

Effective Medical Writing

Pointers to getting your article published

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Preparing the references

ABSTRACT

In a scientific paper, the references serve to provide background information and allow the researcher to compare and contrast the work of others in relation to his own study. Authors are responsible for the accuracy of all references cited. The references quoted should be easily accessible and retrievable by anyone wishing to obtain further information. There is a strong preference for citing journal articles listed in PubMed. The two major reference format systems are the Vancouver and Harvard systems, with increasing preference for the Vancouver system. Authors should adhere exactly to the instructions to authors of the target journal.

Keywords: citations, medical writing, references, scientific paper

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INTRODUCTION

Before starting a scientific study, it is mandatory to conduct a thorough literature search in order to have a grasp of the research that has already been done in that particular topic. Every investigation is based on the work of predecessors in the same or a similar field; this gives soundness and credibility to the study. How to conduct a literature search is beyond the scope of this article. To summarise, keyword searches using computer bibliographic databases such as PubMed are but a starting point, and should be supplemented by reading of recent review papers and other publications, and work referenced in these original research sources. It is particularly important to read and give credit to older published work which may not be adequately captured in computer-based systems. On completion of the study and during manuscript preparation, only key references should be included. Most journals prefer authors to quote a limited number of relevant and current references, even for review articles where a comprehensive list is expected.

PREPARING THE REFERENCES

References should be restricted to those that have a direct bearing on the work described by the authors. In scientific manuscripts, references generally appear in the introduction and discussion sections. In the introduction section, there should be sufficient background information provided about the topic to be investigated or discussed, with a brief summary of what has already been done in a particular field. Authors therefore need to quote relevant work by others, and should not miss out any important previous work.⁽¹⁾ In the discussion section, corroboration with previous work is important. In writing the discussion, the authors' results should be compared and contrasted with previous major and relevant published work of others. Conflicting findings from other published work should be highlighted and possible reasons for the differences discussed. Comparison and citation of work of others who have made similar findings should be included, as well as highlighting in the present work what has not been conducted in other studies.⁽²⁾ Authors are therefore required to evaluate the original sources of information in detail.

SOURCES OF REFERENCES

Authors have to be accountable for the source of their references. Failure to properly cite the reference for the source of information provided in their manuscript may possibly constitute plagiarism, i.e. credit not being given to the work of others where it is due. Although some journals provide a service of checking the accuracy of reference citations, it is the responsibility of the authors to verify every reference against the original document. Verifying the accuracy of references is particularly important for online journals to ensure correct linking of referenced articles. Authors are also responsible for checking that none of the references cited are retracted articles. As the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) considers PubMed the authoritative source for information about retraction, authors are advised to use

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PubMed to identify retracted articles by using the search term “Retracted publication”.⁽³⁾

As a general principle, all the references quoted should be easily accessible and retrievable by anyone wishing to obtain further information. There are potential limitations of sources, such as privately-published books, course syllabi, proceedings and theses. Most established journals prefer references obtained from journal articles listed in PubMed and other recognised bibliographic databases. Abstracts, whether from conference proceedings or journal supplements, are not regarded as formal publications and should not be used as references as the complete manuscript has not been peer-reviewed. Similarly, citing of a “personal communication” should be avoided, unless it provides essential information that is not available from a public source. In these exceptional cases, the name of the person and date of communication should be cited, and written permission and confirmation of the accuracy from the source of personal communication is required.⁽³⁾

References to papers that have been accepted and not yet published may be designated as “in press”. Authors should have proof that these papers have been accepted for publication before citing them. Information from manuscripts submitted for publication but not yet accepted may be designated under this category of “unpublished observations”.⁽³⁾ In general, use of “unpublished observations” are discouraged by most journals and should also be avoided unless absolutely essential. Authors should beware of using websites for references. A website can be easily created, and if the website is restructured or not maintained, information may disappear. Information from websites can change from time to time, hence the requirement to state the date the website was accessed. As a rule, authors should always aim to stick to reputable academic, institutional and professional sources.

