

Women and Birth

Writing for publication: The basics.

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Abstract

Problem: Writing for publication can be a challenging experience. Whilst midwives develop writing skills through their university education, writing a journal article can be quite different.

Purpose: To explain some basic skills of scientific writing when preparing a paper for publication to support midwives in engaging in scientific writing. This is an update of a previous editorial from 2008.¹

Overview: Four basic elements of scientific writing will be presented: the importance of careful word choices, the use of active and passive voice, sentence and paragraph structures, and review and editing. Examples of poor and better writing are given to illustrate these basic elements of good academic writing. We hope potential midwifery authors will read and refer to this article when writing. As editors, the elements addressed here are common problems found when reviewing submitted manuscripts that, with guidance, can be easily overcome.

Keywords

Scientific writing; Writing for publication; Midwifery; Grammar

Background

Clear thinking and critical reflection are the keystones for developing logical, coherent arguments for scientific writing. A midwife cannot advocate effectively for evidence-informed practice unless she can clearly articulate the key messages of critical thinking and logical reasoning. Thus, we argue that good writing is essential to the practice and development of midwifery as a discipline.

In midwifery, speaking is often spontaneous and conversational, while clarity, brevity, and structure are essential in scientific writing. For example, in a conversation, one might say, "The participants in the study seemed to respond better to the treatment after a week, showing fewer symptoms." However, in a journal article, the sentence would be more formal, succinct, and structured: "After one week of treatment, participants showed a significant reduction in symptoms." In scientific writing, key findings are presented concisely and with precise language, ensuring the information is clear and easy to interpret. We will demonstrate the basics of scientific writing, as shown in Figure 1. Additional, more detailed resources are also available.²⁻⁴

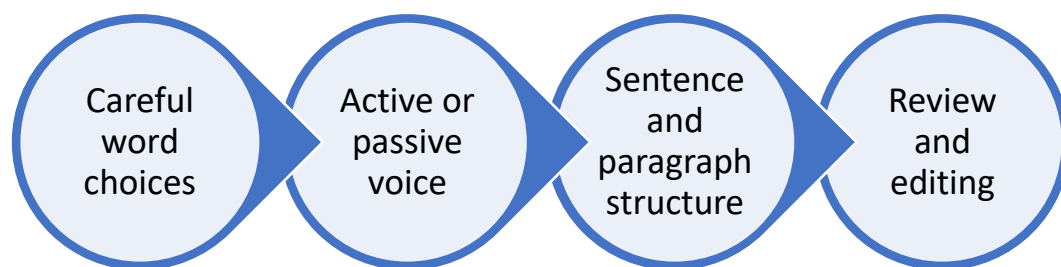


Figure 1: Steps to good scientific writing.

Before embarking on scientific writing, it is timely to acknowledge artificial intelligence (AI) tools. Open AI chatbots are expected to have a substantial impact on future scientific article writing as writing assistants. AI can assist in checking and/or improving several aspects of language, such as grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, spelling, organising text, or generating content in various writing styles.⁵ The technology should be applied with human oversight and control, and all work should be reviewed and edited carefully.⁶ Women and Birth is a journal published by Elsevier, and their policy relating to AI is available [here](#). The key message is that where authors use generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process, these technologies should only be used to improve the readability and language of the work, not for the original creation of the work. Authors are responsible for verifying intellectual property and avoiding plagiarism when using AI tools.⁷ Women and Birth now require a declaration about the use of AI in all manuscripts submitted. If AI tools have been used, the authors are required to state which tool you used and for what purpose. This is to create transparency through the publication process and for the readers.

The basics of scientific writing

While scientific writing has many aspects, this paper will present four key elements seen often through the editing and peer review process. Before you start writing, you need to have a clear (or as clear as possible) sense of what you want to say. That clarity of thinking can change and improve during the writing process, but clear thinking from the outset leads to clear planning and clearer writing.

