

From Dissertation to Journal Article: A Useful Method for Planning and Writing Any Manuscript

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Abstract

A structured, analytical approach to manuscript preparation is offered. It emerged from the author's mentoring experiences guiding fellows and junior faculty in their first forays into academic writing. The purpose of the manuscript, its optimal audience(s), and other factors first lead to a decision on publication outlet. Then, the voluminous "memoir" of the research endeavor is trimmed to manageable size through a series of "bullet point" tests that optimize relevance, conciseness, and cohesiveness. Bullet points making the final cut then are organized into an easy-to-follow writing template. This approach to academic writing has shown value beyond helping fellows pare down dissertations to journal manuscripts; at our institution, it has also generally become a popular method for preparing manuscripts and grant applications.

INTRODUCTION

Recent doctoral program graduates, junior faculty, and professionals who primarily engage in practice often find the prospect of academic writing daunting and mysterious. The first such challenge many were encouraged to undertake was publishing their doctoral dissertation. Yet dissertations usually are tomes that laboriously detail minutiae of limited relevance to a concise, publication-ready report of the research that was conducted. The exercises reported herein were developed while assisting fellows and junior faculty in adapting their dissertations so that they might be publishable in a peer-reviewed journal. These strategies also have proven useful in preparing manuscripts of many other types, e.g., brief research reports, case studies, theoretical rather than empirical manuscripts, and grant proposals. Less experienced writers, mentors of less experienced writers, and anyone who needs some added structure or confidence in putting pen to paper may benefit from following the simple yet effective methods described below. Successfully publishing that first article can overcome procrastination and whet the appetite to become an occasional or frequent contributor to the scientific literature. For many, the most readily available avenue for taking that first step is to adapt their dissertation for publication.

DISSERTATIONS VS. JOURNAL ARTICLES

The dissertation or thesis usually is a graduate-educated professional's first intensive experience in academic writing.

But it is not a representative experience. For the most part, academic writing is quite unlike writing your dissertation. While many graduates are encouraged by their dissertation committees to publish their work, the distractions and challenges that arise in fellowships or professional employment typically prevent graduates from doing so. Apart from the impediments of new work responsibilities, the challenge of transforming a dissertation of hundreds of pages to a journal manuscript of two or three dozen can feel insurmountable. There are doubtless tens of thousands of valuable scientific endeavors recorded in nicely bound but rarely opened dissertation books tucked away on university shelves. Their terse mention in Dissertation Abstracts International is unlikely to lead to wider scientific exposure, in most cases. It may seem a Herculean task to pare down a dissertation to the size of a journal manuscript. But that is exactly what must be done if the wider scientific community is to benefit from the fine work that doctoral students often produce.

The previous sentence is an important one. The first step in manuscript preparation is believing that you have something of value to write about. Too often, young professionals underestimate the value of their research and other scholarly endeavors, including innovative or insightful clinical practice. Almost any thoughtfully considered foray into research or unique clinical experience is a story others would want to know about. Virtually any new thought, new approach, or new perspective in a professional field is

publishable, whether it emerged via a formal research study, term paper, speech, case presentation, or experience alone. Seasoned academics may have scores of publications, but each one is not a “tour de force” nor the work equivalent of a dissertation. Career academics learn to value the many varied products of their minds, small and large, singular or collaborative, and they strive to publish anything that might be of interest or value to their varied audiences.

It is highly unlikely that a doctoral dissertation has so little scholarly value that professionals in that field of study would not be interested in reading about it in some published form. The dissertation committee's guidance and endorsement virtually assure that. The challenge is how to take the behemoth of the dissertation and transform it into a svelte, pithy, and publishable manuscript. This is not simply a matter of removing enough content to meet the page limits of a given journal. The entire organization and thrust of the manuscript must be reconceptualized.

The goals and objectives of a dissertation are quite different from the goals and objectives of a journal article. Dissertations are like memoirs – they contain a great deal of “process” information in addition to the research “content.” The process information allows the dissertation committee to see all the roads one investigated when selecting and defining the research problem, all the plans one considered before selecting the final methodology, and many other details that would be considered extraneous in a journal article. Dissertations are lengthy for the same reason that legal trials often are lengthy – the writer is providing reams of evidence, i.e., meticulously building a case to back up the ultimate conclusions that are offered. Such laborious justification regarding what was or was not done, or considered, in a research project – leaving no conceptual stone unturned – is not expected nor appropriate to journal manuscripts.

