics are the journal’s impact factor, its rejection rate and the time taken until a decision whether to accept the article is made by the editor(s). The impact factor (IF) is seen as one measure of importance or the rank of a journal through the number of times its articles are cited over a defined time (University of South Australia, nd). The IF of JIC for 2018/19 was 1.772. The time to decision may be gauged from colleagues who have experience of a particular journal – it may range from a few days (if an immediate rejection) to several months (if sent out for review). The time to publication once accepted is also variable and could be over a year. However, most journals now publish material early online, i.e. the journal is online as soon as it has been copy-edited. It may then be published again later in an issue – this is the process that *JIC* uses.

**Types of articles**

While these vary from journal to journal, a typical example for *JIC* is a research or evaluation article with the classical IMRD format: introduction, methods, results (or findings if a qualitative methodology) and discussion. The discussion should include a section on limitations. While a qualitative paper will have both an introduction and discussion section, the content of the body of the article is highly variable and the findings and the discussion may be presented in one section. A journal’s author guidelines will have details of other acceptable submissions such as systematic reviews, scoping reviews, short reports, reflective essays, guides, letters and ‘how to’ papers. The length, word count, references limit and number of tables (or boxes and figures) will differ for each of these. Abstracts or summaries may be structured or unstructured (JIC) but should not include citations. In-depth syntheses exploring the evidence for what is effective in health professional education can be published as a ‘Best Evidence Medical Education (BEME) Review’ (<https://bemecollaboration.org>). Such reviews are published as full reports and shorter articles in the journal, *Medical Teacher* (Hammick, Dornan & Steinert, 2010). There have been several BEME reviews related to interprofessional education (Hammick, Freeth, Kopple, Reeves, & Barr, 2007; Reeves et al., 2016; Hean et al., 2018), which are highly relevant references for planned publications.

Research papers aim to add to understanding about health professional practice or education. Findings should be potentially applicable outside the particular study, though authors need to acknowledge the importance of context and culture in terms of generalizability and relevance. Evaluation does not generally advance a field; however, evaluation of innovations in practice or education may be of interest as they can add to what we know about the effectiveness of interventions and how they are also affected by context. In the interprofessional domain, evaluations are important to help answer such questions as: is interprofessional education effective? And does interprofessional collaboration improve patient outcomes? Curriculum committees may ask for evidence of effectiveness when considering introducing IPE in to programmes and professional accreditation bodies require evidence of the relevance of IPE. Though we do need to consider what we mean by effective in relation to learning and translation to practice. Well-constructed and rigorous evaluations are the basis of future systematic reviews. Evaluations that use mainly quantitative methodologies focus on outcomes, for example in interprofessional education the Kirkpatrick framework (Kirkpatrick, 1967 modified by the Joint Evaluation Team [Freeth, Hammick, Koppel, Reeves, & Barr, 2002]). Qualitative methodologies and realist approaches explore the how, who, why and why not questions (Wong, Greenhalgh, Westhorp, & Pawson, 2012).

**Planning your paper**

Ideally you should begin planning your paper at the same time as you plan your project or study and write drafts as you progress. This helps ensure that you do not forget details that may be important later. These early drafts may almost be thought of as a diary of the study and it is important particularly if a project lasts over months or years. In our experience by having a partially written paper at the end of your project, you are more likely to finish an article and eventually submit it.

The paper evolves with the research or evaluation, but a well-presented paper cannot rectify a poorly conceived study. We reiterate that you need to be able to answer the ‘so what’ question of your readers. You will only be able to do this if the study itself tackles a problem or gap that needs addressing or has a hook to stimulate interest. Early researchers or educators should join a community of practice to collaborate with and learn from more experienced colleagues about research and evaluation methodologies. In the interprofessional field we recommend becoming part of the global network and one of the regional networks (see <https://interprofessional.global>).

In the planning stages you must consider whether you need to apply for ethical approval – almost certainly you will if you are planning to publish participant data – noting that participants may be students or health professionals as well as patients. Educational research and evaluation may be seen as low risk and declared exempt from full review by an ethics committee or institutional review board (IRB), but even then, there should be participant consent for publication. In some countries it may be difficult to access an appropriate committee or IRB; in such case authors must state how they have ensured ethical processes throughout their work. There should be local mechanisms to guide you in identifying the type of ethical approach needed through research officers/employees within your health and/or social care organization and within higher education institutions. These advisors can guide you towards the correct pathway and possibly support you in the completion of your application.

