

Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals.

Manuscript Preparation and Submission: Preparing a Manuscript for Submission to a Biomedical Journal. Updated April 2010.

Editors and reviewers spend many hours reading manuscripts, and therefore appreciate receiving manuscripts that are easy to read and edit. Much of the information in a journal's Instructions to Authors is designed to accomplish that goal in ways that meet each journal's particular editorial needs. The following information provides guidance in preparing manuscripts for any journal.

General Principles

The text of observational and experimental articles is usually (but not necessarily) divided into the following sections: Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion. This so-called "IMRAD" structure is not an arbitrary publication format but rather a direct reflection of the process of scientific discovery. Long articles may need subheadings within some sections (especially Results and Discussion) to clarify their content. Other types of articles, such as case reports, reviews, and editorials, probably need to be formatted differently.

Electronic formats have created opportunities for adding details or whole sections, layering information, cross-linking or extracting portions of articles, and the like only in the electronic version. Authors need to work closely with editors in developing or using such new publication formats and should submit supplementary electronic material for peer review.

Double-spacing all portions of the manuscript—including the title page, abstract, text, acknowledgments, references, individual tables, and legends—and generous margins make it possible for editors and reviewers to edit the text line by line and add comments and queries directly on the paper copy. If manuscripts are submitted electronically, the files should be double-spaced to facilitate printing for reviewing and editing.

Authors should number all of the pages of the manuscript consecutively, beginning with the title page, to facilitate the editorial process.

Reporting Guidelines for Specific Study Designs

Research reports frequently omit important information. Reporting guidelines have been developed for a number of study designs that some journals may ask authors to follow. Authors should consult the Information for Authors of the journal they have chosen.

The general requirements listed in the next section relate to reporting essential elements for all study designs. Authors are encouraged also to consult reporting guidelines relevant to their specific research design. A good source of reporting guidelines is the EQUATOR Network (<http://www.equator-network.org/home/>).

Title Page

The title page should have the following information:

1. Article title. Concise titles are easier to read than long, convoluted ones. Titles that are too short may, however, lack important information, such as study design (which is particularly important in identifying randomized, controlled trials). Authors should include all information in the title that will make electronic retrieval of the article both sensitive and specific.
2. Authors' names and institutional affiliations. Some journals publish each author's highest academic degree(s), while others do not.
3. The name of the department(s) and institution(s) to which the work should be attributed.
4. Disclaimers, if any.
5. Contact information for corresponding authors. The name, mailing address, telephone and fax numbers, and e-mail address of the author responsible for correspondence about the manuscript (the "corresponding author;" this author may or may not be the "guarantor" for the integrity of the study). The corresponding author should indicate clearly whether his or her

e-mail address can be published.

6. The name and address of the author to whom requests for reprints should be addressed or a statement that reprints are not available from the authors.

7. Source(s) of support in the form of grants, equipment, drugs, or all of these.

8. A running head. Some journals request a short running head or footline, usually no more than 40 characters (including letters and spaces) at the foot of the title page. Running heads are published in most journals, but are also sometimes used within the editorial office for filing and locating manuscripts.

9. Word counts. A word count for the text only (excluding abstract, acknowledgments, figure legends, and references) allows editors and reviewers to assess whether the information contained in the paper warrants the amount of space devoted to it, and whether the submitted manuscript fits within the journal's word limits. A separate word count for the Abstract is useful for the same reason.

10. The number of figures and tables. It is difficult for editorial staff and reviewers to determine whether the figures and tables that should have accompanied a manuscript were actually included unless the numbers of figures and tables are noted on the title page.

Conflict of Interest Notification Page

To prevent potential conflicts of interest from being overlooked or misplaced, this information needs to be part of the manuscript. The ICMJE has developed a uniform disclosure form for use by ICMJE member journals. Other journals are welcome to adopt this form. Individual journals may differ in where they include this information, and some journals do not send information on conflicts of interest to reviewers. (See Section II. D. Conflicts of Interest.)

Abstract

Structured abstracts are preferred for original research and systematic reviews. The abstract should provide the context or background for the study and should state the study's purpose, basic procedures (selection of study subjects or laboratory animals, observational and analytical methods), main findings (giving specific effect sizes and their statistical significance, if possible), principal conclusions, and funding sources. It should emphasize new and important aspects of the study or observations. Articles on clinical trials should contain abstracts that include the items that the CONSORT group has identified as essential (<http://www.consort-statement.org/?=1190>).

Because abstracts are the only substantive portion of the article indexed in many electronic databases, and the only portion many readers read, authors need to be careful that they accurately reflect the content of the article. Unfortunately, the information contained in many abstracts differs from that in the text (7). The format required for structured abstracts differs from journal to journal, and some journals use more than one format; authors need to prepare their abstracts in the format specified by the journal they have chosen.

The ICMJE recommends that journals publish the trial registration number at the end of the abstract. The ICMJE also recommends that, whenever a registration number is available, authors list that number the first time they use a trial acronym to refer to either the trial they are reporting or to other trials that they mention in the manuscript.