REFERENCE FORMATS

The two major methods of referring to bibliographic material are the Harvard system and the Vancouver system. References are identified not only in the main body of the text, but may also appear in other parts of the manuscript such as tables and figure legends. In the Harvard system, the order of references at the end of the paper is placed in alphabetical order. In the text, references are listed, giving in parentheses, the surname of the author and the year of publication, e.g. (Ng, 2007). Alternatively, the author’s name may be part of sentence, in which case the reference

is quoted as such: “Ng (2007) showed that...”. If there are two authors, both names are given, e.g. (Ng and Peh, 2008). If there are more than two authors, the first author’s name is cited, followed by “et al”, e.g. (Ng et al, 2009). If several references are cited together in the text, they are listed in chronological order and separated by semicolons, e.g. (Ng, 2007; Ng and Peh, 2008; Ng et al, 2009). In the Vancouver system, references are numbered consecutively in the order in which they are quoted in the text. The references are identified by Arabic numbers, appearing in the text, usually either in parentheses, e.g. (1, 2), or as superscripts, e.g. ^{1,2}.

Box 1. Major reference formats:

- Harvard system
 - a. List of references: placed in alphabetical order.
 - b. References quoted in text: surname of author(s) and publication year are listed.
- Vancouver system
 - a. List of references: numbered consecutively in chronological order of quotation in the text.
 - b. References quoted in text: identified by Arabic numbers.

Authors should check the house style of the individual journal on whether the Vancouver or Harvard system is used. Currently, the majority of journals use or have converted to the Vancouver system. However, among individual journals, there are often minor variations in the layout/style with regard to punctuation, use of fonts (e.g. italics, bold), spacing and abbreviations. All these details, usually with illustrative examples, can be found in the “instructions to authors” or “author guidelines” of the target journal. Many major journals follow the style of the National Library of Medicine (NLM). Most authors would be familiar with PubMed, a service of the NLM that provides access to bibliographic information that includes more than 18 million citations from MEDLINE and other life science journals for biomedical articles. Certain article categories, such as editorials and letters to the editor, should be noted as such. Articles that appear in online journals should follow the same citation format as print articles, with addition of the URL and the date the article was accessed. In the case of books, author of a chapter, title of chapter, editor(s), title of the book, edition, city and state, publisher, year, and specific pages, should be provided. For web content, the following items should be listed: authors, title of the page or content, name or owner of website, URL, publication update, and access date.

Box 2. Examples of minor variations in reference style among different journals:Singapore Medical Journal

Chaloeykitti L, Muttarak M, Ng KH. Artifacts in mammography: ways to identify and overcome them. *Singapore Med J* 2006; 47:634-41.

Annals of Surgery

Chaloeykitti L, Muttarak M, Ng KH. Artifacts in mammography: ways to identify and overcome them. *Singapore Med J* 2006; 47:634-641.

Bulletin of the World Health Organization

Chaloeykitti L, Muttarak M, Ng KH. Artifacts in mammography: ways to identify and overcome them. *Singapore Med J* 2006;47:634-41. PMID: 16810441

Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine

Chaloeykitti L, Muttarak M, Ng KH. Artifacts in mammography: ways to identify and overcome them. *Singapore Med J* 2006;47:634-41

World Journal of Surgical Oncology

Chaloeykitti L, Muttarak M, Ng KH: **Artifacts in mammography: ways to identify and overcome them.** *Singapore Med J* 2006, 47:634-641.

