

Putting pen to paper

From press releases to peer-reviewed papers and from blogs to books, peer-to-peer communications encompass a broad range of formats and writing styles. But all have one thing in common: they are written by and for people just like you.

If you have ever considered putting pen to paper and have useful information or comments to share with your colleagues then why not get involved. There are many opportunities both in print and online to contribute, and many benefits too.

Getting your name in print can enhance your own career prospects and status as well as making your job more varied and satisfying. Improving your writing style may also have unexpected spin-offs for your day job, such as better record keeping and referral letters. Writing skills are also essential for those undertaking postgraduate study.

The process of researching and writing in detail on a specific topic can benefit your patients, your practice and ultimately the profession as a whole. But sharing an interesting case report and image, or your thoughts on a current political issue, can be just as valuable to your peers as a lengthy clinical or technical paper.

There may be no prescription for effective written communication, and it would be a shame if there were. Yet there are some features common to most forms of writing for a professional audience that are worth considering, while others are specific to particular types of publication. Here are just a few ideas.

Making a start

The challenge for most writers, whatever your skills and experience, is getting started. Writer's block can and does happen! As with most tasks, preparation is all-important and before hitting the keyboard make sure you have a good grasp of the topic, research it thoroughly and gather all the source material you need.

For papers and features, read widely and keep abreast of the literature in your area of interest. Find the original sources and access the full text of key papers rather than relying on abstracts or news stories. For case reports,

Writing for a professional audience can broaden your horizons and add variety to your career, as **Alison Ewbank** reports



From books to blogs, there are many opportunities to write for a professional readership

identify suitable cases in practice and make sure you have all relevant data and images recorded as well as the patient's permission to use them.

Check the conditions for submission to your target journal and the Guidelines for Authors. These are available on the publication's website or on request and include instructions on how to submit your text and accompanying artwork, and in what format, as well as covering issues such as copyright. Some journals may also have a Style Guide with detailed information on use of titles, numerals, abbreviations etc.

For unsolicited features and review articles you might want to approach the journal editor or section editor to gauge interest, get a written brief and check deadlines before you start writing.

Whether you are writing a short letter to the editor on the GOC's new CET scheme, an *Optician* Awards entry, a report on a course you attended or a 3,000-word paper on spectacle lens design, the introductory paragraph, sentence and even the first word are key; the intro must grab the reader's attention and set the scene.

In fact as written communications in general get shorter – witness Twitter, Facebook and email – the intro is increasingly important and the word count more critical. With pressure on space in practitioner journals, make sure you write your contribution to the

TABLE 1
Tips on writing style and presentation

- Keep it simple – if something can be said in a simpler way, do so. Never use a long word when a short one will do and avoid repetition
- Keep it consistent – make sure that spellings, use of capitals, abbreviations etc don't vary
- Check the style, tone and length for your target journal and type of feature
- Make sure the text 'flows' – using a link word in consecutive sentences or paragraphs is one way of encouraging this
- 'Tell the story' in a logical way – reading your text aloud can sometimes help you find your 'voice' and rhythm
- Avoid long paragraphs and break the text up with cross-headings where appropriate
- Use only one space between sentences in your manuscript. This can make a big difference to pagination on a long document
- The old adage that 'a picture's worth a thousand words' still applies!

appropriate length. A 2,000-word letter to the editor is unlikely to make it onto the page.

If you are writing for practitioner journals and working to a brief, the content and word count should be clear from the outset – stick to it. When writing for refereed journals, length is usually more flexible, although a word count for the abstract may be specified. Either way, keep the text concise and only devote as much space as the topic is worth.

Telling the story

While peer-reviewed publications that report single studies usually follow a set sequence, review papers and features in practitioner journals are more varied in format and style. CET articles, interviews, company profiles, conference and exhibition reports,

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EVIDENCE-BASED COMMUNICATIONS

Optometrists Jane Veys and Anna Sulley have, between them, authored more than 50 educational articles, two books and several peer-reviewed papers over the course of their careers to date.

As education director at The Vision Care Institute, Veys produces a range of written materials, from delegate workbooks for the Institute's courses to creating copy for its website and Facebook posts. Sulley's medical affairs role at Johnson & Johnson Vision Care means she is responsible for all types of publications and scientific conference submissions, as well as clinical studies and internal reports. Both roles have a Europe-wide remit.

