

WRITING A REVIEW ARTICLE

Wilfred C.G. Peh
MBBS, MHSM, MD, FRCPG, FRCPE, FRCR
Editor, Singapore Medical Journal
Clinical Professor, National University of Singapore
Senior Consultant and Head, Department of Diagnostic Radiology,
Alexandra Hospital, Singapore
Email: wilfred.peh@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

A review article comprises a detailed analysis of recent developments on a specific topic. It serves to highlight important points that have been previously reported in the literature. This type of paper does not introduce new information and does not include the author's opinion or personal experience.

WHO WRITES A REVIEW?

Reviews are usually invited by the editor, hence are also known as Invited Reviews. Authors that are invited to provide a review article are acknowledged to have a particular expertise and extensive experience in that field. Therefore, most authors regard the invitation to contribute a review article as a distinct honour.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENTS

Reviews should consist of the following headings: unstructured abstract, introduction and subheadings. The title will often have been provided by the journal which has invited the review. If the author is unhappy with the title provided, he or she can ask for it to be altered. Generally titles should be short and clearly convey the main purpose of the review. Sometimes, a provocative title, perhaps posed as a question, will attract the readership, particularly if the topic is one in which there is debate and controversy.

An unstructured abstract serves to provide a brief overview of the topic and conclusions. This is usually best written last, when the manuscript is otherwise completed. It should be a clear and succinct summary of the important points and conclusions in your review.

The Introduction often includes the historical context of the topic and why the topic is important in current clinical or scientific practice. This aims at providing the background to your review which is to follow.

The body of a review is usually organised into subheadings, which will vary according to the nature of the topics being reviewed. Conventionally, subheadings may include aetiology, pathogenesis, clinical manifestations, investigative findings (including imaging and pathology), treatment and prognosis. Details of a specific procedure (indications, selection of appropriate patients, execution, complications), or features of a specific condition, strengths and weaknesses of various techniques used may be included.

The author should have critically assessed the available evidence. Papers that do not provide useful enough information or evidence should be rejected. If there are areas which are unresolved and which require further research, then these should be specified, and how they might be best investigated may be stated.

A short, clear and succinct summary should be provided at the end of a review article, particularly for a long review. The reader should have a clear idea of what is known about a particular topic and what is yet to be known.

For a review article, a large number of relevant references are expected. These must be provided in the style of the journal. While a comprehensive list of references are required, those provided should be what you judge to be the most important and pertinent to the topic. It is important to include older references, particularly those that pre-date the era of electronic search programmes, so that others do not 're-invent the wheel'. Older articles are often better written than those produced more recently and may serve put certain topics into historical perspective.

SUMMARY

A good review should be topical, current, balanced, accurate, quotable and easily understood, with clear "take home" messages.