

## Writing for publication in a library journal

Nick Joint  
Andersonian Library.  
University of Strathclyde.  
[n.c.joint@strath.ac.uk](mailto:n.c.joint@strath.ac.uk)

This paper is aimed at librarians who want to publish something in a library and information science journal but have never done so before. If you fall into this category, perhaps the first thing to be said is, good for you if you've decided to take this step. We hope that you are about to join that important group of professionals, those who can be described as 'reflective practitioners'. This means that, not only are you good at your job, but you are good at thinking about your work and analysing it for others. Which can only make you better at what you do.

### Two types of author<sup>1</sup>

However, before you go any further, it's best to pause for a moment and think about why you want to publish. You will probably fall into one of two camps – you will either definitely have something to say, or you will not. You should try to be honest with yourself about this, since it makes all the difference to how you approach the challenge of authorship.

If you fall into the former category you will probably have achieved something in your professional practice that you think original or high quality. If not, then you may have had a brilliant idea or feel that you have understood something in a new or compelling way. Or again, you may wish to write simply to pin down a truth about your practice, and in so doing clarify an important issue for yourself and the larger community of practitioners.

But if this is not the case, then think about your motivation for publishing. Is it for career-enhancement? That is an excellent reason for writing. Is it because you wish to reach out to your professional peer group and establish contact with colleagues? Again, this is a very good justification for producing a paper. However, don't get too carried away – you will need to find something original to say before committing pen to paper or finger to keyboard.

The failure to make this distinction between two types of motivation for authorship means that many would-be authors fail to produce a publishable paper. We would all wish to believe we are constantly full of new ideas and that our professional practice is unusually important or even unique. Let's be honest, this is often not the case. But it is still absolutely right to want to publish in such circumstances. The vital thing is to acknowledge motivations such as career-enhancement or raising your professional profile. You can then think about creating something original to say, using established techniques that will help you generate original material.

Of course, there is a danger in being honest with yourself about why you want to get into print. You may get trapped into negative thinking. Because, unfortunately, there

are lots of reasons for not wanting to write – and lack of original material seems about the best. And even if you can convince yourself that isn't a reason for giving up, then other doubts can prey on your mind. Above all, you may fear failure: by offering something to a publisher you do undoubtedly risk rejection. But bear in mind that the failure to find out how good you really are is a far worse failure than having your first attempt at publishing rejected.

Probably the worst reason is saying that you don't have time. The demands of the everyday job are paramount for you. But, be honest, do you really mean you can't be bothered? If so, bear in mind that in the changing world of modern library and information work, every week will present opportunities for reflection and analysis. And reflection and analysis are not just aspects of excellence in professional practice, they are also a prelude to authorship. So the ability to write is a sign of good practice, the two go hand in hand. And if you spurn the challenge of authorship, you may also be spurning the chance to be a better practitioner.

So how do you try and rise to the challenge?

### **Finding your voice**

Regardless of whether you have found your inspiration or whether you are still searching for it, there are a number of steps you can take in order to create an original piece of work. Here are three suggestions:

- Think about the type of article you want to write.
- Do a literature search.
- Talk to people – this can even be a prelude to collaboration on an article. Sharing ideas, mutual encouragement and dividing up tasks can all pay dividends, so do think about collaborative authoring.

So let's first think about what type of article to write.

### **Types of article<sup>2</sup>**

#### *The case study*

Most practitioners write a type of article called a case study. If this is what you wish to do then it is important to realise what a case study is and what it is not. You could define a case study as a research method in which a given situation has a new element applied to it to cause a change. This can be expressed by a formula,

$$X \rightarrow O$$

where the arrow represents the process that leads to the changed outcome, O. Or in other words, X is a cause and O an effect. This is a useful definition to bear in mind, because it helps you to avoid writing a particular type of article, often cruelly parodied by the mock title "How we did good at such and such library". A very commonly rejected library and information paper is just that – a descriptive account

of good quality practice that is no different from good quality practice anywhere else. Any editor reading such a submission will congratulate the author on the exemplary execution of their duties before despatching the familiar rejection notice. In all probability the author who did “do good in such and such a library” has not acknowledged their true motivation for writing – the desire to be in print before finding something original to say. The formula for such articles could be stated as:

$$X \rightarrow ?$$

The author isn't saying anything new nor are they describing how they changed anything. However, in writing interesting case studies, it is a good idea to try and cause some sort of effect worth noting.

