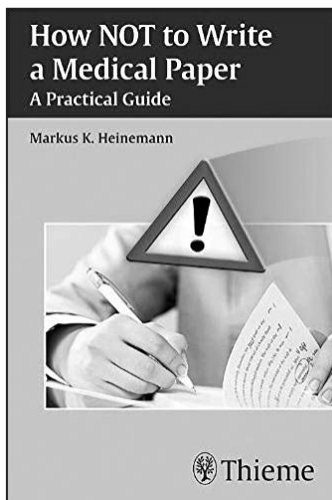


How NOT to Write a Medical Paper: A Practical Guide

Markus K. Heinemann, Thieme Medical Publishers 2016, ISBN-13: 978-9385062292



The author, an experienced surgeon and Editor-in-Chief of The Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgeon, intended to provide a practical manual on how to write a medical paper acceptable for publication, addressed particularly to inexperienced authors.

The book has a handy format and is organised in short, clearly defined sections, going from why editors accept or reject manuscripts, through

different types of scientific articles, manuscript components, the reviewing process, publication ethics, and several other relevant issues, the whole flanked by some introductory and final remarks. All this makes the book easy to browse through, indeed like a manual or a pocket guide. Moreover, it contains numerous examples, in line with the practical goal-oriented approach. However, the actual ready-to-use advice is not always so easy to find.

Even though the overall structure of the book is very clear, some parts lack cohesion. Some examples, though interesting, may be difficult to understand for a beginner as the author does not provide enough context and guidance. Starting sections with an example does not help, either: it could be a good exercise in a writing class but it does not facilitate using a book intended as a writing guide. It is also confusing that editors' comments are cited as "bad examples".

To make it worse, the book contains a number of superficial and/or imprecise statements, and also some substantive errors. For example, in the section on article types, the author seems to classify studies as prospective, retrospective, and observational. This conflicts with the widely used classification for human studies, which can be divided into observational and interventional, with prospective and retrospective design being possible within both of these categories. The author also confuses reviews in general with the systematic review subcategory, while the narrative review is just left out. By the way, it is not perfectly clear what he means by a "medical paper" and so what "studies" he refers to. In fact, much of the information provided throughout the book seems to be tailored for surgeons. While this is comprehensible given the author's background, it is not always suitable for all medical disciplines.

It is also hard to agree with the statement that there is no space for storytelling in scientific writing. On the contrary, every scientific paper should be a clear and complete story of a well-designed, meticulously conducted and analysed study. In fact, many scientific manuscripts are hard to understand because their authors do not manage to report their work as interesting and coherent scientific stories.

Finally, some pieces of advice on the writing strategy scattered throughout the book may be misleading. For example, determining which citations should be dealt with in the discussion when planning the study – as the author suggests – may actually limit the interpretation of the study results, if not lead to misinterpretations.

Despite all the flaws and glitches, the book remains a relatively pleasant read. The author is a witty writer, making an effort to keep the reader interested. Amused by some of his pointed comments, we may overlook the structural imperfections of his book. It is also obvious he has a sharp editorial eye for various faults that a medical manuscript may have. The book does contain a few interesting insights for those who are patient (or experienced) enough to find them, and also several valid references. In particular, the author's considerations on the authorship of scientific publications and the ethical issues behind may be very helpful for junior writers and may also be a good reminder for more senior ones. The chapters on the review and revision process, and on the publication ethics are entirely a good read, and some of the miscellaneous issues clarified in the "Good-to-Know" chapter are indeed good to know.

All in all, the book has numerous flaws but also some merits. Clearly written from a medical editor's perspective, it might be helpful, to some extent, as a manual of critical reading, and for teaching junior authors how to check and improve their own manuscripts before submission. As such, it is indeed a guide on how not to write, consistent with the book title. It is not, however, a step-by-step guide offering help at the manuscript planning and writing stages, as the author hopes, from the introduction till the very end. Given all the imperfections, I would consider reading it as a potentially educating exercise for junior medical editors – but still, to be used with caution.

Katarzyna Szymańska
Science to the Point