Planning should also include which team members are going to be authors, all of whom must be involved throughout the study and the writing process and have read the final submitted paper. In our experience the research team must articulate this with care at the outset to avoid false misunderstandings about the right to be an author. This is especially true within the collaborative field of research for all things interprofessional, which may involve working across institutions, care organizations and different statutory and non-statutory bodies. Openness and transparency throughout bode well for a successful research writing team. In the submission process authors are asked to state their contributions and be accountable for the work. There are four criteria for authorship as defined by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE). All authors must have:

* Made substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work, OR the acquisition, analysis or interpretation of the data AND
* Drafted the work or revised it AND
* Give final approval to the version to be submitted AND
* Agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work and to answer any questions about its accuracy or integrity (ICMJE, 2019).

**Writing up: structure**

As you write during your study you always need to be mindful of your main message and what the paper is going to add to the field. Of course, until you have most of your data you cannot be sure what the results or findings are going to show. During your writing you are basically telling a story:

* Why did we start (the study/research question and background literature)?
* What did we do (methodology and methods)?
* What did we find (data, analysis and synthesis)?
* What does it all mean (the so what answer, what should now change, implications)?

To these we can also add:

* When did we do it?
* What limits our conclusions (the limitations section)?

There are several guiding principles for qualitative research, which have been clearly described by Tracy (2010) as eight criteria for excellence in qualitative research. Ask yourself the following questions as you prepare and then write up your findings:

1. **Is the topic worthy**: Is this research area, topical, relevant, timely, significant and interesting
2. **Rich Rigour**: Does the paper contain ‘*rich complexity of abundance*‘ (p.841) in how the data describe and enrich our understanding of this subject area? This relates to how the data support the claims – are there enough data?
3. **Sincerity**: How has the researcher shown honest reflexivity towards the research context/subject? Is it clear that they have conducted the work with objectivity? Is it clear that the researcher(s) have framed pure and true attitudes and values concerning how the data are identified?
4. **Credibility**: Is the work using triangulation of data and/or are the data richly described so that the reader trusts the work?
5. **Resonance**: Does the writing of this data translate and reverberate the researchers’ findings to provoke insight for the reader?
6. **Significant Contribution**: How does this study extend what we already know?
7. **Ethical**: Have considerations been made for procedural and relational processes?
8. **Meaningful Coherence**: This relates to how the study combines the current literature with the study purpose by using the right methods and data collection approaches underpinned with theoretical understandings to reach trustworthy findings to advance understandings (Tracy, 2010).

For rigour in quantitative research attention must be paid to internal validity, external validity and replicability (Laher, 2016), as well as items 1, 5, 6, 7 and 8 in the list above. Justification for mixed methods should include why and how the qualitative and quantitative approaches, producing different types of data sets, are used and combined (Dixon-Woods, Agarwal, Young, Jones & Sutton, 2004; Pacea et al., 2011)

**The introduction**

Think of this section as the advert for the remaining paper. It needs to draw the reader in. For clarity and ease of reading, introductions should move from general to specific information. You can do this by orienting the reader to the topic, citing key papers that relate to the main topic, and pointing out a gap in current knowledge, which the present article will address as its main aim or research question. Finally, give the outline of the article or what research paradigm will be used thus setting up a cohesive link to the next section.

Applied linguistic researchers have analysed published work and identified a framework for a compelling introduction that includes five main components (Cargill & O’Connor, 2009):

* Background to the field of research to provide context and define importance
* What is already known on the topic (literature review)
* Rationale for further work in this area – gaps in knowledge and understanding
* The aim of the study; the research or evaluation question
* Justification for this particular work now.

For the *JIC* readership it is not always necessary to provide a rationale for IPE or IPECP, nor is it important to define these terms unless authors are using them in different ways to the consensus definitions. However, context is vital, particularly as health care systems, health professional designations and education differ markedly around the globe.

Statements about previous work should be appropriately referenced. Publications may include older seminal works but there must be up-to-date literature to demonstrate that authors are widely read. Self-citations are acceptable if building on one’s own previous work. The knowledge gap should become obvious to the reader; it should be explicit and not only implied. The end of the introduction should signpost what readers may expect from the rest of the paper.