This may seem a bit abstract, so here is an example to flesh this out. A description of how your library runs its interlibrary loan and document delivery service is not a case study. A description of how you changed you ILL and DDS service to raise user satisfaction levels – possibly backed up by user satisfaction surveys before and after the changes – could be a good case study. The fact that other libraries may have introduced similar changes elsewhere does not make the paper unoriginal – the fact that you have proven that the change works is interesting in itself. If you're worried about this, seek reassurance by asking yourself some questions: have other libraries tested the effects of these changes in the same way that you have, or have they possibly introduced the changes without evidence of proof? If they have tested such changes, how do the results compare with yours?

Even if other case studies show similar positive results to yours, can the results be shown to be different in degree or in kind? And even if your case study replicates exactly the results of another, this is valuable. It shows that a new trend in professional practice can be adapted and replicated in other libraries with confidence in its results.

### *The experiment*

Most librarian authors need look no further than the case study for a suitable type of publication. However, case studies can be criticised on the grounds that the changes described may not have resulted from the introduction of a new element. In other words, in the document delivery example cited above, the rise in user satisfaction may have been caused by some other factor, or may have just come about as a random change. Through time, other random changes in the opposite direction may also occur and nullify the result.

A more methodologically robust form of investigation is the experiment. Here a change is introduced into a given situation in parallel with another, which is not subject to that change and which is used as a 'control'. These two parallel contexts may be crudely expressed like this:

$$\begin{array}{l} X \quad \rightarrow \quad O_1 \\ \text{Not } X \quad \rightarrow \quad O_2 \end{array}$$

Where one context shows something happening in response to the change, the other should show something else. Because the cause is absent from the control group, so must be the effect. But if the end result in both contexts is the same, then whatever you have done, it didn't make anything happen.

True experiments are much harder to set up in everyday library work of course. In the document delivery example above, you might have had to split your section into two, one working as before, the other in the new way. This is unlikely to go down well with either your staff or your line manager and may damage your job prospects (the motivation for publishing is career enhancement, remember). A small pilot would be better, and would give some sort of meaningful comparison.

But in other library situations, experiments are quite feasible. For example, to test the effectiveness of your user education programme, you could split a homogenous student group into two similar groups, giving one a user education session, while leaving the other untaught. Some sort of pre-testing and post-testing would be necessary to see what the change effect of the user education was – you would hope that the taught student group would show some sort of post-test improvement on the pre-test results (though negative results are always interesting as well!). You might find that both groups improve to the same extent, showing that the improvement was really due to taking the first test for a second time, and not by the actual experience of being taught. A case study on its own would just have shown you the improvement, without any evidence that the cause of the improvement was something other than what you had assumed.

### *Surveys*

Surveys are a very popular form of investigation and will generate valuable data for publication if handled properly. They can also form a part of other investigations, as in the user satisfaction surveys in the case study example above. But there can be disadvantages – survey fatigue means that many respondents are unlikely to respond to requests for interviews or will be unwilling to fill in questionnaires in any format. Compiling results can be very time-consuming also. A good bet may be to use a software package for number-crunching (these are often already in use in many organisations and can be borrowed by the Library), together with a web form for questionnaire distribution, if a questionnaire approach is most appropriate. Remember that certain target groups are resistant to web questionnaires, mainly those with low IT awareness or low access to network facilities.

Above all, surveys can get you into deep water with statistical methods. Whereas case studies and experiments in LIS work can be successfully carried off with a certain native intelligence, complex statistical analysis is the preserve of experts. So you'd be best advised to stick to a straightforward descriptive, fact-gathering survey. Having decided that, next find an interesting idea, and narrow it down to something specific. Then work out your research questions and hypotheses. You must decide on whether to target a whole population, or group within that population, but make sure you know the basics of sampling. Take advice on the survey technique (questionnaire or interview, in whatever format is most effective), and then create and test your survey instrument (e.g. pilot your questionnaire and then revise it according to feedback). Then the hard work of publicity and distribution takes place, all the time making sure

that the response rate is acceptable, after which data analysis and interpretation will lead to conclusions being drawn.

