

## Style matters

### The nuts and bolts of writing papers

#### Number 1. References

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It may be a boast, but I do believe that I am the only person who actually reads every paper in every issue of the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, and I am not even a psychiatrist. Nor, do I suppose, am I a lunatic. The marvel of the matter is that I am paid to read them all. However, the lamentable fact is that what I do, and I freely admit it, is unnecessary. What, after all, could a layman like myself hope to contribute? Some dedicated souls devote their time and energy to research, they take time and trouble to write up their results, in the happy event that they amount to anything, they then show the papers to their high-handed colleagues (or at least they should), and they send them to the *Journal*. They are refereed, rewritten, re-refereed, and, if not rejected, passed to me. I ask again, what could I hope to contribute?

This is my bid to make myself redundant – the charade has gone on long enough. I shall tell you what I do, and, as you might say, procuring my own exit event, I shall leave you to do it yourselves.

This then is the first in a series of articles on how to win friends and influence people (to borrow a phrase) in the world of learned journals. I fully appreciate that for someone whose profession it is to amend other people's writing to start writing himself is to enter a lions' den. However, psychiatrists above all others, I might hope, know that none of us is (could I hope to get away with 'are?') perfect, and the prospect of an easier life is a large carrot indeed.

The first article had to be on a topic I could cover briefly, as this month I felt compelled to include a preamble to the series. I shall not try to be methodical in my approach, which might well have been dull; having brought dull into the matter anyway, I shall begin with references.

I imagine that most authors are tired by the time they reach the reference list. They are however an essential part of any paper, and it is important that they give (to borrow another phrase) the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Thus each entry should be correct, there should be an entry for each reference

cited in the text, and there should not be entries for references that do not appear in the text. A list of further reading is almost never required for a journal paper, although it is often a useful device in books.

A large majority of papers I see have errors in the references if nowhere else. I would just like to conjure the image of frustrated readers raining curse after awful curse upon hapless authors, who are probably wholly decent people, before offering a little advice.

#### *Practical advice*

Do not try to decipher the correct style for a reference list by reading the guide to authors. I have written such guides myself; it is by no means easy describing the positioning of dots and commas and parenthesis, and I do not suppose it is any easier following such advice. I would suggest taking an example of a journal reference with several authors and an example of a book reference with editors. Keep the two examples to hand when compiling the list, and follow them for style. Don't worry about the capitals and italics and so on – it is easy enough for the typesetter to sort that out.

The other issue is ensuring that the reference list matches up to the references cited in the text. There is only one way to do this. Sit down at your biggest desk and sweep aside for the moment the ink bottles, executive toys, paper clips, and old elastic bands. Spread out the reference list so that it is all visible. Then read through the manuscript (at the last draft stage) and, as you come to each reference in the text, make sure the spellings of authors' names, the number of authors, and the year match those in the list. Tick each entry in the list; often some text references will have been deleted at an earlier draft but left in the list – all those without a tick can be deleted. It is perfectly acceptable to submit a manuscript with a few neat ticks here and there, so you need not even print a fresh copy.

*Next month: a look at repetition.*