**Methodology and method**

In most published articles the relevant section is labeled methods, but it should include details of the underlying methodology, which is the rationale for choosing the particular methods used and the date of the study. Methods should describe sufficient detail so that other readers may replicate the work and that are able to make a judgment on credibility: whether the results are valid and reliable (numerical data) or findings are trustworthy (qualitative approaches). The *British Medical Journal* (BMJ) has published a series of articles on methodological rigor in qualitative research, which we recommend as further reading (Lingard, Albert & Levinson, 2008; Kuper, Reeves & Levinson, 2008; Reeves, Kuper & Hodges, 2008). O’Brien, Harris, Beckman, Reed and Cook (2014) have written about the standards for reporting qualitative research. For theoretical underpinnings for methodologies we suggest Hean et al. (2018) on the contribution to theory in interprofessional education (Hean et al., 2018), while Varpio, Ajjawi, Monrouxe, O’Brien and Rees (2017) challenge some of the concepts and terminology of qualitative approaches. Quantitative methods, such as case control studies and randomized control trials (RCTs), although less frequently used for studies in education because of ethical concerns of parity for all students, are important (Reeves, Boet, Zierler & Kitto, 2015). There are many aspects to consider such as relevant hypothesis testing, sample size and importantly the choice of statistical analysis of results (Groves, 2008).

**Results or findings**

These are the heart of the paper and must answer the ‘so what’ question. Basically, here you are turning your data, whether they are numbers, interviews, observations, text or other artifacts, into a coherent story of what you found to help answer the research question. The data may be presented in narrative, tables, figures or pictures (depending on the journal), with connecting information. Apart from text all other elements require a title and an appropriate legend. Do not present results twice, for example, in both words and tables. Make sure that the most important findings are highlighted – the reader should not have to do this work. However, leave any discussion for the actual discussion section, unless your work is such that the findings and discussion are presented together, as with some qualitative approaches. Ensure that all tables and figures are referred to in the text and indicate in the document where there should be located in the published work (as they should be uploaded as either separate documents or at the end of the main one). This section should be written in the past tense if the work has been completed.

Figures and tables support the presentation of data. In quantitative studies data are frequently tabulated and in so doing the table must clearly state what is being shown in the headings (means, modes, significance with P values etc.) and identify the statistical approach (parametric and non-parametric test applied) and where required power calculations. The journal editorial team will usually seek advice from statisticians so the writing team should also check that these data are calculated using the correct test, with rationale, and that this is correctly explained. In qualitative data, the journal often outlines how it wishes data to be described. In some journal extracts from the subjects’ voices (interviews, text) are inserted within the main text but in other journals they can be shown as tables. In all cases the writers must make the subjects’ anonymity apparent. Often in studies new models, frameworks, and relationships between data, can be presented using *diagrams*. High quality resolution is often needed and it is important to check if the journal accepts coloured presentations (there may be a charge for this). Be clear to check the number of tables and figures expected and any word limit.

**The discussion**

This element needs to refer back to the introduction, should meet the aim of the paper and answer the research question. Or, perhaps it needs to explain why the question could not be answered. Remind readers briefly of the main points of the results/findings and discuss how these do or do not contribute to meeting the gap previously identified. The reasons for the findings should be explored and how they agree or disagree with previous work (referenced appropriately). The discussion also includes a section on limitations and strengths of the study, and how findings may be generalized or applied to other contexts. Provide an answer the ‘so what’ question and finish with the implications: what you are going to do as a result of this study; what others may do; what further work is necessary. Or, if the study did take place sometime ago, what you have actually done.

## **Final touches**

Titles, abstract and key words are often revised in the final copy and are very important. This is because search engines (such as Medline in PsychINFO, CINAHL and SCOPUS database), used to identify relevant literature, can only identify papers using key words identified from what is written in the title, abstract and key words. We suggest that writers consider identifying the type of study (qualitative, quantitative, review etc.), theoretical underpinnings and main context area within these sections. In some journals the choice of key words might limit how you wish to identify your work; in this case ensure to choose as many fields as possible. Punchy titles that catch the eye and draw attention to your subject are helpful; take time to get this right as too clever titles may obscure the actual content.

Ensure that the references are in the correct format for the journal and that the citations in the text match the works included in the reference list. Journals differ as to what they allow in terms of number and formatting of tables, figures and boxes, but if included all should have legends and be referred to in the main text.

Always read a print copy of your work to find all the mistakes that are often not discernable on the screen. But note that it is very difficult to proof-read accurately your own work. Invite someone to read the final draft – an honest critical friend who can point out tautology, obscurity, grammatical errors, mixed tenses and mixed metaphors. Typically, these are only visible to a fresh reader.

