

Essentials of writing biomedical research papers, second edition

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McGraw-Hill Book Company, Suite 2310, One Hung To Road, Kwun Tong, Kowloon, Hong Kong
US\$95.00, pp 440, ISBN 0 07 134544 2

The amount of new biomedical literature that the world gets bombarded with these days may sometimes seem overwhelming. Yet, research results need to be reported in peer-reviewed journals and researchers need to publish regularly. Journal publication, whether on paper or on-line, is here to stay. However, it is not just the formal end-point of a research project; it is an integral part of research that documents new information gleaned from an investigation, and in so doing inspires more research, in an endless search for truth. Peer review of manuscripts and grant proposals, journalology, meta-analysis, evidence-based medicine, and worldwide database access are elements of this search for the truth.

Unfortunately, as the author of *Essentials of Writing Biomedical Research Papers* points out, many biomedical research papers lose the forest for the trees. The message of a paper gets lost or, even worse, misunderstood. So it is a shame that scientists and novice authors do not always receive the help and instruction needed to produce clear writing. This important skill takes time to nurture, and—like most skills—requires training and practice. Fortunately, through years of collecting examples and refining lecture material, Mimi Zeiger has compiled a hands-on workbook of journal snippets to help authors hone their biomedical writing skills. To be more precise, Zeiger presents what good style is by working through sentences and paragraphs, and showing the ‘before’ and ‘after’ versions, thereby teaching readers how to edit their own work. *Essentials of Writing Biomedical Research Papers* is extremely detailed and analytical, and it contains many useful exercises. I recommend delving into particular sections and concentrating on

specific areas—for example, writing abstracts, choosing a title, presenting data—rather than to work through the book from start to end. This approach will especially help novice authors to start preparing a draft manuscript.

The first three chapters are actually most useful after a draft has been prepared. They contain hints for improving the sense and style of sentences and paragraphs, and increasing the coherence between them. Common problems such as noun strings, dangling modifiers, and parallel structures, as well as pet-hate words among editors, such as ‘with’, ‘for’, ‘occurred’, ‘as’, and ‘while’, are dealt with in these introductory chapters. The book ends usefully with a complete manuscript that can be edited according to the style points learned earlier.

Essentials of Writing Biomedical Research Papers is suitable for authors and editors alike, and for medics as well as basic scientists (this second edition contains new examples and exercises on molecular biology). I hope that, as readers work through the book, they do not find too many traps into which articles of the *Hong Kong Medical Journal* have fallen! I also hope that, as an educational exercise, readers notice when points of good style under discussion are illustrated in the Journal. This task might be difficult: the test of good editing is that it seems invisible.

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Oncologic therapies

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Springer-Verlag Hong Kong Ltd., 1702 Tower I, Enterprise Square, 9 Sheung Yuet Road, Kowloon, Hong Kong
HK\$381.00, pp 1236, ISBN 3 540 64052 5

Rather than simply being a comprehensive handbook for physicians who treat cancer patients, *Oncologic*

Therapies is a hybrid of a handbook and textbook of oncology. The editors aim to cover the principles and

therapies of oncology in a practical manner and provide a comprehensive multidisciplinary approach to cancer management. This 'handbook' starts with 10 concise chapters on the fundamentals and complications of therapeutic modalities ranging from chemotherapy to immunotherapy. Each author successfully presents the concepts in a well-structured manner and provides a broad overview of particular cancer therapies. Each chapter gives a brief summary of the epidemiology, pathology, and tumour staging—all basic information that is readily available in other textbooks. However, strong emphasis is placed on state-of-the-art therapy. The authors highlight the main controversial issues related to cancer therapy, emphasise the key problems related to each cancer site, and provide a comprehensive discussion of the existing clinical data. In the situation where existing information is inconclusive, the authors try to provide up-to-date data from ongoing clinical trials as well as from their own personal experience. This information gives readers a sense of direction for future development. The final few chapters are devoted to supportive care, biostatistics, and medical ethics. These important topics are frequently ignored in handbooks, although the information is pertinent to most clinical oncologists. These chapters will be helpful to junior oncologists learning how to design or organise clinical trials.

I appreciated the editors' approach to the selection of references for this handbook. They have made extra effort to assure that the list is thorough but not exhaustive. For example, only 28 references are included in the chapter on non-small-cell lung cancer. Each reference bears a significant impact on the practice of oncology, and the list provides a solid resource for further learning. The authors frequently include conference abstracts in the reference list, which

probably reflects their emphasis on current information from ongoing clinical trials.

The authors have intentionally left out the specifics of chemotherapy regimens and dosing, and they suggest that the reader refers to primary sources of this information. The reason given by the editors is to avoid the possibility of an occasional typographical error. The main function of a handbook, however, is to provide a convenient reference. Because the editors have targeted general internists who have an interest in oncology and junior oncologists to be their prime readers, this audience would appreciate a quick reference to chemotherapy regimens while working in the ward. The handbook could serve this purpose by including this important information; unnecessary typographical errors could be avoided by careful editing.

A shortcoming of this handbook lies in its physical size rather than content. The book is more than 5 cm thick and weighs nearly 1.5 kg. Carrying it in a laboratory-coat pocket or briefcase would be inconvenient and cumbersome. Its role as a handbook is less explicit if the clinician cannot refer to it efficiently during his or her busy daily practice, and by keeping this book on an office desk, it would have little advantage over any major oncology textbook. Nevertheless, *Oncologic Therapies* is much easier to read and comprehend than most major oncology textbooks and offers greater depth than the normal handbook.

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