Careful word choices

The key elements of effective word choices are clarity, simplicity, accuracy, and consistency. These form the foundation of good writing. Clarity involves selecting the simplest and most accurate words to express ideas, making your meaning easy for the reader to understand.⁸ Avoid complex words when simpler alternatives exist, as they can confuse readers. See Box 1 for some examples. Clarity is also improved if word choice is accurate. Accuracy means choosing the precise word to express what you mean. In the introductory section, your paper will likely have some key terms that should be defined to set the scene for your topic. Clarity

is improved if you use the same terminology consistently throughout once a precise word is chosen. For example, if you want to write about ‘perinatal mortality’, first define that term and then use the same term throughout the paper. It is advised not to carelessly use synonyms (e.g. perinatal deaths, baby deaths, stillbirths, newborn deaths) as this may confuse the reader and distract from your message. You must remain consistent throughout a paper. In summary, to improve the clarity of your writing, be sure that your chosen words are accurate and as simple as possible, and be consistent, using the same word each time you write about the same idea.

Poor word choice	Better word choice
Acquire	Get, gain
Ascertain	Verify, confirm, find out
Attempted	Tried
Facilitate	Help
Furthermore	Additionally, in addition
Remainder	Rest
Significantly	Greatly (when not referring to statistical significance)
Subsequent	Next, following
Terminate	End
Utilise	Use
Voluminous	Ample, large, full
Therefore	Thus

Box 1. Words for simplicity and clarity

Use active versus passive voice

In scientific writing, an ‘active’ rather than a ‘passive voice’ voice is generally preferred because it is clearer, more direct, and easier for readers to understand. In the active voice, the subject names the actor. For example: ‘The midwife monitors the baby’s heart rate during labour’ is correct because the midwife (subject) is the actor, i.e. the one doing the monitoring (verb). By comparison: ‘The baby’s heart rate is monitored by the midwife during labour.’ is in the passive voice. In this example, the subject is now the ‘baby’s heart rate’, the verb has been modified by the addition of ‘is’, and the verb ‘monitor’ has been changed into the past tense ‘monitored’. Many scientific sentences have more than one possible subject and more than one verb. The writer must be clear about which noun in any given sentence is the ‘real’ subject of the sentence. The subject should appear early in the sentence. Putting the subject early in each sentence helps you write simple, active, and brief sentences.

In previous years, scientific writers wrote in the passive voice because they had been trained to appear detached and objective in writing. The first-person words ‘I’ or ‘we’ were banished from journals, dissertations, and academic texts. This injunction has changed, and scientific writers are encouraged to use the first person when writing about subjective matters of opinion or judgement. An active voice can help ensure clarity by making it clear to the reader who is taking action in the sentence. Examples of active and passive voice are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Passive and Active voice examples

Initial passive voice	Improved active voice
Weight stigma has been found to pose a significant risk to the health and well-being of pregnant women with high BMI ^(ref)	Weight stigma poses a significant risk to the health and well-being of pregnant women with high BMI ^(ref)
Midwifery scholars are highly critical of this anticipatory approach to risk management, referring to it as the 'ever-narrowing window of normality' (ref).	Midwifery scholars criticise the anticipatory approach to risk management as the 'ever-narrowing window of normality.' (ref)
The purpose of this section is to describe the research methods undertaken in this project	In this section, the research methods are described

Passive voice, because it omits or de-emphasises the actor in a sentence, often deprives writing of its vigour. Further, passive voice may create unnecessary vagueness.¹⁷ Passive voice, however, is acceptable when you want to focus on the recipient of the action rather than on the actor.²⁰ For example "The student midwife examined the woman" is correctly written in the active voice as the focus is on the student midwife. By comparison, "The woman was examined and found to be healthy" is correctly in the passive voice as the focus is kept, appropriately, on the woman.

