

Foreword to *Surgeons' Guide To Medical Writing*

Having co-edited the journal *Surgery* for 22 years from 1998–2020, first with Andy Warshaw, Chair of Surgery at the Massachusetts General Hospital and later with Kevin Behrns, Chair of Surgery at University of Florida, we lived through and experienced a tremendous change in the world of medical publication. Many sea changes occurred over these years, and many have changed further again even in these last 6 years: the ever-expanding, immediate role of the internet, ready access to articles via the electronic media rather than via the classic paper periodical journal or even the “Library”, the introduction of open access “journals” with the both good and potentially bad implications of such, the short-lived bad idea of publishing “preprints”, the growing trend of visual abstracts or what I refer to as “insufficient (written) sound bites”, and now even the reader’s ability to immediately distribute in real time “publication” (note the quotes) via social media. And I haven’t even mentioned yet the role of artificial intelligence (AI)! These trends have affected the entire original process of publication for the investigator/author/clinician and also for the “publisher” which used to be the center that organized the collection of the submitted manuscript followed by its scientific peer-review by true experts. These changes have also introduced the expansion of the outlets for communication of the work (paper copies, electronic versions, and most recently via social media like YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, Snapchat, etc.—delivery methods not available in the past, and most recently, real time distribution (even by the author or learner!)).

The world has gotten smaller and “closer”, and yes all, or at least most of this, is good, educational, fast, and often immediate, and even relatively easy to manage at least by the more younger generation. With this ease of publication or maybe better worded “presentation/communication”, there are now many strengths and advantages that were previously unavailable and would even in the recent past have been unbelievable. But these potentially tremendous advantages have spawned potential problems in new “journals” related to an (unfortunately) poor or often even nonexistent scientific review of a research or clinical submission for “publication” (methods, results, discussion, conclusions) often by a non expert, editing by an inexperienced, non-expert “editor” or the publisher itself, taken up as doctrine by the nonmedical world (and on occasion governments), fabricated data, unacceptable plagiarism, and now the increasing presence from a scientific standpoint of a still “adolescent, not yet mature” group of artificial “intelligences”.

Many current readers want “the summary of key points” without looking at the potentially important details of actually how the work was designed, collected, analyzed, etc. i.e., many times the most important information about the scientific validity of the article. And then come the conspiracy “theorists” (note the quotes) who massage, or better termed misrepresent, the data to fit their beliefs, their mission, their ideology, or just to disrupt, to promote fear, and sadly, to consciously cause chaos. Yet, within this cosmic soup, hopefully appropriately reliable mechanisms will be developed to allow the objective goal of the work to be recognized, evaluated, distilled, and ultimately judged and acknowledged based on the underlying science, results, and outcomes. And here is the challenge- what does it mean to have your work published in a “reputable scientific way”? And what is the reliable role of AI and the gold rush or revolution that AI has catalyzed?

So how do we as authors navigate this ever-changing “space”, now maybe better described as the universe of publishing, in a way that conveys one’s message in a truthful, reliable, justifiable, scientific, comprehensive, readable form of publication (or maybe a better term is “understandable form”, because in the future it may not be “written”). How can we trust the data, the journal, the authors, and believe the message?

So, here is the world of publication where this book belongs, and where both the novice as well as the more experienced surgical author can improve their insight into the modern era of what used to be called “publication” but which now has expanded into the world of “communication”. The aim of this book is the brainchild of three experienced editors/writers (and indirectly publishers) who describe so much of the current playing field of publication- how, who, where, when, concerns, gauntlets, pitfalls, dangers, and successes.

Dr. Abe Fingerhut has 55+ years of providing insightful advice and educating authors in so many aspects of starting and maintaining their careers in the world of publishing- this has been his passion and his mission, and this book represents the culmination of his long, storied career.

Dr. Desmond Winters, current editor-in-chief of the *British Journal of Surgery (BJS)*, brings with him the imprimatur of the long history of the *BJS* with its uniquely enviable organization of superb, detailed scientific review, and a journal in which

Dr. Fingerhut has played a major role in education as well. These two more classic “surgical” editors are complimented by a newer breed of editor Dr. Steven Wexner who adds a more ensconced position in the ever-expanding universe of, for want of a better term, the “connectivity” of the social media(s). These three surgeons have recruited well-known authors to write chapters that address both the classic and now the more “virtual” space of publishing; the book discusses the pros and cons of each and how they might best be used individually as well as together to enhance the education of our hallowed house of surgery.

