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## Methodological letter

### What should I do if I want to publish a paper?

### ¿Qué tengo que hacer si quiero que me publiquen un artículo?

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Biomedical journals of wide circulation, recognised scientific prestige, including journals in general surgery, other surgical specialties, have many common characteristics, but one of the aspects that most interests authors is the difficulty in gaining acceptance.<sup>1,2</sup> This circumstance is due to several factors, especially the low interest of many papers, a supply that far exceeds the demand for articles, studies related to SARS-CoV-2, coronavirus infection that have come to occupy much of the available volume of journals and, as, a transversal fact, the lack of training of authors in the methodology of biomedical publications.

Although it is true that one only learns to publish by "publishing" and that often "rejections are healthy" because they help to review the scientific contribution of the work from a more balanced and less ambitious perspective, there are issues of concept and publication procedure that, if the authors know how to combine them, facilitate acceptance.<sup>3,4</sup> Each of these details may be seen as a "minor" element, but perfection in each of them enhances and highlights the others, and all of them together give the authors credit for having been able to produce a flawless manuscript.

The guidelines for authors contain key information on the details of the editorial process, including ethical requirements, but above all, recommendations regarding the types of articles and preparation of the manuscript. Among the advice concerning the preparation of the manuscript, attention should be paid to the structure of the manuscript, the data to be contained on the first page, the structured abstract, the style of the bibliographical references, the tables and the characteristics of the figures. It is also important to look at the provisions for supplementary material and videos. It is

advisable to download the document and print it on paper, highlighting the most relevant parts and keep it next to you as you write your manuscript. It is also a good idea to have an article published in recent issues of the journal as a model, especially for typographical specifications. Editors know the style of their journals inside out, and there is nothing more annoying than receiving a paper that does not conform to the recommendations, or even hints that it is adapted to the standards of a previous journal.

In the conclusions of the abstract and the body of the paper, authors should clearly and unambiguously convey the "message" of the study, which generally corresponds to the answer to the research question, how the outcome of the main variable (or variables of interest) has been interpreted, and the applicability to clinical practice. When a general recapitulation of the importance of the topic is made without specifying it, or when vague, superficial and unjustified conclusions are presented by the results, the real scientific contribution of the work is usually lower.

In the format of the original article, there are 2 sections that require attention with respect to their scientific content: the introduction and the discussion.<sup>5,6</sup> The introduction has to be short (less than 700 words) and is difficult to write because it has to focus on explaining what the current state of knowledge is as a justification or rationale for the study. In the last paragraph, our reader will want to find an exact description of the hypothesis and objectives of the study, in particular the main objective. The discussion, besides being difficult, is the most relevant and intellectually challenging section, since it is about explaining the meaning of the results from a scientific point of view, how they are understood and how they are

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interpreted in the light of data from previous studies and in the light of the authors' own judgement. A common mistake is to re-describe the results in different words or to dissect them in detail by emphasising statistical significance, even though the relationship may be spurious, or to speculate excessively about the extent of the findings with minimal comparisons with previous studies. Commenting on the limitations of the study adds to the scientific interest and demonstrates the wisdom of the authors. When necessary, the strengths of the study can be highlighted, but be wary of insisting that the research is unique, novel or highly original.

The number of tables and figures should be proportional to the volume of the results.<sup>7</sup> Long tables with more than 3 or 4 columns and 10–12 rows are difficult to understand, especially if they include many letters, numbers or call-out signs for footnotes. Figures are used to show evidence or salient data, not because they "look pretty".

Bibliographical references should correspond to the documents consulted by the authors, be recent, valid and accessible, be free of citation errors,<sup>8</sup> be appropriate to support the claims made in the text and, bearing in mind, it is always appreciated to include articles directly related to the topic published in the chosen journal.

When it comes to selecting the journal, valuing the impact factor as the sole criterion, disregarding the interest and characteristics of the readers and giving priority to a general journal when the subject is specialised or super-specialised (and there are journals in these fields), practically ensures rejection and delay in publication.<sup>9</sup> By insisting on the same approach, rejections tend to be chained, which has a negative impact on the loss of topicality and contributes to the distortion of the initial scientific information.<sup>10</sup> On the contrary, assessing the purpose and coverage of the journal, in addition to its bibliometric indicators, and the true scientific scope of the work within the framework of the usual publications that appear in the journal is a prudent strategy that is usually favourable.

Finally, a brief note on style. Although everyone has their own way of writing, in order to communicate quickly and effectively, it is necessary to write clearly, simply and

precisely, with short sentences (avoiding punctuation problems), knowing the meaning of each word, without grammatical mistakes and being sure that the logic and legibility of the text is adequate. To do this, it is enough to read what you have written and let someone else read it. If you have to reread it, you have to improve the writing. It is as easy as that.

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