Sentence and paragraph structure

The aim is to write clear, direct, and brief sentences in well-structured paragraphs. This involves placing the subject early in the sentence and using active voice. A sentence is a group of words about a single idea. A well-written sentence should be able to stand on its own to convey this single idea to the reader. Each sentence contains at least one subject and one verb. A subject is a word or group of words that relate to what the sentence is about. A verb is a word or group of words that provide more information about the subject. For example: "Women form bonds with their baby during pregnancy and childhood". In this example, 'women' is the subject of the sentence. The verb in the sentence is 'form' because it is what women do. In this example, you can also see an additional description of what the women (subject) form (verb): "bonds with their baby during pregnancy and childhood". This additional information, known as a complement, tells you more about the verb. When writing academic sentences, it is important to keep them concise and to the point. You can use simple words and avoid non-essential or redundant words. For instance, the example "You can write really well if you take your time and also practice, practice, practice" can be made more concise: "You can write well if you take your time and practice". Your sentences should also be clear. Clarity in sentence writing involves using unambiguous words and phrases and accurate and precise vocabulary. Lastly, all sentences should use correct punctuation in the form of commas, semi-colons, full stops, and so on.⁹ See Table 2.

In scientific writing, anthropomorphic sentences should be avoided. Anthropomorphism is attributing human characteristics, behaviours, or emotions to non-human entities, such as

objects or abstract concepts. An example of an anthropomorphic sentence is, “The results concluded that the optimal sleep duration for teens was 8–10 hours”. Here, the noun “results” is given the human quality of drawing a conclusion. A better sentence would be, “We concluded that the optimal sleep duration for teens was 8–10 hours.”

Table 2 Sentence examples

Initial sentence	Improved sentence	How was this improved?
A decrease in maternal blood pressure occurred.	Maternal blood pressure decreased.	The subject of the sentence (maternal blood pressure) now names the actor in the sentence. The verb ‘decreased’ no longer needs the modifier ‘occurred’. The sentence is shorter and more direct
When tobacco smoke is inhaled, it takes 10-20 seconds for nicotine to be delivered to the central nervous system via arterial circulation	Nicotine takes 10–20 seconds to reach the brain after inhalation	The subject (nicotine) is first in the sentence and is the actor. By contrast, in the first sentence, ‘tobacco smoke’ was the subject, whereas the actor was ‘nicotine’. The verb ‘reach’ is active in the second sentence, whereas ‘be delivered’ is passive
Participants under age 16 who did not get parental consent were not recruited.	I decided not to recruit participants under the age of 16 unless they also got parental consent	The message of the sentence concerns a judgment about who to recruit and why. Using an active voice makes the actor and the reason clearer. In active voice, version the ‘I’ is now the subject (not the participants). The verb ‘decided’ is active and places the action on the verb that is most appropriate, ‘decided’ rather than ‘recruited’ as in the passive first sentence
It was concluded that delaying induction of labour until 41 completed weeks is safe and results in less inductions.	We concluded that delaying induction of labour until 41 completed weeks is safe and results in fewer inductions	The use of the first person ‘we’ and the active verb ‘concluded’ make it clear who made the conclusion.

Paragraphs comprise a group of sentences that are centred around one main point. The first sentence in a paragraph should be the ‘topic sentence,’ which sets out the main idea or central point of that paragraph. It acts as a guide to what the paragraph will discuss, giving readers a clear understanding of the paragraph's focus. A topic sentence example is, "A midwife plays a crucial role in providing emotional and physical support to the woman during labour and birth." Following the topic sentence, the rest of the paragraph unpacks this main point with evidence and explanation. Evidence can include, for instance, the research of others (presented and cited appropriately). Explanation relates to clearly clarifying, describing, and

justifying why the point being made in the paragraph is important and relevant to the overall argument of the paper. In the example, the overall message may be about the role of a midwife. Both evidence and explanation require clear, well-supported examples, details, and descriptions. As such, all sentences included in a paragraph should relate to the main point being made, and that is outlined in the topic sentence. Sentences should not go off-topic and should progress in a logical order; this ensures clarity and cohesiveness in the point being made. Linking between paragraphs also needs to be included, whereby keywords and/or signposting are included in sentences at the beginning and/or end of paragraphs to link between the paragraphs. There is no upper or lower limit for the length of paragraphs in academic writing, but a good rule of thumb is that a paragraph should be at least three sentences and no more than half a page. See Table 3.