The book addresses a basic overview of publishing, such as the basics of writing a scientific study concerning language and writing style(s), organization, structure, and the important aspects of construction of tables and figures. Many of the chapters, as well as emphasizing aspects such as conciseness and clarity, address in a useful, straightforward, but still erudite and not overpowering text the appropriate use of statistics, need for a clear and comprehensive reference list, and the importance of an abstract (because that is where many, perhaps most readers start). Indeed, the abstract needs to provide an overview that hopefully will lure in the readers into exploring and evaluating more of the depth of the publication; one of my mentors told me “make the abstract sexy” (and he didn’t mean from a romantic standpoint! Hah) so the reader will WANT to read the article.

In addition to this more classic approach toward successful publication of the submission/article, the current era demands a discussion of several important topics, such as the electronic methods of “research” employing systematic reviews and meta-analyses which have become recently much more prominent as educational and academic tools, the need for accurate, justified, and truly meaningful epidemiologic mining of databases, current arguments addressing use and misuse of peer review, and alas, unfortunately, the presence and recognition of scientific misconduct, plagiarism, and fabrication/misrepresentation of data (a real concern now with too much politicization of data according to ideology and the still adolescent stage of AI and its possibility of what has been called “hallucination”).

I would like to highlight a few of the chapters that the spectrum of potential authors will find indelibly useful in their endeavors as well as alerting them to avoid and recognize mistakes.

First: “THE NON-NATIVE ENGLISH-SPEAKING AUTHOR”. This chapter astutely addresses the non-English-speaking authors for whom English is not their native language. Consider with me the daunting task of conveying one’s detailed and often intricate work in a language which is not the author’s first language (try to imagine having grown up learning to read and write in characters and then having to change to an alphabet-based language) or the author living/working in an environment where ready access to the internet is not always possible (yes these places still exist). The chapter on foreign authors provides great suggestions to get started. And I want to stress that there are very good editing services that the non-English-speaking authors can utilize to help with the writing of the text and the writing style (unfortunately they are not free).

Second: “EQUATOR”, which stands for Enhancing the QUALity and Transparency Of health Research. This chapter provides a formal, now universally accepted framework for consistent and comprehensive presentation of data across different disciplines, institutions, countries, and topics, such that the relevant explanation of methods and their form of presentation are uniform and inclusive—not just for RCTs using CONSORT or epidemiologic studies using STROBE or systematic reviews using PRISMA, but also for the spectrum of different topic, such as case reports, animal studies, studies addressing quality improvement, the ever increasing work on genetic associations, and many more avenues of research.

Third: “DEALING WITH A REJECTED ARTICLE”. I ask everyone reading this to rethink their response to their first rejection (and I will challenge the readers as well as virtually all scientists who believe that no one including themselves has never had a submission rejected)! What a great (though often somewhat painful) way to learn; I have many times learned more from the review of a submission that was rejected than from one that was accepted. I compliment the authors and their insight into including this chapter.

Fourth: “OPEN ACCESS JOURNALS, PREDATORY JOURNALS, and PUBLISHERS”. Yes, the concept of open access is laudatory, and as has often been said, any true scientist would readily support Open Access—BUT the real world is that the financial environment of publishing and the distribution of data and studies does not and cannot realistically support universal free open access. Many journals have struggled with this and have come up with various ways to help to financially support the “service” of information distribution, even going so far as to suggest that philanthropic organizations support the costs. But far too many of the newly started open access “journals” lack an expert peer review, and in some cases lack any

review at all, will “publish” anything for a price, put out non-reviewed, non-vetted or even fabricated articles—all for the price of their service to “publish” the submission. Obviously, these predatory journals are to be condemned!

So, in summary, here in this comprehensive albeit concise source is where young authors should start. Undoubtedly, much of the current world of publishing will change, but we as authors should strive to uphold science, truthfulness, and integrity.

NOTE: none of the text I have written was generated by AI, only human intelligence (HI).

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