



Research Methodology and Publishing

How to Convert Thesis into Publication

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ABSTRACT

The postgraduate medical education regulation demands that the postgraduates should have publications and presentations to their credit to make them eligible to appear at the postgraduate degree examination. Unless the thesis is published, the scientific world won't be updated of the research finding and the entire effort a postgraduate has put forward in conceptualising, designing and implementing the research goes into vain. The present article aims to give an overview to residents on how to proceed about planning and execution of publication of their thesis. Although everyone wants to submit in the best journal, there are limitations to be considered and choosing the right journal is an important step. Knowing the thrust area and readership of the journal and also the quality of the thesis helps to make the choice. The article highlights into the introspection of the quality of the thesis and tips to choose the article type best suited for publication. Drafting of the different sections of the article is highlighted with reference to CONSORT guidelines. Drafting of the title along with choosing the running title and key words, abstract, introduction, methodology, results, discussion, limitations and conclusion are highlighted along with tips on drafting the references too. In the end, we also discuss on how to face rejection and the way forward.

Keywords: Thesis, Publication, CONSORT

INTRODUCTION

In recent times the competence-based dermatology curriculum designed for postgraduate students by National Medical Commission, India has put in lot of focus on research as the subject specific objective.^[1] It is required that the postgraduate students need to be proficient in understanding of basic concepts of research methodology and they have to have the expertise to plan a research project. He/she also needs to have basic knowledge of statistics. The amendment of 'Postgraduate Medical Education Regulations, 2000' has put more thrust on research, wherein all postgraduate students admitted from the academic year 2019–20 onwards are required to complete an online course in research methods (conducted by institutes designated by National Medical Commission, India) by the end of their second semester.^[2]

Implementation of whatever is learnt in the online course occurs at the time of doing thesis work. Conducting research and writing thesis are mandatory for any postgraduate training and the thesis paves the way for conceptualisation, conduction and reporting a research under the guidance of a supervisor.

The postgraduate medical education regulation also demands that the postgraduate should present one poster, present one paper at a national/state conference and also to present one research paper which should be published/accepted for publication/sent for publication during the period of their postgraduate studies so as to make them eligible to appear at the postgraduate

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degree examination.^[3] Thus, it becomes imperative that a post-graduate focuses on publishing the thesis. ‘The proof of the pudding is in the eating.’ Publication speaks about the planning and execution of the study that is being published.

Setting aside the demands of the regulations, unless the thesis is published, the scientific world won't be updated of the research finding and the entire effort a postgraduate has put forward in conceptualising, designing and implementing the research goes into vain. Needless to say, thesis is guided by the knowledge deficit that arises out of extensive literature search and rationalises the need for them to be explored by means of research. Thus, postgraduates contribute to science by publishing their research.

CHECKLIST TO DECIDE WHETHER THE THESIS MERITS PUBLICATION

Executed the thesis with the desire not only to pass MD examinations but also to publish – it shows and it matters

You value the results of your study to write about – if you do not value, nobody else will

Have the desire to take the information of your research from the shelves of the college library to a wider scientific-audience world-over.

THESIS SUBMITTED, WHAT NEXT?

The manuscript should be drafted immediately after submitting the thesis, since at that point of time the postgraduate remembers facts, figures, merits and demerits of the study vividly and the examinations is few months away.

Choose an appropriate journal where you plan to submit. Formatting of the article will depend on the journal you choose for publication.

HOW TO CHOOSE AN APPROPRIATE JOURNAL

Everyone plans to submit in the best journal, but there are limitations to this approach.

‘The better the journal, more is the chance of rejection. Every rejection accrues onto the time to final publication and quantum of dejection.’ This is anecdote but somehow it reflects the ground reality.

Some journals charge a fee for article submission (e.g., Journal of Investigative Dermatology) and some page charges for text and/or colour images (e.g., Dermatology). Thus, if money is not the limiting factor, then one may go ahead with these journals.

‘Thrust areas’ vary with each journal. Thus, it is important to screen through some of the recent issues of the journal to assess if the area of research fits into one of the thrust areas of the journal.

It is important to consider the ‘readership’ of the journal as well, for example, for an association journal catering to practitioners, pure research article without immediate translational value may not be suitable.

The quality of the thesis work would decide what journal one needs to aim for

There are indexed journals which does not charge fee for publication, for example, Indian Journal of Dermatology, Venereology and Leprology, Indian Journal of Dermatology, Indian Dermatology Online Journal, Indian Journal of Leprosy, Tropical Parasitology, Clinical and Experimental Dermatology, International Journal of Dermatology and JAMA Dermatology.