So when did they first put pen to paper for their peers? Veys' first published article was an interesting case study when working in practice, whereas Sulley started writing product-related features as clinical manager at an industry research centre during the late 90s.

Common to all their writing, they say, is the need to ensure that practitioner communications are always evidence-based, relevant and useful. 'One of the hardest things is gathering a wealth of detailed information and getting it to fit into something as short as a two-sided flashcard,' says Veys.

As well as raising their profiles, there have been advantages to getting their names in print from a personal point of view. 'You get huge satisfaction from seeing something you're really proud of being



used in practice,' observes Veys, while Sulley has also used her portfolio of publications to help gain Fellowship of the BCLA and American Academy of Optometry.

Both have some straightforward advice to offer to colleagues on getting involved in writing: start small. 'If you have an unusual clinical image or advice on how to manage a particular condition in practice, share it with others,' says Sulley. 'It can be something very simple that inspires you to get started.'

book reviews and comment pieces are just some of the feature formats. For this type of feature it may be useful to write a rough plan to work to before making a start.

Whatever you are writing try to 'tell the story' in a logical way and make the purpose of the feature clear. As a rough guide for a formal-style paper or clinical/technical review, try using the following sequence for the introduction:

- A strong opening statement on the study/feature topic
- Facts about the topic and why it's important
- What we currently know about the topic
- What we don't know, what we need to find out and why
- The purpose of the study/feature.

Levels of formality in the various forms of communication differ considerably and getting the 'tone' right is more difficult than simply following style. A general interest or interview-based feature, for instance, can be more creative than a clinical article. Open any practitioner journal from the US and the informal language jumps off the page. Letters to the editor are another format where a different tone is acceptable and even humour is welcome.

Being a regular reader of journals and familiar with the publication you are writing for helps you to adapt your tone accordingly. Table 1 has some general tips on writing style and presentation.

TABLE 2

Key differences when writing features for non-refereed journals

- Approach the target journal to check their interest in the feature, the lead-in time, word count, artwork and deadline
- Be creative - these journals allow more variety in format, tone and length
- Try using a more informal style and active rather than passive verbs, eg 'Researchers found that...' rather than 'A study has been reported that...'
- Note that references may not be published but may be available from the journal on request
- Expect to have your copy 'subbed' (ie sub-edited) rather than published verbatim. This may mean that copy is cut for space reasons
- Be aware that procedures for vetting unsolicited features and for the publishing process (eg return of proofs) may vary between journals

Peer-reviewed vs practitioner

In addition to the practitioner journals and industry magazines published in the UK, several peer-reviewed optometry and ophthalmology journals are based here and these publications have an international readership. Cast your net wider and there are many more, published in English and other languages, both in print and, increasingly, online.

Your target publication will depend on many factors such as impact factor,

specialty, readership, lead-in time and, not least, the likelihood of having the paper accepted.

Writing for a peer-reviewed journal may not be the first step for a budding author but is the ultimate way to be acclaimed by your peers and get your name in lights. It may also open up new opportunities for publishing and presenting in your specialist area.

Journal editors are generally keen to publish practice-based studies and papers with clinical relevance and not all authors are directly involved in research. These journals also carry editorials, case reports and book reviews - explore their websites to identify opportunities to contribute.

While there is some cross-over between the content of peer-reviewed and practitioner publications there are differences between the two formats. Table 2 outlines some of the key differences when writing features for practitioner journals.

The format for a refereed paper based on a single study will generally follow a set sequence of: title and authors; abstract and keywords; introduction, including study objective and hypothesis; methods (or sometimes methods and materials); results; discussion; conclusions (sometimes combined with discussion); acknowledgements and affiliations; references; tables, figures and images (with captions or 'legends'). Again, read the Guidelines for Authors carefully and check recently published papers for style points.

Various resources are available to

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learn more about academic publishing and there are accepted practices across all disciplines. For a clinical study, for instance, methods will normally include the study design, masking and randomisation, study population, ethics committee approval and consent, materials and procedures, control of variables, scheduled visits, adverse event and discontinuation procedures, and statistical analysis.

While the reader (and reviewer) needs to understand every step of the study protocol, you can save space by referring to methodology, procedures and grading scales used in previous studies. Remember to describe what efforts were made to ensure tests were standardised and detail the procedure for reporting adverse events.