A journal's peer review process allows published manuscripts to function more like magazine articles. Journal reviewers do not need or want the heavy process-focused information that dissertation committees do. The journal's editors would not even distribute a manuscript for review if they did not think that the topic was a relevant one or if a cursory review of the document did not pass muster. In a sense, there is a degree of trust given the contributing author that precludes the heavy “burden of proof” requirements surrounding dissertation writing. Journal reviewers want to see that one is knowledgeable (but briefly so) about the existing literature in the topic area, that the methods are

reasonable (and replicable if someone desires to try) and that the results support the conclusions. They also want to see that a manuscript offers a contribution to the field, although this contribution can be (and typically is) very small. Accomplishing these writing objectives requires far less space than meeting the process objectives of a dissertation. The journal's readership in turn presumes that others already have subjected the manuscript to a reasonable degree of scientific scrutiny and, in that regard, readers are free to consume journal articles with an even less jaundiced eye toward the author's burden of proof. Accordingly, the author's communication task in preparing a journal article is much more straightforward than when preparing a dissertation.

Most of the remainder of this article describes a unique, structured approach for determining what dissertation content (or other material one is starting from, including one's ideas alone) is or is not appropriate to a journal article, and explains how to organize the resulting content in a way that is likely to yield a publication-worthy manuscript. First, however, a method for selecting the most appropriate journal – the publication target – is described. While it is possible to write a manuscript first and then to seek an appropriate publication outlet, it is preferable to select the targeted publication beforehand, because the style and parameters of the chosen publication should guide the approach to writing.

SELECTING A JOURNAL

The first step in selecting a journal where to submit a manuscript is to consider as many fields of study that might pertain to the planned article. For example, a study on Hispanic patients' compliance with doctors' health recommendations might appeal to the readership of journals with a focus on Hispanic populations and issues, journals with a focus on ethnic and language issues for minority populations, public health journals, health policy journals, journals that deal with ethics, or interpreting and translation, or many other healthcare journals (including those geared toward practitioners vs. researchers vs. educators). Strive to create a list of at least five fields of study that overlap with the dissertation or proposed manuscript's content. Do not worry at this point about the main focus of the manuscript and what field of study that it pertains to. Think broadly at this stage; the journal choices can be narrowed at a later time.

For example, my field of study happens to be deaf individuals. However, I do not restrict my publication outlets

to the few “deaf journals” that exist. There are many times when something I've written could be of interest to a wider or altogether different audience, even though the content of the article happens to be about deaf people. I can always inform my colleagues in the small deafness field to an article that I have published elsewhere. Informing and motivating a broader audience to find something that I have published in an obscure deaf journal is a lot more difficult.

If making a list of fields of study that overlap with the manuscript content seems difficult, the following exercise might help. Pretend that the dissertation (or other work product) is going to be made into a newspaper story from the 1800s. Back then, newspapers typically had several “levels” of headlines, each summarizing a particular aspect of the story to follow. For example: “Titanic Sinks on Maiden Voyage... Nearly 1,500 Lost... Steamship Carpathia Rescues Hundreds... Roles of Saved and Missing... ”Unsinkable” Ship's Hull Breached by Iceberg... Stirring Eyewitness Accounts.” Each of these headlines might appeal to a different type of reader, including those interested in the bad news, the good news, celebrities, or even the ship's engineering and structure. Printing numerous headlines stimulated a wider variety of people to buy the newspaper. Similarly, the headlines that could be written about the dissertation or other work product will suggest different types of readers, and therefore journals, to consider.