**Writing style**

Academic writing for journal articles requires the authors to make careful choices about section headings, paragraphing, sentences and even word choice. Remember that sections are a collection of paragraphs that develop an idea, while a paragraph is a collection of sentences that elaborate on the first, or topic sentence. The elaborating sentences are optimal when they state only one idea and can be made clear selective use of the active and passive voices (American Medical Association, 2007; American Psychological Association, 2010). It is no longer necessary in a scholarly piece of work to write in the passive voice. We encourage authors to own their work by using personal pronouns (I, we) and use the active voice where appropriate. This may be a big change for some particularly those from biomedical fields. While we use the phrase ‘clear and elegant’ to describe what we feel is ideal, syntax and grammar are still important. A piece of work in a reader’s own field should not require multiple readings to make sense.

One’s writing style evolves over time and should be adaptable for different contexts. Writers can improve their craft by reading high quality articles in their own content area. We also advise that you learn how language works and what choices are available to the writer when forging sentences, paragraphs and papers. For the committed student, we recommend several highly influential works (see further resources below).

**The submission process**

The majority of publishers now have dedicated websites for authors to submit manuscripts. The website address may be found on a journal’s own webpage, alongside author guidelines which detail how to prepare a paper for uploading. A covering letter is usually required. This should be succinct and outline the main message of the paper and why it is suitable for publication. See the following guidance paper on approaches to writing covering letters (Brice and Bligh, 2005).

After submission, the journal’s administrative staff check papers to see they do follow the author guidelines. They are then usually seen by the editor who may decide to reject at this point if the paper is obviously unsuitable. Otherwise papers are typically allocated to an associate editor who will invite reviewers, read their feedback and make a recommendation to the editor: accept (very unusual at this stage); major or minor revisions; reject (though the exact decision wording does vary). At *JIC* there will be two peer reviewers who are chosen from the journal’s database having been identified as having expertise and interest in the paper’s topic, methodology or both. The editor makes the final decision and feedback is provided to the author(s). If the reviewers disagree in their feedback, the associate editor and editor will stress which comments need addressing.

**Reasons for acceptance and rejection**

The most common reasons for a paper being rejected are that it is not suitable for the particular journal and/or it does not add sufficiently to the existing literature. For *JIC* this means it does not have a sufficiently developed interprofessional focus or it does not advance understanding in the field of interprofessional education or practice. Text needs to be related to previous work with appropriate and relevant references that indicate knowledge of the area. Studies with weak outcome measures such as student satisfaction, self-assessment of learning or changes in confidence, are unlikely to be sent for review. Work should not be country-centric without reference to a global perspective and should not include jurisdiction specific jargon that is not explained (for example health professions terminology, specific legislation). The data should be recent or, if not, authors should indicate what has happened or is planned as a result of the findings. There must be details of ethical approval or exemption.

**The paper is rejected**

Rejection happens to every author at some stage. We are very familiar ourselves with the effects of being rejected after months of work. It is very disappointing and can sometimes seem like the end of the world. After first reading a rejection letter, put it aside and do something else until emotions are under control. We stress how important it then is to discuss the rejection letter with co-authors, as this is a team effort, and work out why the paper was rejected. Hopefully the feedback and editor’s summary will help in this respect. Spend some time away from your work before any next steps. Appeals are possible but must address the feedback and in particular the editor’s comments. However, it is probably more productive to try to engage with the feedback, rewrite and send to another journal as appropriate. Or accept the decision and learn from the rejection for future work.

**You are asked for revisions**

This is a cause for celebration but can also be frustrating, even for the most experienced writers. Remember that papers may be rejected after revising if the response to feedback is not sufficient. Take some time away from the paper and then approach the comments with an open mind. It is important to respond to each point in all the reviews, particularly any areas highlighted by the editor/associate editor. If you do not agree with any specific point that is fine as long as the reason for your point of view is clearly articulated. Submit a list of changes responding to the feedback in detail as well as a document with revisions in track changes or highlighted.

# **Conclusion**

Writing for publication is all about telling others what you know in an engaging manner. There is no quick approach as it takes time, thought and is always richer when achieved by a team, in which case the leading author will need to ensure consistency of style throughout the paper.

It remains vital that when writing you are cognisant of the audience you are addressing. The *Journal of Interprofessional Care* has a global readership so the context of your work must be clearly stated and in addition address the multiple voices of readers from the full range of modern health and social care practice: from health sciences, medicine, psychology and social care, and from housing to education as well as from management to administration, and from therapy to policing and beyond, while being culturally sensitive and politically aware.

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**Further resources**

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