

RHRC CONSORTIUM MONITORING AND EVALUATION TOOLKIT

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING FOR PROFESSIONAL JOURNALS

The process of publishing an article is a long, often frustrating, but important and ultimately rewarding exercise. The process can be partitioned into 7 steps.

Steps in publishing an article

- 1. Identify the purpose of your article.***
- 2. Choose a relevant journal-audience.***
- 3. Write following journal's criteria.***
- 4. Edit, share drafts, revise.***
- 5. Submit article to journal, following instructions.***
- 6. Revise based on reviewers' comments, resubmit.***
- 7. Make copies widely available.***

Step 1: Identify the purpose of your article

Why are you writing this article? What do you want to share? Is it the results of your survey? A new training technique that you would like to recommend to others? Your analysis of, for example, the HIV program policies of WHO or another large organization? Any of these ideas could be written up into an article.

Some purposes of writing articles could be:

- ***Reporting project results (e.g., survey findings)***

These kinds of published articles are common in journals. They describe a project's causal hypothesis (including desired impact, effects, outputs and activities) and present the evidence that show whether the causal pathway worked.

Note that merely a description of the project is not acceptable to journals (or to conference organizers). You will always need to show results.

- ***Project component description and results (e.g., training)***

This is another type of article that you will find in some journals. Instead of writing about the overall project, you can focus on a specific set of activities, such as training, supervision or logistics. Perhaps you tried a supervision system that was easier for the project and resulted in better motivation and performance by the staff. Such a finding would be interesting to share with other program managers.

As noted above, a simple description of a project component is not adequate for a published article. You have to present evidence of the success or failure of the activities.

- *Multi-project analysis*
Some published articles report activities and results from more than one project. For example, you could write an article on all the HIV prevention projects your organization runs in your region. (You might describe the similarities and differences in their causal hypotheses and causal pathways, illustrate their results, and then draw some conclusions as to the usefulness of their approaches.)
- *Literature review*
In a literature review, the author or authors summarize the existing published and unpublished reports on a particular topic to identify the range of information available and to determine if there is a consensus on how the topic is understood.
- *Policy analyses, conceptual articles*
Some articles are about organizations' policies, as they actually are or as the author(s) thinks they should be. For example, someone could analyze WHO's policy and funding decisions about HIV in the past 15 years and draw conclusions about how effective they were, what influenced them, what their future directions should be.
- *Letters to the Editor*
A *Letter to the Editor* is not an article exactly, but it can be a useful and influential piece of writing. Often, *Letters* are a response to an article already published, either disagreeing with or supporting the authors' conclusions. *Letters* have also been used to highlight a topic in which not much work has been done; this was successfully accomplished for the topics of RHR and global maternal mortality.

Step 2: Choose a relevant journal-audience

The choice of journal is in large part determined by the purpose and type of article and the audience you want to read it. These are the general types of journal:

- *Reproductive health journals*
Examples are *Studies in Family Planning*, *International Family Planning Perspectives*, *Reproductive Health Matters*, *Journal of Sex Research*.

Those who read reproductive health journals tend to be health professionals: project managers, researchers, policy makers. *You cannot assume* that readers of reproductive health journals know even the basics about refugees – definitions of refugees and displaced, numbers, where refugees are located, etc.
- *Health journals*
There are many health journals. Examples are the *Journal of the American Public Health Association*, *International Quarterly of Community Health Education*, *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*.

Readers of these journals may not know about refugees or reproductive health, so your writing should include the fundamentals.

- *Relief journals*

Examples are *Disasters*, *Forced Migration Review*, *Refugees*.

These audiences cannot be expected to know about reproductive health, so you have to be sure to explain technical terms. They do know about refugees, displaced, the effects of conflict on society.

- *Medical journals*

Examples are *The Lancet*, *International Journal of Gynecology and Obstetrics*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, *British Medical Journal*, *East Africa Medical Journal*.

Traditionally, these journals catered to a purely medical audience. But in recent years, they have published articles on applied program research, project findings, refugee issues. Thus, readers now include program managers, researchers and policy makers.

A subset of medical journals is the many journals dedicated to HIV/AIDS, such as *AIDS*. They tend to report clinical results, but some programmatic findings are also reported.