Armed with the list of five or more fields of study that overlap with the manuscript's content, consult a university librarian, on-line resources, and/or professionals in those fields and determine two or three journals that are published in each field. This should not take long at all. The reference list from the dissertation or thesis may provide clues to journals that publish in these topic areas. Now, there should be a list of around 10 or 15 journals under consideration. Next, again using advice from librarians, on-line resources, or colleagues, list some of the major characteristics of each of these journals. Characteristics to consider include: intended audience (e.g., clinicians vs. researchers vs. teachers vs. consumers; specialists vs. generalists), competitiveness (see below), article types (e.g., empirical vs. theoretical vs. case studies), typical article length, and subscription volume and breadth (e.g., popular, obscure, international). Competitiveness is a very important characteristic in making the decision about which journal to target the manuscript. Some indicators of competitiveness include the journal's submission/acceptance ratio, publication lag time, and how often articles from that journal

appear in “journal citation reports” from the Institute for Scientific Information. Librarians or journal editors themselves will readily provide you with these competitiveness indicators. For example, the American Psychological Association (APA) publishes an annual report containing most of this information regarding the journals it publishes, usually in the August archival issue of the *American Psychologist*. Data from 28 APA journals were presented in the most recent report ¹.

None of the above journal characteristics are necessarily good or bad. Their importance is in matching the manuscript optimally to the goals and characteristics of the journal. Many times, I write manuscripts that would not be appropriate for a highly competitive or widely distributed journal. For example, I once gave a speech that I thought was unique and deserved to be in print. I chose a journal with limited circulation, one that was not very competitive but was happy to receive my submission. Now, I frequently distribute copies of that article and it is another peer-reviewed publication on my resume.

Now it is time to narrow down the list of potential journals by comparing their characteristics to those of the dissertation or other existing or hypothesized work product. This is a multi-step process. To begin, consider the ultimate goal in publishing the manuscript. Is it to influence clinicians' behavior? Then, focus on journals that are geared toward clinicians and be prepared to write a short article, as clinicians are busy people. Is it to inform a particular group (e.g., students, researchers, policy makers) about something that they should know? Then, focus on journals that are commonly read by those audiences. Is the content applicable to a wide audience? Then focus on journals that are generalized, not specialty journals, and journals that have wide circulation. However, these are often among the most competitive journals. Alternately, a very specialized topic may demand a specialized journal. Is the goal to introduce an audience to a topic that they would not normally think or care about? Then, consider publishing in a journal geared toward audiences who are interested in the general topic of the manuscript (e.g., assessment) but who know little about the specific, focal topic (e.g., assessment of deaf children), even if specialty journals (e.g., on deaf issues) exist. Is the goal simply to get something into print that is worthwhile but not particularly sophisticated or influential, rather than never publish it at all? That is a fine goal; a less competitive journal may be a wise choice in that situation. Compare the list of journal characteristics to these and other such

questions, noting in each case whether a given journal on the list seems to be advantageous, disadvantageous, or neutral. Remember to think back to the “1800s newspaper headlines” to help make these judgments. This process should narrow down the list of journals by at least half, leaving you with no more than 5 – 7 journals still under consideration.

The next step toward final journal selection is to locate each of the journal's “instructions to authors” document. Some journals publish this in each issue, others only once per year. Most journals will have this document on their website. Study that page for additional information that can further narrow the list of journal options. The instructions page may contain lists of topics that are welcomed or discouraged, information on page limits, and descriptions of the different types of manuscripts it welcomes (e.g., empirical research articles, theoretical articles, “short reports,” case studies, essays and opinion pieces, brief letters, even book reviews). Some journals have several sections, each one devoted to a different type of manuscript. Do not limit the conceptualization of journal-worthy publications to full-fledged research studies. There are many types of articles that journals welcome. Certainly, there is a style that will match any fresh idea or experience one would like to impart, no matter how much that idea or experience differs from a conventional research study. After considering the above factors as they relate to the dissertation or intended manuscript, narrow down the journal options to three or fewer.