Introspection into the quality of thesis

- Is/are the study question(s) valid?
- Is the methodology appropriate to answer the study question?
- Has the sample size been calculated a-priori? (often, this is compromised in favour of convenience sample size due to limited time of 1.5–2 years for thesis study)
- Have the results been derived by appropriate statistical tests, or at least the postgraduate is satisfied with the approach of the statistician to the data?
- Has the study been registered with online registries?
 - If clinical trial, this is essential
 - If an observational study, this is optional
- Last and not definitely the least, have the study done something novel (even in the context of a country or a region)? Are there only few references on the core topic during literature search?

If the answer to all the question is ‘Yes’, one can go ahead with a top end journal.

If the answer is ‘No’ to some of the questions, one has to moderate the expectations!

HOW TO CHOOSE THE ARTICLE TYPE

- Once the journal is chosen, it is important to go through the ‘instruction to authors’ in the journal homepage
- Thesis normally gets published either as original article or its shorter versions – brief report/concise communication or letter to editor
- It is necessary to look into some of the published literature in the same journal in recent times
- The number of parameters assessed in your study decides the number of tables (not just the demography tables) in the publication. If there are four or more tables then it merits original article; if less, then a shorter version is appropriate. These are rough estimates and exceptions frequently do occur.

HOW MUCH OF INFORMATION NEEDS TO GO FOR THE PUBLICATION

The most difficult job is to convert the nearly hundred-page thesis into four to five print pages (20–25 pages in a 1.5–2 space word document) for a journal. One has to be really ruthless to slash and delete the typed words one has so diligently typed while writing the thesis. The best thing is to give it to the guide/co-guide or even the co-postgraduates (who has helped in the thesis and deserves authorship). They are the ones who have less involvement with the study and it is easy for them to delete and prune the thesis to fit in a scientific article suitable for publication.

While pruning the thesis, it is important to remember a few things

- 1) Does the average reader of the journal really need this information as a consumer of this manuscript? If the answer is 'No', then that information may be omitted^[4]
- 2) Does the average reader of this journal already know this information?^[4]

If the answer is 'Yes', then that information may also be omitted.

If the answer is 'probably yes', one has to consider whether the point is so critical that readers need to be reminded of it? If 'Yes', that piece of information may be retained in the article.

The editor(s) and reviewer(s) expect a brief and crisp article that is easy to read and understand and is written in simple language. Appropriate deliberation on existing literature in the topic, understanding the knowledge gap and how to bridge the gap keeps the article one-step ahead of other articles. It is also desired that methods are reasonable and replicable if someone else repeats the methods. Appropriateness of statistical tests, tidy presentation of results and conclusions based on results of the study are factors that positively influence the acceptance of an article in a journal. Overall, the article should offer some contribution to the field-this decides the fate of the article.^[4]

DRAFTING TIPS FOR DIFFERENT SECTIONS OF AN ARTICLE

General guideline

It is important that the thesis is not copied and pasted into the manuscript. It is important to perform a fresh literature search to find any new information that should go into the article. Crisp sequential discussion improves the flow of the article. Thus, focus should be on the fact that the data

should be combined together in meaningful table rather than piecemeal analysis.

Title

It has to be brief and yet describe all elements of the study. It is preferable to mention the strength(s) of study in a word or two. Some journals require the mention of the study type (randomised trial, randomised controlled trial, observational study, etc.) in the title as per CONSORT checklist, 'randomised trial' has to be mentioned in the article title.^[5]

Running title has to be brief which appears on each page of the printed article as header or footer. Usually, it is around 30 characters long.

Abstract

Normally most journal ask for 250–300 words abstract and a majority ask for a structured abstract with the laid structure of background, patients and methods, results and conclusions. Some journals also ask for a mention of the limitations too.

- Background: Two-three sentences highlighting what is known, what is the existing knowledge gap and what is/are the objective(s) of the study?
- Patients and methods: Three-four sentences on patient characteristics, number of patients, methodology in brief (RCT/observational, etc.) and the outcome measures
- Results: Four-five sentences on the most relevant findings of the study addressing the existing knowledge gap
- Conclusions: Two-three sentences on the value of the scientific information derived from the study and future directions
- Limitations: To list the main limitations of the study so that future researchers keep them in mind when they plan a similar study.