From the presentational point of view, when writing up a survey, try not to burden the reader with too many statistical tables and sets of data lists in the main text of your paper. Having slaved through mountains of numbers you will probably feel impelled to push as much data as possible into the eyes of your readers. This is a mistake. The core text of your paper is for discussion and argument, interpretation and debate. It may break your heart, but relegate numbers and statistical tables into appendices as much as possible while showing just the tip of the numeric ice-berg in the text itself.

There are many other types of paper, but these are some quite good points to start with. Above all, thinking about the genres selected above should help you avoid writing an unoriginal descriptive piece about everyday library work. In fact, the three article types above are particularly suited to giving new perspectives on professional practice.

### **The literature search**

Literature searching? We're librarians, so we're good at this. Bear in mind that, if searching for ideas, a review of the literature is a tremendous source of inspiration. For example, you'll see what the hot topics are, which is important if you want to attract readers' and editors' attention. You'll be able to trace topics that interest you for treatment as case studies, but you should be looking at these topics from a different angle to give fresh insights on a popular subject. And a literature review can be written up as a type of article in itself.

So, if you do a particularly thorough job of your literature review you may want to publish it as a self-contained article. If so, remember the advice above about surveys. If you spend a lot of time collecting data, you tend to want to put too much of that data into your main text. Similarly, if you spend a lot of time collecting and reading articles on a theme, then you will probably want to prove how well you know this literature by reproducing too much of each paper in the main body of the text. This makes for a mechanically written and extremely long literature review. Much better to keep the essence of a paper for your main argument, and let the reader follow up the references themselves to find out more about an interesting citation. Just stick to the main argument, so the text of your literature review reads well as a self-contained piece of prose.

### **Collaboration**

An enjoyable way to create ideas for a paper is to get together with colleagues and kick some ideas around. Keep the contacts up and develop some thoughts iteratively. You will probably come up with a number of insights that would otherwise never have seen the light of day, and other people's advice will help you avoid going down cul-de-sacs. There's nothing better than impartial criticism (just don't take it personally – like fear of failure, fear of criticism can cut you off from hearing other people's valuable contributions). Even if you've written a paper on your own, showing it to colleagues after writing is a great idea, but again don't feel too defensive. You may have to deal with negative comments, but better to do this prior

to submission to a journal. If you have to rewrite something, don't worry - it will probably increase your chances of acceptance.

If you do decide to co-author a paper, there are various ways of dividing up the work. You may want to divide up your paper into sections and have each part written by one of the co-authors. This raises the issue of structuring your paper, a topic we can treat briefly under this heading.

It may sound fatuous to say this, but your paper should have a beginning, a middle and an end. The beginning can take in an introduction, literature review and hypothesis for investigation. The middle could be descriptive and tell the reader what you did to investigate your hypothesis before showing the results that you gathered. Finally, you could provide a reflection on your investigation, leading to some clear punchy conclusions that directly relate to the opening hypothesis. Finally you give your references. If you can, work out the format of the references required by your target journal (numeric style or author/Harvard style) and use that format right from the start, from the moment you first make a reference in a first draft. It's possible to leave it to the end, but this can be frustrating if you then need to change. There's no point in making work for yourself by having to change citation style once the paper is written.

So, having created a good structure for your paper, it may be tempting to divide up these sections between co-authors. But in my experience it doesn't work that well. Better to give the job of writing the whole piece to one individual, which will make for a more unified and consistent result. Other whole, self-contained tasks can be divided up (for example, compiling questionnaires, number crunching survey results) but the act of writing is best left to one person.

### **The publication process**

Finally, it is as well to bear in mind the nuts and bolts of the publication process. You are in fact writing your paper for four people - for yourself, for an editor, possibly for a reviewer, and definitely for your reader<sup>3</sup>. You should think about how your paper will move through the hands of these four people, arriving (we hope) with the grateful reader.

Most of this paper has dealt with you as an author and how you approach the act of writing. However, in thinking about the editor you will be considering issues such as selecting a suitable journal and writing to a particular set of requirements. Many journal articles are rejected because they are submitted to an inappropriate journal. It is very disappointing for an editor to read through a paper that has been conceived and submitted without consideration of its suitability for the journal that he or she edits. How do you avoid this trap?