Introduction

Provide a context or background for the study (that is, the nature of the problem and its significance). State the specific purpose or research objective of, or hypothesis tested by, the study

or observation; the research objective is often more sharply focused when stated as a question. Both the main and secondary objectives should be clear, and any prespecified subgroup analyses should be described. Provide only directly pertinent references, and do not include data or conclusions from the work being reported.

Methods

The Methods section should include only information that was available at the time the plan or protocol for the study was being written; all information obtained during the study belongs in the Results section.

Selection and Description of Participants

Describe your selection of the observational or experimental participants (patients or laboratory animals, including controls) clearly, including eligibility and exclusion criteria and a description of the source population. Because the relevance of such variables as age and sex to the object of research is not always clear, authors should explain their use when they are included in a study report—for example, authors should explain why only participants of certain ages were included or why women were excluded. The guiding principle should be clarity about how and why a study was done in a particular way. When authors use such variables as race or ethnicity, they should define how they measured these variables and justify their relevance.

Technical Information

Identify the methods, apparatus (give the manufacturer's name and address in parentheses), and procedures in sufficient detail to allow others to reproduce the results. Give references to established methods, including statistical methods (see below); provide references and brief descriptions for methods that have been published but are not well-known; describe new or substantially modified methods, give the reasons for using them, and evaluate their limitations. Identify precisely all drugs and chemicals used, including generic name(s), dose(s), and route(s) of administration.

Authors submitting review manuscripts should include a section describing the methods used for locating, selecting, extracting, and synthesizing data. These methods should also be summarized in the abstract.

Statistics

Describe statistical methods with enough detail to enable a knowledgeable reader with access to the original data to verify the reported results. When possible, quantify findings and present them with appropriate indicators of measurement error or uncertainty (such as confidence intervals). Avoid relying solely on statistical hypothesis testing, such as P values, which fail to convey important information about effect size. References for the design of the study and statistical methods should be to standard works when possible (with pages stated). Define statistical terms, abbreviations, and most symbols. Specify the computer software used.

Results

Present your results in logical sequence in the text, tables, and illustrations, giving the main or most important findings first. Do not repeat all the data in the tables or illustrations in the text; emphasize or summarize only the most important observations. Extra or supplementary materials and technical detail can be placed in an appendix where they will be accessible but will not interrupt the flow of the text, or they can be published solely in the electronic version of the journal.

When data are summarized in the Results section, give numeric results not only as derivatives (for example, percentages) but also as the absolute numbers from which the derivatives were calculated, and specify the statistical methods used to analyze them. Restrict tables and figures to those needed to explain the argument of the paper and to assess supporting data. Use graphs as an alternative to tables with many entries; do not duplicate data in graphs and tables. Avoid nontechnical uses of technical terms in statistics, such as “random” (which implies a randomizing device), “normal,” “significant,” “correlations,” and “sample.”

Where scientifically appropriate, analyses of the data by such variables as age and sex should be included.

Discussion

Emphasize the new and important aspects of the study and the conclusions that follow from them in the context of the totality of the best available evidence. Do not repeat in detail data or other information given in the Introduction or the Results section. For experimental studies, it is useful to begin the discussion by briefly summarizing the main findings, then explore possible mechanisms or explanations for these findings, compare and contrast the results with other relevant studies, state the limitations of the study, and explore the implications of the findings for future research and for clinical practice.

Link the conclusions with the goals of the study but avoid unqualified statements and conclusions not adequately supported by the data. In particular, avoid making statements on economic benefits and costs unless the manuscript includes the appropriate economic data and analyses. Avoid claiming priority or alluding to work that has not been completed. State new hypotheses when warranted, but label them clearly as such.

References

General Considerations Related to References

Although references to review articles can be an efficient way to guide readers to a body of literature, review articles do not always reflect original work accurately. Readers should therefore be provided with direct references to original research sources whenever possible. On the other hand, extensive lists of references to original work on a topic can use excessive space on the printed page. Small numbers of references to key original papers often serve as well as more exhaustive lists, particularly since references can now be added to the electronic version of published papers, and since electronic literature searching allows readers to retrieve published literature efficiently.

Avoid using abstracts as references. References to papers accepted but not yet published should be designated as “in press” or “forthcoming”; authors should obtain written permission to cite such papers as well as verification that they have been accepted for publication. Information from manuscripts submitted but not accepted should be cited in the text as “unpublished observations” with written permission from the source.

Avoid citing a “personal communication” unless it provides essential information not available from a public source, in which case the name of the person and date of communication should be cited in parentheses in the text. For scientific articles, obtain written permission and confirmation of accuracy from the source of a personal communication.

Some but not all journals check the accuracy of all reference citations; thus, citation errors sometimes appear in the published version of articles. To minimize such errors, references should be verified using either an electronic bibliographic source, such as PubMed or print copies from original sources. Authors are responsible for checking that none of the references cite retracted articles except in the context of referring to the retraction. For articles published in journals indexed in MEDLINE, the ICMJE considers PubMed the authoritative source for information about retractions. Authors can identify retracted articles in MEDLINE by using the following search term, where pt in square brackets stands for publication type: Retracted publication [pt] in PubMed.