If the final choice is not obvious by now, it may be helpful to contact the journal editor to discuss the nature of the intended submission and whether or not the editor thinks it is appropriate for the publication. Editors are proud of their journals and, in some sense, are like talent scouts in that they are always on the lookout for appropriate, quality submissions, especially from new authors. Most will give generously of their time and advise or guide in this matter. Send the editor a brief e-mail describing the essential features of the proposed manuscript (i.e., topic, length, type of article (e.g., research study or case report) and desired audience) and ask if that journal would be an appropriate one for a submission. This is a more neutral approach than attaching a copy of the manuscript and asking or implying that the editor should review the entire article. This brief e-mail is simply seeking a quick opinion on whether a manuscript such as the one planned or actually completed would be welcome for review. If that particular journal does not seem appropriate, the editor may advise on how to alter

the manuscript so that it would be more appropriate or give advice on alternative publication outlets that would be more appropriate. After a final decision has been made on the most appropriate journal for submission, ensure that the manuscript conforms to the characteristics, style, and preferences of the chosen journal. Also, follow exactly the instructions given to potential authors.

PRUNING AND PRIORITIZING MANUSCRIPT CONTENT

The following method has proven valuable in helping writers pare down their dissertations to manageable size, yielding a manuscript that reflects the most essential elements of the dissertation but also complements the characteristics, style, and preferences of the journal that was chosen as the preferred publication outlet. While this method originally was developed for use with dissertations as the starting point, it is just as appropriate to use when the starting point is some other type of content that is trying to be organized into a manuscript or when there is no pre-existing content at all but instead one is starting “from scratch” in conceptualizing a manuscript, grant proposal, etc.

The method centers around defining a limited number of “bullet points” - individual facts or extremely specific topics that will have to be addressed in the manuscript in order for it to be a coherent whole. As will be described below, after the bullet point list is created, a number of strategies are used to distinguish essential bullet points from unessential ones based upon the views, motives, and knowledge base of the intended readership of the chosen journal for submission, and not from the author's viewpoint. Finally, the remaining bullet points are organized according to a functional outline of the manuscript.

BULLET POINT CHARACTERISTICS

The manuscript first begins to take shape through compiling a list of several dozen or so bullet points, each one identifying a fact, issue, finding, or other detail that must be written about. These bullet points are chosen and organized in a fashion that will allow the manuscript to flow smoothly and logically for the intended reader. It is imperative to understand that the manuscript is not being written for yourself nor for a dissertation committee nor even for the journal editor. The manuscript is being written for the average reader of the chosen journal. Do not begin this exercise until carefully considering what this average reader is like and, in particular, what they need to know and do not need to know (e.g., things that they can be presumed already

to know) about the manuscript's topic, content, and background. This image of the average reader should emerge readily from the previous investigation into the characteristics of the journal selected for the submission.

For example, when writing for a deafness-related journal, I do not need to plan on a bullet point explaining how the linguistic structure of American Sign Language (ASL) differs markedly from English. When writing for a journal outside of the deafness field, I may well need to include such a bullet point in order for later topics in the manuscript to make sense.

To create bullet points, read through the dissertation or other starting material and list as a bullet point each of the issues, topics, or findings written about, one-by-one, from start to finish. Commonly, each bullet point will capture the essence of an entire paragraph or more of text. The content of a bullet point should never be repeated. Try to limit each bullet point to a dozen or so words. Do not bother listing any issues, topics, or findings that will not be included in the manuscript being written. Also, see the “bullet point tests” below to further eliminate unnecessary content at this stage. Working from a dissertation, one may end up with a list of 100 or more bullet points.

Here are a few examples of bullet points that emerged from the dissertation of one of my mentees. Her dissertation was a study on minority women's experiences in prenatal care.

- when patient expectations of a visit are met, satisfaction increases (references)
- having procedures explained to pregnant women is associated with prenatal care satisfaction (references)
- subjects were 23 minority, 32 Caucasian, 78% college graduates, mean age 32.5
- found a trend for the control group to have more appointments than the experimental group
- this sample was highly educated, therefore generalizability is limited

GENERAL BULLET POINT TESTS

After generating the bullet point list or, better yet, during that process, apply the following three tests to each bullet point to determine if it truly is essential to the manuscript or whether it can be eliminated. Be very conservative here; the

goal is to eliminate as many bullet points as possible, perhaps up to half of the bullet points that the dissertation generated. (However, save this longer bullet point list, in case at a later time it is decided to add a point back in or if a reviewer asks to explain something further.)

Test 1. “Does the reader really need this information to be a consumer of this manuscript?” If the answer is not a resounding “yes,” eliminate the point. Remember to think of the average reader of this particular journal when applying this test.