- *Social science journals*

Examples are *Social Science & Medicine*, *Demography*.

Articles published in these journals tend to address a topic from a social science perspective, such a sociology, psychology, anthropology or economics. For example, an article that addresses the changes in the social environment of adolescents and its effect on their reproductive health status might be of interest to a social science journal.

- *Journals of international, regional and national interest*

Each of the types of journals listed above might also be published with a regional or national focus. The *East Africa Medical Journal*, listed above, is one example.

It is important to learn about the journals published in your region or country, because they are excellent places to publish. The audience is others working in the region, so your findings will be of direct interest and relevance to them.

Step 3: Write, following journal's criteria

Each journal provides guidelines to authors interested in submitting an article for consideration. These are usually printed in each issue of the journal and also listed on the websites; they are called "Instructions to Authors" or "Guide to Contributors." The guide usually provides information on length and format, for example.

It is also important to keep in mind the criteria the journals will use to decide whether or not to accept your article. They are looking for articles with:

- Originality,
- Interest to scientists and/or practitioners,
- Relevance to the field,

- Coverage of appropriate existing literature,
- Adequacy of methodology, analysis and interpretation,
- Significance of contribution,
- Clear, concise and jargon-free writing,
- Logical organization.

Step 4: Edit, share drafts, revise

Writing is a long, detailed and painstaking process. *No one's* first draft is their final draft – every article goes through many reviews and revisions before it is ever submitted to a journal. You should ask colleagues in your own organization and in other organizations to read your drafts and give you critical feedback. Then revise your draft, and have it reviewed again. Be sure to obtain any necessary approvals from your own organization prior to sharing your draft more widely. It is not uncommon to go through 6 or more versions over several months before it is finally ready to be submitted.

Step 5: Submit article to journal, following instructions

The “Instructions to Authors” for the journal you have selected will tell you whether to email or mail the manuscript and, if by mail, how many copies to send. It may instruct you as to what size font to use, how to organize and label graphs and tables. Make sure to follow all the instructions.

All journals require that articles be submitted to only one journal at a time. You may not send the article to two journals simultaneously.

Step 6: Revise based on reviewers' comments, resubmit

When the Editor of the journal receives your submission, she/he will read it and decide if it fits the general purpose of the journal. (Since you will have carefully selected the journal, this should not be a problem.) The Editor will then send your article to 2 or 3 health professionals who are expert in your topic (these are the “peer reviewers” in a “peer review” journal), *but first the Editor will remove all the authors' names and affiliations*. The reviewers, therefore, do not know whose article they are reviewing. Similarly, you will never know who the reviewers are. It is a double-blind process.

Each reviewer will send confidential comments to the Editor including a recommendation as to whether the article should be:

- accepted, with few or no revisions,
- reconsidered after substantial revisions, or
- rejected.

The reviewers will also prepare detailed comments for the authors, which the Editor will send to the lead author along with the final decision of the journal.

If they have asked you to revise and resubmit, read the reviewers' comments carefully. You do not have to make every suggestion they recommend, but very often the comments are extremely helpful in improving the article. After you make the revisions, send the article back to the journal. It might go through one or more rounds of review and revision.

If the journal rejected your article, they will usually tell you why. A common reason is that the topic is not pertinent to the journal. If that is the case, you can submit it to another journal.

Step 7: Make copies widely available

The main advantage of publishing in a journal is that a permanent record of your work is created. Your article will be permanently available in libraries and through Internet searches. Even in 10 years, if someone does an Internet or library search for your topic anywhere in the world, your article will be listed and the searcher can find your article in back issues of the journal (more and more frequently on the Internet). If your work is only written up in project reports, it is very unlikely that anyone could learn from it in the future.

You should also distribute copies of your article to colleagues in your own organization and in other organizations working in the region, since they may not receive the journal and will not know the article is published. Be sure to ask the journal if you may post your article to your organization's and the RHRC Consortium's web sites, and then email the final version of the article to the web manager to do so.

Note that journals are not an effective means of distributing project information to the community; they are really for professionals. So, be sure to use other means to feed project information back to the community.

Example [Click here](#) for an outline to guide you in writing an article for a professional journal.