It is important to draft the abstract with care since full text access may not be available to all readers. Majority of the readers gather information from abstracts only and if abstract sounds interesting and succinct, readers are drawn towards reading the full text.

Keywords

Normally three to seven key words are needed during submission. These key words help someone to reach the article when they search with one of these key words in any medical database/search engine. Regarding the choice of key words, it is important to imagine oneself as the reader searching for an article catering to their query. The key words which the prospective reader would use become key

words of the study. It is essential to put important elements of the study, including type of study in the key words.

Introduction

The introduction needs to be drafted within two-three paragraphs (250 words approx.). The introduction section of the article primarily talks about the lacuna(e) in existing knowledge. For that, one needs to introduce the subject to the reader and briefly review the literature related to the core objective of the study along with knowledge-gap. Then, it is essential to enumerate about the objectives to bridge this gap. This section should be riveting to convince the reviewer first and then the intended reader to care enough to read the rest of the manuscript.

Methodology

It is essential to mention the necessary details in methodology so that the reviewer/reader understands the result that will be presented in the next section under 'Results'. It is intended to be succinct report of only those parts of experiment that ends up as subject matter for this particular publication. Any experiments that do not lead to results presented in the next section need to be omitted.

It is important to include details on how/when study subjects were selected, recruited, investigated, intervened, followed up, end points of the study and lastly released from the study. It is necessary to mention the measuring units. It is also important to mention the overall study period to include those results that are directly relevant to the study question and objective(s). Dwelling on common demographic variables is useless, unless it is of direct relevance to the objectives of the study. It has to be noted that one table of demographic profile is important in reporting a clinical trial as per CONSORT.^[5] This should contain parameters that can influence the outcomes of the study.

Rather than stressing on written text, it is better to focus on self-explanatory tables, diagrams and figures. These are often the only part of the results that are noticed. It is also important to avoid duplication of detail in the text that has been presented in the tables and diagrams. Only that part of the result needs to be referred in the text which is not mentioned in tables or diagram.

Wherever applicable, it is desirable to mention the central tendency and dispersion in bracket along with the Odds ratio, *P*-value, etc. If a part of result is not presented or not found relevant, it is necessary to omit the related methodology from the previous section.

Table

It is preferably to have one table per page of the manuscript. The tables are to be numbered sequentially

and cited chronologically in the text. Each table needs to have informative title. Formal abbreviations can be used in table and they should be expanded in the footnotes. It is necessary to check that the data in the table are consistent with that in text (if appears at both the places), totals add up correctly and percentages have been calculated accurately.

Discussion

This section is rather a bridge to the conclusions rather than a detailed review of literature. Thus, this part should make the reader understand 'how the authors reached the conclusion?' It is necessary to discuss the findings that have been presented in the results; and if a result is not worth a discussion, it can be removed from the previous section.

Limitation

Every study has limitations. Just like the 'The wearer knows where the shoe pinches', researchers know best the limitations of their research. Any justifiable limitation does not in any way decrease scientific value and chance of acceptance. Rather, it underscores that the researcher has understood the study well. For a future researcher, it is of great help to take care of those limitations in the stage of study planning itself.

References

The references are to be limited to the maximum allowed by the journal for the relevant type of article. Furthermore, it is important to limit to recent references and those references that are relevant to the study. The style of quotation of reference in the text and reference citation varies from journal to journal. Hence, it is essential to make sure to go through the instructions to authors.

DAY AFTER TOMORROW

After preparing the first draft and celebrating it, one can forget it for about a week or two to let the dust settle and give a clearer perspective about the manuscript. During this time, the co-authors go through the draft and give their independent comments. Their emotional dependence to the work is less; hence, their comments are more objective and fruitful and it is essential to incorporate them. The first draft requires 4–5 rounds of revisions for fine pruning, modifications, fine tuning etc.

The job is not complete after submission to the journal and one has to be prepared for rejection, which is as early as a couple of hours in the top rate journals. If there is no mail from the journal office by approximately 5 days; it can be considered that the article has passed the first test of approval

from the editorial board and set for peer review. Exceptions do occur, but getting article accepted on first submission is a miracle (which do not occur!).

Although thesis/dissertation follows a specific pattern, in the article, one presents a coherent and logical flow of information that the reader can follow from the introduction to the conclusions – in approximately 2000–2500 WORDS!

Happy Publishing!

Declaration of patient consent

Patient's consent not required as there are no patients in this study.

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Nil.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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