

Write a Scientific Paper course - Utility or otherwise?

ABSTRACT

Background: Publish or perish is a cliched mantra but publishing requires the acquisition of a wide set of disparate skills that are typically learned in a completely *ad-hoc* manner in an early period of one's career. The Write a Scientific Paper (WASP) course is delivered online by an experienced, international faculty of academics, including several medical journal editors. This study retrospectively analyzed the attendees' perceptions of the usefulness and the utility of WASP.

Methods: An email questionnaire of 11 questions was sent to all previous WASP attendees, 370 subjects, in May 2022. The questions included the geographical locations of the subjects as well as the number of published articles before and since WASP course. Besides a couple of questions on rating and recommending the WASP course, some other related questions were also asked.

Results: There were 68 responses (18%) with high agreement (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.92$). The WASP course fared well across the different research-oriented dimensions and expectations and is mostly welcomed by young career professionals. Following WASP, a 9% increase in scientific writing and published articles engagement was reported.

Discussion: WASP is an international and unique course that emphasises presentation skills using newspaper media theory. It highlights to the delegates the importance of understanding the conflicting tripod of forces that govern publishing. Authors wish to publish more; readers are inundated, wishing to read less, whereas journal editors' primary aims are to elevate their journals' impact factors. WASP endorsements and the testimonials are invariably positive. The transition to online barely affected satisfaction rates with WASP while permitting the enrolment of a more international faculty that includes even more journal editors. WASP's ultimate objective is to impart the faculty's collective experience to the delegates in this crucial, early aspect of career progress.

Key words: Manuscript, questionnaire, writing a scientific paper

Introduction

Publish or perish is a cliched mantra that is constantly hammered at trainees and academics alike.^[1] However, publishing requires the acquisition of a wide set of disparate skills that are typically learned in a completely

ad-hoc and unstructured manner during the early period of one's career.^[2] The Write a Scientific Paper (WASP) course was created by a group of Maltese academics in 2010 and it covers all the aspects of paper writing: from literature review to proposal to grant/s to ethics to data protection to

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data collection to analysis to writing to abstracts/posters/ presentations to paper formatting to referencing software to submission to peer review to crafting a dissertation.^[2] WASP is a very intensive 3-day course certified for 18 continuing medical education (CME) points. It has been held twice or three times a year at the Life Sciences Park in Malta, the Royal College of Paediatrics in London, the University of Manama in Bahrain, and now online, with an experienced, international faculty of academics, including several medical journal editors.^[2]

A full-third of the course is devoted to statistical analysis and this is eased by solely using Excel™. Excel’s native capabilities are expanded for WASP by bespoke sheets created specifically for this course so as to not only facilitate the tests that Excel natively carries out but also be able to carry out tests that Excel cannot natively do, such as tests for normality, non-parametric tests (e.g., Spearman and Kendall correlation, Wilcoxon sign rank test, Mann–Whitney U test), Kaplan–Meier curves, log-rank tests, Cronbach’s alpha, etc.^[2]

Lectures include interactive sessions with hands-on statistics sessions using the bespoke Excel sheets. Comprehensive advice is given on preparing a compelling abstract, an attractive poster, a captivating presentation, how to apply for grants, how to lay out a paper, which journals to target and why, the pitfalls of open-access and predatory journals, editors’ viewpoints and tackling editors, and how to navigate ethics and data protection. The learning goals for each subject are comprehensively listed in a document freely downloadable on the WASP website. WASP courses include soft copies of all talks, papers used as examples, and the bespoke spreadsheets that contain data from published papers as examples.^[2]

The aim of this paper was to retrospectively analyze the attendees’ perceptions of the usefulness and the utility of WASP.

Methods

An email was sent to all previous WASP attendees on the 31st May 2022, followed by two reminders, on the 21st June and 27th June 2022. Attendees had previously provided consent to be re-contacted for any future follow-up exercise. After excluding obsolete email addresses, the email had been sent out to 370 individuals and the questionnaire was closed on 3rd July 2022. The email stated the following:

“Dear Colleagues, this is being sent out to WASP attendees to evaluate WASP’s long-term effectiveness. It is a very short and

anonymous questionnaire of 11 items and can be completed in a minute or two, literally. Do please help us and fill.”

The form consisted of 11 questions with drop-down options as per Table 1. Results were analyzed using bespoke spreadsheets as created for WASP.

Results

There were 68 responses (18%). Results including means and medians (where appropriate) are shown in Table 1. There was high agreement with Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.92$ (only applicable for the last five questions). The WASP course fared well across the different research-oriented dimensions and expectations and is mostly welcomed by young career professionals. Following the completion of WASP, a 9% increase in scientific writing and published articles engagement was observed.

Discussion

WASP is an international and unique course whose ultimate objective is to impart the faculty’s collective experience to the delegates in this crucial, early aspect of career progress. The endorsements and testimonials are invariably positive.^[3] Feedback from the attendees is actively sought and used after each WASP, and this is typically positive, as evidenced, for example, in the last WASP course of 23–25 May 2022 [Table 2].

WASP emphasises presentation skills using newspaper media theory^[4] and highlights to the delegates the importance not only

Table 1: Questionnaire and summary of results

Question	Answers		
Are you based in Malta?	80% based in Malta		
Gender	68% females		
Age (5-year brackets)	68% ≤ 5 years of age		
Which WASP did you attend? If unsure, choose approximately	71% since 2021		
How many papers had you published BEFORE WASP (approximately - in brackets of 10)	Before	Since	
How many papers have you published SINCE WASP (approximately - in brackets of 10)	None	42	36
	1-10	23	29
	11-20	2	2
	31-40	1	1
	Median	Mean	SD
Rate how useful was WASP to generally raise your research interest? (Likert 1-5)	4	3.7	0.96
Rate how useful was WASP to raise your statistics knowledge? (Likert 1-5)	4	3.6	0.98
Rate WASP spreadsheets usefulness (Likert 1-5)	4	3.8	1.07
Rate WASP overall, in retrospect (Likert 1-5)	4	4.0	0.93
How likely are you to recommend WASP? (Likert 1-5)	4	4.1	0.95

Table 2: Anonymous feedback from the delegates for the WASP online May 2022

WASP Online May 2022					
Anonymous feedback from the delegates					
Speakers	Lectures Overall	Practical Sessions	Handouts	Home work	Customer Care and Support
Median	5.0	4.5	5.0	5.0	5.0
Mean	4.2	4.3	4.6	4.6	4.4
SD	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.8	1.0
–	Overall	How likely are you to recommend WASP?			Cronbach's α
Median	5.0	5			0.75
Mean	4.5	4.3			
SD	0.9	0.9			

WASP=Write a Scientific Paper course. Scores out of 5 (Likert scale)

of understanding the publishing process but also the conflicting tripod of forces that govern publishing. Authors wish to publish more but readers are inundated and wish to read less, whereas journal editors' primary aims are to elevate their journals' impact factors.^[5] The transition to online barely affected satisfaction rates with WASP while permitting the enrolment of a more international faculty that includes even more journal editors.^[6]

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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