Table 3 Example paragraphs

Initial paragraph	Edited paragraph	Justification for changes
Women who have an episiotomy more frequently report painful intercourse and marital problems six months after birth. Compared to women who had a 1st or 2nd-degree tear, episiotomy is associated with higher rates of perineal trauma in subsequent births. Episiotomy is associated with long-term morbidity. Urinary incontinence is preventable.	Episiotomy is associated with long-term morbidity. Compared to women who had a 1st or 2nd-degree tear, episiotomy is associated with higher rates of perineal trauma in subsequent births. ^(ref) Women who had an episiotomy were more likely to report painful intercourse and ongoing marital problems six months after birth. ^(ref)	The topic sentence is 2nd last in the first example. The last sentence in the first example is not related to the topic of the paragraph and should be in a new paragraph supported with evidence. No references were provided in the first example

Review and editing

Reviewing, editing, and proofreading are the tasks that take up the most time in scientific writing. Expect to spend about 80% of your time on this stage. For novice writers, this can be challenging and frustrating. Your more experienced co-authors may send you back many revisions. Try to be patient and trust the process. If they have published widely, they know what they are doing, and the result will be high quality. If you don't have experienced co-authors, ask a friend to read your paper. Ask if it makes sense. Is it clear? Ask them to describe to you what they understand from your paper. Printing the manuscript out and reading it on

paper may be helpful – often, you will pick up things you did not see on your computer screen. Always assume at least three drafts will be written before your paper is ready for submission. You may end up writing 10 or more drafts to refine your paper; in the process, you will clarify your meaning and develop and support your arguments fully.

Brevity means using the fewest words possible; too many words can confuse the reader. Achieving brevity is the result of disciplined and consistent self-editing. We tend to write as we think and speak, often long-winded and convoluted. If we write as we speak, what we write will be dull, confusing, and difficult to read. After you write a first draft, you may need to simplify your writing by removing unnecessary words, sentences, and paragraphs. Then, you may need to re-write many of your original sentences and paragraphs to achieve clarity and brevity. Trim excess words that do not add anything to the point you are making. Beware of words like moreover, furthermore, additionally – ask yourself if the sentence reads well without them. If so, delete them.

Review your paper for topic sentences and paragraph structures. Reorganise individual paragraphs so they always start with a topic sentence. Check that each paragraph only has one topic and that the topics flow in the order you intend. It may be helpful to highlight the topic sentence of each paragraph and then look at the structure you have created overall in the paper. Reorganise sentences so they use an active voice, and check that they are not too long. If a sentence can be split into two sentences, it probably should be.

When you send your work to co-authors, ensure you send them a version without spelling, grammatical, or formatting errors. If the content is in a formative state in early drafts, that is fine, but it is disrespectful (and very frustrating) to colleagues to expect them to wade through typos and poor formatting. Never submit a manuscript with typos to a journal. This is a surefire way to have your paper rejected outright. Some writers find the use of spelling and grammar-checking software useful. Make sure you set it to the preferred language of the target journal. Lastly, ensure your paper complies with the author guidelines for the journal you are submitting to to avoid immediate rejection.

Conclusion

You should pay attention to the basics of scientific writing because, as a writer, you want to make it as easy as possible for the reader to understand what you are saying. We have reviewed some of the basics of writing for scientific publications, emphasising how to help you make your ideas clear and your arguments easy to follow. The most common reason for unclear writing is unclear thinking. Unclear writing indicates that your ideas are not yet well developed. The answer to clear thinking and clear writing is the same: engage in the process of writing and critically reading your own work; it is the best way to clarify what you really mean. You want your readers to know what you are saying so they can be convinced of the merit of your ideas. Alternatively, if the reader is going to disagree with you, at least it is not because you failed to express your ideas clearly or to structure your ideas logically.

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