COMMON PROBLEMS

Many authors, particularly inexperienced ones, make the mistake of regarding the reference section of a manuscript as a minor chore. Journal editorial staff usually pay great attention to the references section and submission of references that are inappropriate, inaccurate or in the wrong format may be sufficient grounds for the journal editorial office to return the manuscript before further consideration. References that are set in the style of another journal may lead the editor or reviewers to conclude that the manuscript has already been rejected by a rival journal and has been resubmitted without the author bothering to reformat the references (or make any other improvements), and may possibly be subjected to a more detailed scrutiny. As most reviewers read the articles quoted in the references, authors

need to be careful not to omit key references or preferentially quote references. Excessive errors or carelessness in quoting or listing of references also leave a bad impression, and may lead editors and reviewers to doubt the accuracy of the methods and results sections as well.

Box 3. Common problems with references:

- Inaccurate quoting of references.
- Omission of key and relevant references.
- Failure to give credit to others, i.e. plagiarism.
- Preferential quoting of references.
- Source of previous data not credited, e.g. in graphs, diagrams, tables.
- Failure to format references exactly according to the target journal's instructions to authors.

SUMMARY

The references section is critical to the credibility of a paper and care should be taken to ensure that all references are accurately cited. The list of references should be limited only to those that are directly relevant to the work described. Only references that are easily accessible and retrievable should be used, with a strong preference for journal articles listed in PubMed and other recognised bibliographic databases. The journal's instructions to authors should be strictly adhered to, and the references formatted accordingly.

Box 4. Take home points:

1. Ensure that all references are accurately cited.
2. Include only relevant references and be sure to have read all the references quoted.
3. Ideally, cite journal articles listed in PubMed and other recognised bibliographic databases.
4. Adhere exactly to the instructions to authors of the target journal.

REFERENCES

1. Peh WCG, Ng KH. Effective medical writing. Writing the introduction. *Singapore Med J* 2008; 49:756-8.
2. Ng KH, Peh WCG. Effective medical writing. Writing the discussion. *Singapore Med J* 2009; 50:458-61.
3. International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals. Updated October 2008. Available at: www.icjme.org. Accessed June 14, 2009.

SINGAPORE MEDICAL COUNCIL CATEGORY 3B CME PROGRAMME
Multiple Choice Questions (Code SMJ 200907A)

	True	False
Question 1. In a scientific paper, the purpose of references includes the following:		
(a) Provides background information.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(b) Gives credibility to the study.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(c) Acknowledges work of the predecessors in the same field of study.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(d) To impress the journal reviewer by listing more than 500 references.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
 Question 2. References may be found in the following sections of a scientific paper:		
(a) Introduction.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(b) Discussion.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(c) Abstract.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(d) Legends.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
 Question 3. Regarding the source of references:		
(a) Authors must take responsibility for accuracy of their source of references.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(b) References quoted should be easily accessible and retrievable.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(c) Abstracts are strongly encouraged by most journals.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(d) Papers that have been accepted may be designated as "in press".	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
 Question 4. Regarding the Vancouver system of references:		
(a) References are numbered consecutively in chronological order.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(b) References quoted in the text are identified by Arabic numbers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(c) At the end of the article, the references are listed in alphabetical order.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(d) Most journals currently use the Harvard system rather than the Vancouver system.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
 Question 5. The following are common problems with references:		
(a) Inaccurate quoting of references.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(b) Omission of key references.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(c) Failure to format references exactly according to the instructions to authors.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(d) Citing of journal articles listed in PubMed.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS:(1) Log on at the SMJ website: <http://www.sma.org.sg/cme/smj> and select the appropriate set of questions. (2) Select your answers and provide your name, email address and MCR number. Click on "Submit answers" to submit.**RESULTS:**(1) Answers will be published in the SMJ September 2009 issue. (2) The MCR numbers of successful candidates will be posted online at www.sma.org.sg/cme/smj by 15 September 2009. (3) All online submissions will receive an automatic email acknowledgment. (4) Passing mark is 60%. No mark will be deducted for incorrect answers. (5) The SMJ editorial office will submit the list of successful candidates to the Singapore Medical Council.**Deadline for submission: (July 2009 SMJ 3B CME programme): 12 noon, 7 September 2009.**