Results should cover subject status, subject demographics, results for each variable in turn, statistically significant findings and p values, plus figures and tables. Common mistakes include failing to account for discontinuations so that subject numbers fail to add up. Make sure your results aren't really methods and don't include any discussion of the results – save it for discussion.

Discussion is often the most difficult section to write. You might start by referring to the purpose of the study then say what the key finding is and why it's important, new or different. Work through each of the findings putting them in perspective with those of previous studies and where the findings are different suggest why. Discuss the implications of the results for clinical practice. You should also allude to any limitations of the study and highlight any areas for further investigation or other studies already underway.

When reporting studies for either peer-reviewed or practitioner publications, include conclusions but keep them brief. Don't be tempted to repeat everything you have already said. For example, a statement of what the study demonstrates overall and the key findings, plus the clinical relevance is sufficient. For a less formal feature a strong closing sentence may be the most that is required.

A word on references

All peer-reviewed publications, and most clinical/technical features and case studies for practitioner journals, will be expected to include references. Referencing a paper is a major part of the writing task; don't underestimate its importance or the time it will take to get right.

OPEN TO NEW IDEAS

Stanley Keys is a more recent recruit to the ranks of journal author. Qualifying in 2003, Keys has pursued a career in the hospital eye service and is now a principal optometrist at the Ninewells Hospital in Dundee.

Examining large numbers of wet AMD patients receiving intravitreal treatment and many dry AMD patients in the low vision clinic prompted him to pen his first feature for *Optician*. 'From reading some articles in the journals, I thought that's another thing to do within the profession. I wrote to the clinical editors to see whether they'd be interested and found they were keen to take on new authors.' He has also written about the ocular effects of rheumatoid arthritis, glaucoma and contributed to picture-based CET. Working in a local practice one or two



Saturdays a month helps Keys ensure his writing is appropriate for a practitioner audience. 'Hopefully it's not purely academic but has a clinical application too,' he says.

Seeing his work produced professionally on the page has been very satisfying.

But Keys also finds that writing is a good

way of learning about a topic or understanding an issue. 'I always like to keep an open mind about new ideas – it keeps your professional life interesting.'

Keep track of your references as the paper or feature progresses, particularly if you are moving copy around. Some software packages include referencing aids but print off the reference list and give it a final check against the text before submitting.

Do check and follow the journal reference style carefully – this can vary considerably and restyling a long list of references is best avoided. Use the most recent references wherever possible, since reviewers often pick up on those that are out of date.

Importantly, be selective! List only those that are relevant and don't be tempted to include every reference that has ever appeared on a given topic. That way your references will not end up longer than the feature itself and they are more likely to be included than 'available on request'.

Every picture...

Most forms of peer-to-peer communication are enhanced by appropriate, good-quality, high-resolution images and some submissions to practitioner journals, such as press releases and people stories, are much more likely to be used if accompanied by a photograph.

Poor quality images, on the other hand, can spoil an otherwise useful and interesting feature. While we may all like to think of ourselves as competent photographers it is worth taking the time and effort to supply professional standard photography. An unusual image can grab the attention in the same way as an effective intro.

If your clinical images are particularly good, this opens up other opportunities to share them with your peers such as for competitions, quizzes,

company materials and online posting.

Graphs, figures, tables, bullet points and pull-out panels are other tools for presenting results and conclusions, and enhance the layout of a longer feature or paper. Again, look for guidance from the journal and seek out help on the 'well-dressed graph' (see Useful resources).

Beyond the page

While seeing your name on a printed page may be appealing, there are many other ways of communicating with your peers in a public arena. The OpticianSpace Forums and Blogs at opticianonline.net, Facebook and Twitter, and discussion groups such as the Optometry List all provide opportunities to share your views and experiences and get more involved with your profession.

Finally, remember that communication is a two-way process – open up a dialogue with your colleagues and you may just learn something along the way. ●

Useful resources

Veys J and Schneider C. Evaluating clinical research for your practice. *Optician*, 2009; 234: 6118, 22-25.
Evaluating Clinical Research – a 10-point guide and How to Access Eye Care Resources at www.thevisioncareinstitute.co.uk (under Library, Practice Resources).
Hall GM. *How to write a paper*. 4th Edition. Blackwell Publishing.
College of Optometrists website www.college-optometrists.org and Library for other resources.

● In the next part of our series, Graham Hutchison describes how to prepare patient communications and write for a lay audience.