

Chapter-21

Writing a ‘Short Communication’

Ali Madeeh Hashmi

Introduction

There is no definition of short communications according to the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE).¹ However, it is generally understood that a **short (or brief) communication** is a concise, independent report representing a significant contribution to science. Sometimes, the term ‘Short Communication’ is confused or used interchangeably with ‘Special or Rapid Communication’ although the two terms differ as explained below. Short communications are generally not intended to publish preliminary results of an ongoing or recently concluded study unless the results are of exceptional interest and particular relevance. In general, the length of a short communication is restricted to 2500 words (some journals may allow up to 3500 words). It may include two figures or tables, and should have at least 8 references. Unlike a full length paper, ‘Methods’, ‘Results’ and ‘Discussion’ may be combined into a single section in a Short Communication.² Not all journals accept short communications so authors need to check before submission whether their intended journal will accept their submission.

‘Rapid communications’³ are similar to ‘short communications’. These are usually articles used to disseminate preliminary results that are original, of high interest and likely to have a significant impact on the relevant scientific community. In the healthcare field, this can include information that is urgent from a public health perspective or findings in a rapidly

changing specialty (e.g. Infectious Disease). Their format is similar to short communications in terms of word count, tables and number of references.

“Special Communications” can sometimes address topics such as medical humanities.⁴

Short/Rapid communications are generally peer-reviewed and many journals will prioritize the publication of this type of paper (policies vary from journal to journal). Some publishers have journals dedicated especially to short communications which address ‘new ideas, controversial opinions, negative results and more’.³

WRITING A SHORT COMMUNICATION

Even though short communications differ from full length papers (as outlined above) authors would be well advised to approach writing a short communication the same way as writing an original article. The following steps can help guide the way.⁵ Most of these steps can apply to writing other types of articles as well:

1. Determine the list and rank of authors.

Ideally this should be done while the study is still ongoing. This will avoid misunderstandings and hurt feelings later. All journals have established criteria for authorship including how to determine author order. These should be strictly followed. Simply filling out a few forms or entering data into SPSS does not automatically entitle a person to authorship. ‘Ghost authorship’ is a serious violation of publication ethics and every authentic journal has policies in place to prevent and penalize such acts. If the short communication is about an ongoing study, the writing should ideally begin while the study is still ongoing.

2. Decide when to submit

If your preliminary findings represent a ‘complete story’ you can begin the process of submission.

3. Write a title and an abstract

This helps clarify what you want to include in your paper.

4. Determine the basic format of the paper

We have already outlined what short communications consist of. Before you begin writing the full paper, make sure the results or data that you plan to report fulfill the requirements. You may find on reflection that your findings are too broad (or perhaps not original enough) to warrant a short communication in which case you may want to save them for a full length paper.

5. Select the journal you want to submit to

There are multiple factors that will determine which journal you target for your paper. However, one essential feature is that any journal which you consider must have a peer-review process in place. This will also help you avoid ‘predatory publishers’ which invite authors to publish in their journal in exchange for money.⁶ ‘Predatory Publishing’ has become a huge business in recent years with hundreds of these so-called ‘journals’ popping up all over the world.

There are dozens of medical journals in Pakistan, most of dubious quality. The Pakistan Medical and Dental Council recognizes a large number of medical journals.⁷ Many of these journals have no international ranking or standing outside of Pakistan. The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC) uses a more rigorous method of evaluating the quality of journals and ranks them according to various criteria with journals having an ‘Impact Factor’ (Category W) at the top.⁸ HEC’s ‘Tenure Track System’ recognizes only publications in Impact Factor journals for the purpose of promotion and tenure. Currently only three medical journals in Pakistan have an ‘Impact Factor’: Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences (PJMS), Journal of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Pakistan (JCPSP) and Journal of the Pakistan Medical Association (JPMA). If possible, authors should target these journal in order to ensure international exposure for their publications. It is also important to consider publication charges which can vary from Rs. 1000 to Rs. 25000. Many reputable journals will reduce or waive charges for articles with findings of special value to their readership.

6. Write an outline of the paper followed by a first draft

It is important to have a ‘road map’ in mind before you begin writing the paper and as you go along. This is equally important if there are multiple authors each working on different sections of the paper. Take care to align the writing style into a single ‘voice’ if multiple authors have written different sections. The final ‘consensus version’ will usually be developed by the first author and approved by all other authors. While writing the first draft, some people find that writing ‘sequentially’ from the Introduction onwards works best for them. Others can jump back and forth between sections without any problems. Find the style that works best for you and remember that even a single written line is better than a blank piece of paper or a blank screen. Remember the one cardinal rule of writing: Don’t edit as you write. Try to get through the first draft as quickly as possible. Editing is much easier than writing and can be done later.