You have a choice – you may want to select your journal very early on in the writing process and write very much to the requirements of that journal. If you find that a bit too much of a straightjacket, then you may prefer to write the paper itself and then consider what sort of journal it would be suitable for. This can be a bit more risky. You may end up with a hybrid sort of paper that could suit one journal or could suit another but which is perhaps not ideal for either. But first time authors often prefer to do this, since writing to a set of requirements can take a bit of experience until you

feel comfortable with it. But whenever you do it, do take care that you have read the instructions for authors and that the intellectual content, style, and formatting of your paper suits the journal you've chosen. You should always feel free to contact the editor direct – editors want to do as much as possible to improve their journals and they will readily help would-be authors.

You will also need to think about whether you want to submit to a peer-reviewed journal or not. Some journals simply publish papers that have been seen and edited by the editor or editorial board themselves. Others will send papers out to independent review. Such peer-reviewed journals tend to have more academic credibility and be more research-oriented in focus. If there is any question of your paper being used for the Research Assessment Exercise, then you must submit to a peer-reviewed journal – any other journal would not be a 'proper' journal for RAE purposes. On the other hand, if you want to reach as many practitioners as possible, then a peer-reviewed journal may not be appropriate for you. Practitioners often find peer-reviewed journals too ponderous in content, and the need for originality in research can drive peer-reviewed journals into some fairly specialised (if not obscure) areas. A clear, insightful paper that elegantly treats a familiar but important topic from a new angle can be more valuable to practitioners than a hundred specialised research papers. It will be more widely read also! Think what is appropriate for you.

In particular, if you do go for peer review, brace yourself for the receipt of the reviewer's comments. Reviewers will give an open and honest account of the paper from an objective perspective. Unlike editors, they have no direct contact with you, which may make the criticism they offer seem impersonal and rather robust. Again, don't get too disheartened by this – if you are a first-time author you may feel like giving up and submitting to a different journal. Just work through the reviewer's comments and by the end of rewriting your paper, you will probably have a paper that is much improved and acceptable for publication.

Last, but not least, the reader. The reader should obviously be the focus of your efforts all the way through. However, it is often very difficult to get a good idea of how the reader will see your work when you have been so close to it for so long through the protracted act of authorship. Apart from collaborative authorship and soliciting people's advice – which will give you something nearer to the reader's perspective on your work - you can always simply shelve your paper for a period, just long enough to give you a sense of its unfamiliarity. The key to this is not to work right up to your deadlines! If you do have a deadline then try and finish with a good period of time between the final draft and that submission date. You can then set the work aside and come back to it with a fresh perspective. The aim should be to see it through the readers' eyes, for the first time and with an honest perception of faults and failings.

### **Conclusion**

I will now try and take my own advice and write a punchy conclusion that rams home my basic hypothesis. Firstly, be honest with yourself about your motivation for publishing. Think about techniques for generating ideas, especially if you do not have ready-made material to hand. Use your knowledge of article types, your skills in literature searching and your contacts with colleagues to generate creative momentum. And use your understanding of the publication process to target the right journal with a paper that will suitably impress editor, reviewer and reader alike.

And so, armed in this way with all this excellent advice you should be fully empowered to enter into the creative process of writing. Moreover if you wish to take an editor's advice, I would be delighted to respond to any queries in my role as editor of 'Library Review', a peer reviewed practitioner-oriented library research journal. My email is at the top of the paper – and I look forward to hearing from budding first time authors in due course!

---

<sup>1</sup> Abby Day's article entitled "How to Write Publishable Papers", gives a full treatment of her ideas (briefly described above) about why people write, and why they fail to write:  
<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/literaticlub/authors/publishable1.htm>

<sup>2</sup> This section draws on the more extensive discussion of types of research in Section 2, 'Methods', in: Williamson, K. et al. "Research methods for students, academics and professionals; information management and systems" 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Wagga Wagga, N.S.W.: Centre for Information Studies, Charles Sturt University, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> This discussion of roles in the publishing process is elaborated in Day, A. "How to Write Publishable Papers" <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/literaticlub/authors/publishable22.htm>