

Good Writing and Good Reporting to Enhance the Impact of Articles and Journals

Karen Shashok

Co-coordinator, AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean, Granada, Spain and Shiraz, Iran

Although English is currently considered the international language of science, most researchers who are now active, and therefore most readers and writers of research articles, may not use English as their first language. Although all writers regardless of their native language must work hard to acquire good writing, reporting and publication skills, the challenges of effective research communication are greater for non-native users of English. Differences in language skills and inequities in access to high-quality writing assistance may skew the international science literature by favoring the publication of research by native writers, while placing non-native writers at a competitive disadvantage in the publication game.

The potential this situation creates to marginalize important contributions to scientific knowledge from emerging research communities should not be ignored, and a number of organizations and institutions involved in research editing and publishing are working to increase awareness of the problem. Unfortunately, the resources available

to level the playing field for researchers in non-native English research settings are currently limited. To make matters worse, journal editors and publishers that were previously willing and able to provide free substantive editing or copyediting to make accepted manuscripts easier to read and understand have for the most part withdrawn this service to authors, because they lack the budget, staff and time, or possibly out of a desire to maximize profits in the case of commercial, for-profit science publishers.

The AuthorAID concept¹ is a response to inadequacies in the support for writing and publishing available to researchers from settings where English is not the first language. AuthorAID projects aim to strengthen research publication capacity in several ways. For researchers, projects provide manuscript editing and training in good writing, reporting and publication skills. For editors, projects provide manuscript editing support and advice about effective editorial policies and practice. For

Corresponding Author:

Karen Shashok, Compositor
Ruiz Aznar 12, 2-A, 18008
Granada, Spain
Tel: +98-711-9373566193
Email: kshashok@kshashok.com

both researchers and editors, AuthorAID projects provide training in appropriate writing and publication ethics—an area that currently receives considerable attention from editors. The proliferation of copy-and-paste writing is forcing editors and publishers to reconsider definitions of plagiarism (or words, of ideas, or both?) and the meaning of "original contribution" as it applies to research writing.²

The AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean (AAEM) project³⁻⁶ has been helping researchers to write better manuscripts and improve their chances of acceptance. Some guidance about good writing from AAEM is offered below. Researchers are encouraged to provide the same quality in manuscripts for national and regional journals as for international journals, since the former are likely to be available internationally on the internet and through bibliographic databases even though they are published locally. After all, if the findings are important enough to publish, they are worth publishing in a way that will make a favorable impression on readers around the world regardless of the journal's place of publication.

The introduction section should be used to attract the reader's attention by explaining what question the research was designed to answer, and by identifying which researchers or health care practitioners need to know the results. In addition, the introduction should allow the reader to understand why it is important to know the answer to the research question. For example, can the findings be used to improve the quality of care, avoid treatment errors, or help to understand a mechanism of illness or health?

The end of the introduction section should contain a statement of purpose to explain what solution the authors proposed and briefly explain what kind of study or experiment was done to test the solution. This definition of the aim of the study is important to focus the article on the original findings, and also to guide the discussion of the findings and their implications with reference specifically to the purpose of the study.

If the results section reports the data clearly and

in a logical order, readers will be able to foresee the conclusions, and will be more likely to find the article rigorous and convincing. The discussion section should provide an answer the question asked in the introduction—which is what the readers want to know when they reach the end of the article.

"Writing" usually refers to proficiency in the use of language; in contrast, "reporting" refers to the accuracy and transparency of the information about the methods and results. A manuscript written in excellent English may not report the technical information well, and a manuscript in which the technical information is reported rigorously may not be well written in terms of English usage. Like the writing quality, the reporting quality influences how the reader perceives the scientific rigor of the research. Editors, statisticians and methodologists have developed useful instruments to improve the reporting quality of research manuscripts, and researchers should use these tools, which are available free online in the form of checklists.^{7,8}

Even though it is can be challenging to write well in English, it can be risky to copy text from other articles. If the source of the text is not referenced correctly, copying may result unintentionally in plagiarism. Some editors believe that plagiarism occurs even though some of the words in the copied text have been changed, if the text has been paraphrased, or even if the text has been translated from another language. There is no consensus yet among journal editors about the exact definition of plagiarism, so it is better to avoid the risk entirely by writing all parts of the manuscript in the authors' original words. For now, the only exception some editors find acceptable is for specific methods that must be described accurately to ensure that the study is reproducible. Another good reason to avoid copying and pasting is because the English may not be very good even in articles written by native users of the language, and even in articles in the most prestigious journals.⁹

In summary, a well-written article will use the simplest language possible so that the meaning is

clear to all readers. Busy researchers do not have time to read the same sentence or paragraph more than once to understand it. The results, analyses and conclusions will be reported in a rigorous manner that emphasizes the important new findings but does not exaggerate their generalizability. To be rigorous and make a favorable first impression, a manuscript should be checked carefully before it is submitted to correct errors in technical information about the design, sample size, methods, statistical tests and numerical data. A simple, rigorous article is more likely to convince the reviewers, editors and other readers that the research was done carefully and that the results can be trusted. If the article is readable and convincing, it has a better chance of making a useful impact on health care and research. In addition, it will enhance the reputation of the authors, their institution, and the journal that has published the research.

Acknowledgements

I thank Dr Farhad Handjani, Co-coordinator of AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean, and Shiraz University of Medical Sciences in Shiraz, Iran, for making it possible for AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean to offer writing and publishing support to researchers and editors in the Eastern Mediterranean, Middle East and Western Asian regions. I also thank the volunteer editors who generously donate their time and skills to AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean.

References

1. AuthorAID. Wikipedia entry. Available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AuthorAID>. Accessed 25 January 2011.
2. Habibzadeh F, Shashok K. Plagiarism in scientific writing: words or ideas? *Croatian Med J* 2011; in press.
3. Shashok K. AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean: A communication bridge between mainstream and emerging research communities. *European Science Editing* 2009;35(3):106-108. Available at http://www.ease.org.uk/pdfesearcharticlesnov09/EATW_correspondence106-8.pdf. Accessed 27 January 2011.
4. Shashok K. 2010. Aiding authors in the Eastern Mediterranean. *Ethical Editing* 2010;2(3):5-6. Available at <http://publicationethics.org/newsletters>. Accessed 27 January 2011.
5. Shashok K. How AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean helps researchers become authors. *The Write Stuff* 2010;9(1):43-6. Available at http://www.emwa.org/JournalPDFs/J_V19_I.pdf. Accessed 27 January 2011.
6. Shashok K, Handjani F. Enhancing the quality of research publication: AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean. *Journal of the Tehran University Heart Center* 2010;5(4):169-71. Available at http://journals.tums.ac.ir/description.aspx?org_id=59&culture_var=en&journal_id=18&segment=en. Accessed 27 January 2011.
7. The CONSORT Group. The CONSORT statement.. Available at <http://www.consort-statement.org/consort-statement/overview0/>. Accessed 25 January 2011.
8. EQUATOR Network. Enhancing the QUALity and Transparency Of health Research. Available at <http://www.equator-network.org>. Accessed 25 January 2011.
9. Vasconcelos SMR. Writing up research in English: Choice or necessity? *Rev Col Bras Cir* 2007;34:1-2.