Test 2. “Does the average reader of this journal already know this information?” If the answer is “yes” or “probably yes,” eliminate the point unless test 3 below applies.

Test 3. “If the answer to Test 2 is “probably yes,” is the point so critical that the reader needs to be reminded of it, just to make sure?” If the answer is “yes” then leave the point in. Otherwise, eliminate it. Ideally, the final list will have no more than 40 bullet points.

Writers who are beginning from scratch, not from existing material like a dissertation, obviously would skip the above step of creating and then winnowing bullet points based upon a pre-existing work. However, creation of a bullet point list from one's ideas alone, and testing each point as explained above, is still an excellent approach for preparing to write a manuscript of any kind. Whether starting from a pre-existing document or from scratch, the following functional outline is next used to organize and further modify the list of bullet points in preparation for writing.

EMPLOYING A FUNCTIONAL OUTLINE

Below are the elements of a functional outline for a typical research manuscript, such as one being developed from a dissertation. The outline headings below would differ a bit for other types of manuscripts, such as theoretical articles. Regardless, the purpose of the functional outline is to guide the author in selecting and organizing bullet points in ways that will assure that the manuscript is cohesive and flows logically for the reader. It is important to note that the headings of the functional outline do not exactly parallel the traditional headings of a research article. Instead, the functional outline reflects the order of narrative flow that is common in academic writing. It is recommended to organize the bullet point list in accordance with this functional outline. Subsequently, the actual manuscript headings can be selected in ways that make the most sense based upon the content of the work.

When considering each section of the functional outline, move or label bullet points as belonging to that section. After completing each section of the functional outline with the appropriate bullet points from the list, review them in accordance with the functional description of each section provided below and assure that there are no significant gaps (missing information) and no extraneous points that deviate from the purpose of that section.

Importance of the issue or problem. This section leads off most academic articles and must answer the question “Who cares?” Note that the individual hypothetically asking this question is, again, the average reader of the targeted journal, and not the author of the manuscript. There are lots of things an author may care about that the average reader would not. The limited goal here at this point is to convince the reader to care enough to read the rest of the manuscript. In selecting the bullet points that pertain to “caring” about the manuscript's focus, presume that the reader already cares about the journal's broad topical focus but may need further information to care about anything more specific than that. In other words, eliminate bullet points that argue for/about issues that the average reader of the journal already would know or care about. This is a particular area ripe for trimming from a dissertation. In most cases, if an appropriate journal is selected, there will be very little space needed to convince the reader to care about the manuscript's topic.

Relevant literature. The bullet points in this section must convey what is known and what is not known about the issue or problem described in the above section. These bullet points should succinctly summarize the literature (the more recent, the better) that comes closest to the topic of the manuscript. The more remote the bullet point or literature citation is to the central focus of the article, the more dispensable that bullet point or reference is likely to be. Again, unlike a dissertation, presume that the average reader of the targeted journal has a decent grasp of the literature in the general field of study that the journal deals with. The purpose of this section is to clarify why this particular study, innovation, or idea is a relevant one at this time in the evolution of this specific field of interest.

Fundamental concepts. When writing the manuscript, this section is best integrated within the above two sections, although it is somewhat a different topic and therefore a distinct bullet point matter. This section includes bullet points that provide background information necessary to prepare the journal's typical reader to be a competent consumer of the manuscript. In contrast to the above two

sections, this is where knowledge gaps between the author's knowledge base and the average reader's knowledge base are fixed, not in terms of the relevant literature (that was done above) but in terms of more fundamental knowledge. Resist the temptation to make this section lengthy. Only include those additional points that are essential to make the average reader capable of understanding what follows. For example, this is where one would place a bullet point explaining the differences between American Sign Language (ASL) and standard English.

