

A Writer's Rubric
or
An Algorithm to Efficiently
Organize and Write a
Manuscript©

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Begin Before the Beginning

- Scribble or type a list of topics, themes, ideas, conclusions, in any order
- Work for about 15 minutes and then **reward yourself** with a latte or a quick peek at the Tivo'd Daily Show

Create a Scaffold

- Using the **Instructions for Authors** contained on the Web site of every journal, set up the major headings/sections of the paper
- You are now not looking at a blank screen and can treat yourself to a **snack or a latte**

Put on the Sorting Hat

- Insert fragments from the scribbled list into the scaffolding sections, eg, background? result? discussion?
- Pen a meaningful topic sentence for the fragments. Note: meaningful means an original idea that sets up the issue to be discussed in that section or paragraph
- Continue to fill in the space under the topic sentences by moving entries around, and by adding entries from the scribbled list
- Pull out your Endnote Library and troll around

Put on the Sorting Hat (continued)

- Note ideas for tables, boxes, figures
- Re-check rules for authors as to formatting requirements
- Note areas that require further thought or discussion
- Go for a run or a ride

Write an Introduction

- Do not reinvent the wheel - go back to the grant, proposal, RFP
- **Content:** The introduction is your promise to the reader
- **Style:** Write the way that you speak, but not conversationally

Content of Introduction

- The introduction is your promise to the reader (in 3 paragraphs or less)
- Describe the **background**, **raison d'être** of the study, the reason your findings are **relevant**, and (if you're feeling gutsy) the **contribution** you have made
- Close the intro with a **road map** of what the reviewer/reader will find in the paper

Style of Introduction

- Write the way that you speak, **but not** conversationally
- Be **economical** in your articulation: Avoid connectors, descriptors, or transitions that you would not feel comfortable saying aloud, or presenting orally (eg, hence, thusly, etc)
- **Read** your introduction **aloud** to yourself to see if it rings true and sounds sensible
- **Call it a day**

Write the Easy Parts First

- Good bets for knocking off sections are the **Methodology** and **Results** sections
- **Methods:** Carefully track the research protocol, and if you repeat or reproduce a part of the protocol as stated in your original proposal, **do not** paraphrase or change verbiage

Results/Discussion

(Pull out the scribbled list again)

Framing the Content

- What grabbed you about your results?
- Was there an expected or unexpected finding? If you are presenting something new, build the case in a logical order – eg, is this study the result of a long line of similar research that is “confirmatory, but”?
- Is it presenting a new theory to explain an old phenomenon? Is it rebutting a long-held belief in the field?
- Does it have implications for research policy or social policy?
- Will it be a useful “tear-out” with pragmatic clinical utility?

Discussion

- **Actually speak to the reader**
- **Argue** your case with the **facts** that you've set forth formulaically in the **Results** sections
- Use *I.A.C. (Idea - Analysis - Conclusion)*
- Check each paragraph against the next: be certain that you are **connecting the dots** for the readers, not bludgeoning them

Styling Your Discussion

Using the topic sentences you've already drafted, write stand-alone paragraphs following the "I.A.C." rubric:

- **Idea** (the topic sentence)
- **Analysis** (the clinical, microbiologic, biochemical, social, economic, explanation of the result)
- **Concluding** sentence which sums up the analysis, and often will serve as a transition to the next paragraph

Styling Your Discussion

(continued)

- If you find that you are stuck, and cannot create an I.A.C. paragraph for a particular result, go back to the topic sentence, and make sure that it is worthy of a whole finding/result
- Consider whether you have enough (interesting) results to merit another paper (After this one is completed)

Anticipate Possible Criticism

- **Careful, not defensive, explanation**
- Anticipate critique of your methodology or study design and present the reasoning behind your choices
- Your design and study criteria were well thought out in the beginning – now is not the time to have a crisis of confidence

Conclude With a Send-off

- **A conclusion is not a repetition**
- Take the bully pulpit, and set a course
- Set a research agenda; get others interested in your field
- Create some controversy that is well-founded on the basis of your findings

Some Practical Advice

- **Return to the Instructions for Authors** and re-check formatting requirements, word length, formatting of references, suggested number of references, advice about graphics, the works
- **Print hard copy** of the manuscript, and **proof it** for substance by **reading it aloud once, making hard copy corrections** (You will be amazed at what you will find to self-edit)
- **Then**, and only then, run **spell check**
- **Wait a day, re-read**, and with a sigh of relief, **hit the send key** to your co-authors, or friendly readers