7. Revise your manuscript

This can follow three general steps:

- (i) Make major alterations in the paper such as filling in information gaps, correcting any major mistakes and restructuring the writing to make sure the paper has a logical and narrative ‘flow’.
- (ii) Polish the manuscript to refine the text and correct grammar and spelling mistakes. This is an essential aspect of writing and revising your paper in Pakistan where most authors, including medical faculty, are weak in writing coherent, idiomatic English. If you are unsure of your command over written English, have someone with good English language skills edit the paper for you. The one thing you want to avoid is to have your paper rejected by the journal because of poor English. It does not matter how significant your findings if you cannot communicate them to the journal and to your intended audience.

(iii) Format the document according to the requirements of your chosen journal. This should be done at the end after you have finalized your manuscript so you do not have to keep going back and re-doing it as you edit the manuscript.

8. *Check your references*

This will depend on which journal you are targeting for publication. Check and make sure all references are cited in the format required by the journal. Double check to make sure the references are numbered correctly and each reference corresponds to the correct number within the text. Provide DOI numbers for all references if possible (to make it easier for the journal editor and the reviewers).

9. *Prepare the final manuscript*

Write the final title and abstract and prepare your title page including the final list of authors/author order. Re-read the journal's 'Instructions to authors' and make sure your manuscript is correctly formatted. Send the final version of the paper to all authors to get their feedback (and to revise again if needed).

10. *Final submission*

Once the final checks are complete, you can submit the manuscript after checking to make sure about the proper procedure. Most journals now, including the three Pakistani Impact Factor Journals listed above, require online submission of manuscripts. This requires that the manuscript be properly formatted according to the journal requirements and that all tables and illustrations be prepared beforehand. Remember that corrections or revisions will be difficult once the manuscript has been submitted so if necessary, delay your submission for a day or two while you correct any errors. Many journals allow (or encourage) a 'pre-review' where the manuscript can be sent to the editor before formal submission to see if the journal will accept it for a full review. This saves time for both the journal and the authors. Once accepted for a full review, the journal

may request you to submit a list of potential reviewers. Most journals nowadays allow authors (or at least the corresponding author) to check the status of the manuscript on the journal website.

11. *Dealing with reviewer's comments*

Most manuscripts are not accepted on first submission ('invited articles' may be exceptions). Usually, the journal will inform you in a matter of weeks that your manuscript has been reviewed and you will be asked to respond to the reviewer's comments. Usually, you will be given a week to respond failing which your paper will be either sent back to you or put on hold. Being a reviewer for a peer-reviewed journal is a rather thankless task so take that into account when responding. Remember that peer-reviews are usually anonymous. Neither you nor the reviewer know each other. Use tact when responding to reviewer's comments or queries. All queries need to be addressed (even if you decline to make a change in response to a particular query). Usually, changes in the text need to be made in bold or otherwise highlighted to make it easier for a second review. Remember that being asked to revise your paper means there is a good chance it will be published eventually. Rejected manuscripts are usually not sent back to authors for revision. At all costs, avoid rude or personal comments about the reviewers in your response. If you disagree with their comments or do not wish to revise your paper according to their observations, you are free to retract the paper and re-submit to another journal. You will, in that case, have to re-format or otherwise re-write your manuscript.

12. *Final Steps*

Generally, after one (or rarely two) reviews, your paper will be accepted for publication and you will be sent page proofs of the article for your approval. You normally have 48 hours to correct these and send back. They will generally be accompanied by queries which can be addressed in the text.

No major re-writing or alterations in the paper can be done at this stage without prior permission of the editor. Correct any typos and factual errors and read the paper one more time for accuracy. This is your last chance to ensure accuracy before it appears in print.

The advantages and disadvantages of Short/Rapid Communications

Short communications offer several advantages over full research papers although, obviously, they cannot replace them. Some of the benefits of short communications include:

- * The findings can be tailored to a specific community and can be as narrow or as broad as possible.
- * The most interesting and salient points are highlighted with details to follow in a later paper.
- * Many journals offer rapid publication for short communications especially if the findings are highly original or time sensitive. Some journals may even offer to waive the peer review process in place of editorial review for a short communication.

Some disadvantages include limited space in which to present your relevant findings and less weight given to short communications in matters of promotion and tenure. Beware of building a research CV that has a lot of short communications.

In summary, short communications have a useful place in the literature. They can be used to rapidly disseminate important preliminary information from ongoing studies and can be fast-tracked for publication. It is important while writing a short communication to keep the basics of writing a research article in mind. Short communications cannot replace full length articles and too many of them in an author's research CV may hinder rather than help academic prospects.

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1. Ali M. Hashmi, MBBS, MD.
Diplomate American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology,
Associate Professor of Psychiatry,
King Edward Medical University/Mayo Hospital,
Lahore, Pakistan.
Email: ahashmi39@gmail.com