Methodology. In a research manuscript, this is where bullet points belong that pertain to subjects, measures, and procedures. In academic writing, this section can be much shorter than in most dissertations. Dissertations usually include excruciating detail regarding all the methods chosen, eliminated, and why. In academic writing, describe only the final methods that were used and only those that will be discussed later on in the Results section. In most cases, do not over-elaborate to justify the methods chosen. Only do so if reviewers ask for this detailed information. Often, researchers use many more measures and collect much more data than they end up discussing in their publications. Resist the temptation to describe everything done, learned, or that occurred. Include only information that is directly relevant to what will appear later in the Results or Discussion sections of the manuscript. This is not a memoir of the totality of the research experience. It is a succinct report only about those parts of the experience that end up mattering for this particular publication.

Findings. Again, avoid the temptation to report everything that happened. This tends to balloon dissertations. Be very selective about what bullet points to include in this section. Include only those findings that are believed to be the most relevant ones or, better yet, that are believed that the reader will find most relevant. There should be a direct parallel between the bullet points in this section and the ones in the methodology section. If a finding is not presented here, then the methodology pertaining to it probably should not be included in the prior section.

Implications of the findings. There also must be a direct parallel between the bullet points in this section and the ones in the findings section. The points in these two sections must echo one another in order to pass the “How did they come to that conclusion?” test. In other words, each bullet point included here must be justified by one or more bullet points in the findings section. Similarly, if one does not intend to discuss a finding here, then that finding might be eliminated

from the previous section. The bullet points in this section also should directly hearken back to the “Who cares?” question raised in the first section of the functional outline. If one bothered to make the reader care about a problem or issue, then the reader should feel that the problem was addressed by the end of the manuscript. If not, either address it here or eliminate that particular problem or issue from the earlier section.

Future research or other scholarship recommendations. Keep the bullet points in this section to a minimum – fewer than dissertations generally require. But do consider and acknowledge the limitations of the work and suggest how others could improve or expand upon this work.

The time invested in this bullet point exercise may be considerable, but it is time that is very well spent. If one has been judicious in the evaluation of which points to include and discard, one will end up with a list of (hopefully) 40 or fewer bullet points that capture the essential elements of the work product, with little or no extraneous material or problematic gaps. Further, if one has thoughtfully organized them in accordance with the functional outline described above, then one also will have a clear and easy-to-follow blueprint for writing the manuscript, comparable to completing a connect-the-dots puzzle. From this point, one should be able to write the manuscript, with far less effort than otherwise would have been the case. It is my estimation that a well-crafted, 40 bullet point list could yield a publication-ready manuscript in less than 20 hours of writing time, assuming one is familiar with commonly required manuscript formats for academic writing. In addition to the journal's instructions to authors document, the American Psychological Association's Publication Manual ² and the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors' Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals ³ are important resources in this regard. Additional helpful advice on academic writing can be found in numerous books, articles, and web pages. For example, see Becker ⁴, Calfee & Valencia ⁵, Day ⁶, Kazdin ⁷, Matthews, Bowen, & Matthews ⁸, Piercy, McDaniel, & Sprenkle ⁹, and Pyczak & Bruce ¹⁰. Many consider Strunk's Elements of Style ¹¹ an essential writing resource as well.

One last thought – there is no better way to educate oneself about the types of manuscripts that journals are likely to publish than by volunteering to be on the review board of a journal. It also is good for one's resume to show that one has participated in the peer review process, whether as an

ongoing member of a journal's board or as an ad-hoc (occasional) reviewer for a journal. If one has any interest in being a reviewer, do not hesitate to send a curriculum vitae and a letter of interest to the editors of selected journals that pertain to one's background, interests, and knowledge base. One does not have to be an expert in everything the journal publishes; manuscripts always go to more than one reviewer and editors understand if one replies that one is not qualified to review a particular manuscript or comment on a particular aspect of a manuscript, e.g., statistics. Journal editors love to have a longer list of people willing to review manuscripts because standing review boards get overworked or sometimes become “dull.” Fresh ideas are always welcomed. If reviewing journal articles seems too daunting for one's current level of experience, try volunteering to review lecture or workshop proposals submitted to professional conferences. To do so, contact the professional organizations that regularly host such conferences and volunteer to be on their “program committee.” Serving on a program committee is a good stepping stone toward manuscript reviewing and program committees virtually always welcome new reviewers. Serving as a reviewer for conference programs and journal manuscripts will greatly enhance one's own writing abilities. Happy publishing!

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