Reference Style and Format

The Uniform Requirements style for references is based largely on an American National Standards Institute style adapted by the NLM for its databases. Authors should consult NLM's Citing Medicine for information on its recommended formats for a variety of reference types. Authors may also consult sample references, a list of examples extracted from or based on Citing Medicine for easy use by the ICMJE audience; these sample references are maintained by NLM.

References should be numbered consecutively in the order in which they are first mentioned in the text. Identify references in text, tables, and legends by Arabic numerals in parentheses.

References cited only in tables or figure legends should be numbered in accordance with the sequence established by the first identification in the text of the particular table or figure. The titles of journals should be abbreviated according to the style used in the list of Journals Indexed for MEDLINE, posted by the NLM on the Library's Web site. Journals vary on whether they ask authors to cite electronic references within parentheses in the text or in numbered references following the text. Authors should consult with the journal to which they plan to submit their work.

Tables

Tables capture information concisely and display it efficiently; they also provide information at any desired level of detail and precision. Including data in tables rather than text frequently makes it possible to reduce the length of the text.

Type or print each table with double-spacing on a separate sheet of paper. Number tables consecutively in the order of their first citation in the text and supply a brief title for each. Do not use internal horizontal or vertical lines. Give each column a short or an abbreviated heading. Authors should place explanatory matter in footnotes, not in the heading. Explain all nonstandard abbreviations in footnotes, and use the following symbols, in sequence:

*, †, ‡, §, ||, ¶, **, ††, ‡‡, §§, ||||, ¶¶, etc.

Identify statistical measures of variations, such as standard deviation and standard error of the mean.

Be sure that each table is cited in the text.

If you use data from another published or unpublished source, obtain permission and acknowledge that source fully.

Additional tables containing backup data too extensive to publish in print may be appropriate for publication in the electronic version of the journal, deposited with an archival service, or made available to readers directly by the authors. An appropriate statement should be added to the text to inform readers that this additional information is available and where it is located. Submit such tables for consideration with the paper so that they will be available to the peer reviewers.

Illustrations (Figures)

Figures should be either professionally drawn and photographed, or submitted as photographic-quality digital prints. In addition to requiring a version of the figures suitable for printing, some journals now ask authors for electronic files of figures in a format (for example, JPEG or GIF) that will produce high-quality images in the Web version of the journal; authors should review the images of such files on a computer screen before submitting them to be sure they meet their own quality standards.

For x-ray films, scans, and other diagnostic images, as well as pictures of pathology specimens or photomicrographs, send sharp, glossy, black-and-white or color photographic prints, usually 127 x 173 mm (5 x 7 inches). Although some journals redraw figures, many do not. Letters, numbers, and symbols on figures should therefore be clear and consistent throughout, and large enough to remain legible when the figure is reduced for publication. Figures should be made as self-explanatory as possible, since many will be

used directly in slide presentations. Titles and detailed explanations belong in the legends—not on the illustrations themselves.

Photomicrographs should have internal scale markers. Symbols, arrows, or letters used in photomicrographs should contrast with the background.

Photographs of potentially identifiable people must be accompanied by written permission to use the photograph.

Figures should be numbered consecutively according to the order in which they have been cited in the text. If a figure has been published previously, acknowledge the original source and submit written permission from the copyright holder to reproduce the figure. Permission is required irrespective of authorship or publisher except for documents in the public domain.

For illustrations in color, ascertain whether the journal requires color negatives, positive transparencies, or color prints. Accompanying drawings marked to indicate the region to be reproduced might be useful to the editor. Some journals publish illustrations in color only if the author pays the additional cost.

Authors should consult the journal about requirements for figures submitted in electronic formats.

Legends for Illustrations (Figures)

Type or print out legends for illustrations using double spacing, starting on a separate page, with Arabic numerals corresponding to the illustrations. When symbols, arrows, numbers, or letters are used to identify parts of the illustrations, identify and explain each one clearly in the legend. Explain the internal scale and identify the method of staining in photomicrographs.

Units of Measurement

Measurements of length, height, weight, and volume should be reported in metric units (meter, kilogram, or liter) or their decimal multiples.

Temperatures should be in degrees Celsius. Blood pressures should be in millimeters of mercury, unless other units are specifically required by the journal.

Journals vary in the units they use for reporting hematologic, clinical chemistry, and other measurements. Authors must consult the Information for Authors of the particular journal and should report laboratory information in both local and International System of Units (SI). Editors may request that authors add alternative or non-SI units, since SI units are not universally used. Drug concentrations may be reported in either SI or mass units, but the alternative should be provided in parentheses where appropriate.

Abbreviations and Symbols

Use only standard abbreviations; use of nonstandard abbreviations can be confusing to readers. Avoid abbreviations in the title of the manuscript. The spelled-out abbreviation followed by the abbreviation in parenthesis should be used on first mention unless the abbreviation is a standard unit of measurement.

Versión disponible en el sitio web del Comité Internacional de Editores de Revistas Médicas (*International Committee of Medical Journal Editors*) http://www.icmje.org/manuscript_1prepare.html