Writing Articles for Peer-Review Publications: A Quick Reference Guide

An abundance of resources and guidelines exist for researchers writing for peer-reviewed journals. This quick reference provides: a broad overview of the writing process; guidelines for determining the type of article to write; considerations for choosing a journal and submitting the article; and links to several comprehensive resources for journal authors. Whether you have published many articles during your career or have never submitted a manuscript for peer-review publication, we hope that this reference will provide you with some useful tips and resources.

Overview of the Writing Process

General Resources
→ Understanding the Publishing Process 1
→ How to Get Your Journal Article Published 2
→ How to Get Published: Video and PDF 3

Narrowing Down a Topic
The first step in writing an article for peer-review publication is to narrow down and frame or “scope out” your topic.

Ask yourself:
→ Which interventions or programs are being implemented?
→ What populations are targeted?
→ What policies are involved?
→ What is the health care context?
→ What gaps in the current literature will your article fill?
→ Who are the audiences that will be interested in your findings?
Simply put, what story are you trying to tell, and to whom?

Selecting the Type of Article to Write
Next, consider what type of article will allow you to convey your message most effectively. Points to consider:
→ Are you presenting a study on the impact of a new clinical or public health intervention or an analysis of an existing approach? What data do you have? If your data and methods are original, robust, and compelling, consider writing a research report.
→ Are you presenting an innovation, policy development, opinion, or idea? Is your topic of broad concern to your intended audience? If your argument is grounded in the scholarly literature, consider writing a descriptive article. If your topic is based in personal opinion or experience, consider a perspective piece or case study.

Keep these questions in mind as you select the type of article to write. The majority of articles in peer-review scientific and medical journals are empirical research reports; while journals publish other types of articles as well, research reports will be the easiest to publish, especially for new authors. The chart below describes several general categories of articles that may be relevant to the Beacon Communities, including research reports, descriptive articles, perspectives, and case studies.
See Appendix A for a table showing which journals publish each type of article listed above.

**Selecting a Journal**

Once you decide on the type of article to write, the next step is to identify one or more appropriate journals. Though protocol prohibits the simultaneous submission of articles to more than one journal, it is wise to identify two-three potential publishers of your work in case the first attempt with the priority journal is not successful.

You may search for journals in online databases (see chart below) or in the periodicals sections of the library. To maximize your chances of being published, an excellent rule of thumb is to look at the most relevant articles in your citation list—as well as those articles’ citations—to see where they were published. If you are citing a journal’s articles, this indicates the journal’s areas of focus and signals a good fit for your article.

Unless you have a specific reason otherwise, a general guideline is to focus on peer-reviewed, U.S.-published journals. If you are not sure whether your article is a good fit, contact the editors to gauge their interest in the topic. Editors appreciate inquiries, and even if they say they are not interested, they may provide helpful feedback explaining their response.

**Some questions to consider as you select a journal:**

- Does your topic fit the journal’s aims and scope? Have they recently published articles related to your topic? Do they publish the type of article you would like to write?
- Who is the journal’s audience (e.g. policymakers, practitioners, researchers)? Does it align with your intended audience?
- Does the journal have an upcoming theme or special issue on your topic?
- How often is the journal published? How many articles does it publish each year? What is the journal’s acceptance/rejection rate?
- What is the response time (i.e., once you submit, how quickly are they able to review and respond?) Is there a publishing backlog (i.e. once accepted, how long until your article is published?)
- What is the journal’s rank and impact factor (average number of citations received per paper published in the journal during the two preceding years)? Find impact factor [here](#).

### Table 1. Article types and descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Article</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Report</td>
<td>Original quantitative (e.g. reports of randomized controlled trials, observational studies, or other clinical and public health investigations) or qualitative (e.g. interviews, focus groups) research. Research reports may be long or short, and must follow a specified structure (introduction/hypothesis, methods, results, discussion) and contain compelling data to support conclusion(s). These make up the majority of journal articles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive Article</td>
<td>Focus on timely or controversial issues and are grounded in the relevant scholarly literature. They should be broadly informative, offering new insight and prompting new thinking. Some examples include policy papers; conceptual papers analyzing existing literature; descriptions of programs, interventions, or innovative practices; focused approaches to solve a particular problem; and efforts to translate research into policy and/or practice. If the descriptions of programs involve interviewing administrators or participants, then rigorous qualitative methods need to be used for the article to be publishable (see above).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective</td>
<td>Perspectives describe a considered view about one or more issues, propose and support a new hypothesis, or theorize the implications of newly implemented programs or innovations; they are generally based on opinion and/or personal insight (see specific journal guidelines).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study</td>
<td>Stories about experiences of patients with the health care system; experiences of providers treating a single patient with a specific disease or condition; or experiences of institutions with implementing a new system or method.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2. Databases to search for journals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Free Databases</th>
<th>Publisher Databases (free access)</th>
<th>Access through Library or Institution</th>
<th>Subscription Required</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PubMed/MedLine</td>
<td>Elsevier</td>
<td>Ingenta</td>
<td>Cochrane Database</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genamics JournalSeek</td>
<td>Sage</td>
<td>JSTOR</td>
<td>EMBASE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google Scholar</td>
<td>Springer</td>
<td>Project Muse</td>
<td>Science Direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directory of Open Access Journals</td>
<td>Taylor &amp; Francis</td>
<td>Thomson Reuters’ Web of Knowledge</td>
<td>Ulrich’s Directory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Resources to help you select a journal:

- **Springer Journal Selector**: matches keywords or text (such as a draft abstract) to relevant Springer journals (2,000+ total)
- **Checklist** to help decide to which journal you will submit:
  - Square checkboxes = advantageous or neutral characteristics
  - Circular checkboxes = negative characteristics, Avoid these!

New Publication Opportunity: e-GEMs (Electronic publications Generating Evidence and Methods)

e-GEMs is the new open-access electronic publication of AcademyHealth's Electronic Data Methods (EDM) Forum. e-GEMs is now accepting submissions related to innovative uses of electronic clinical data for quality improvement (QI), comparative effectiveness research (CER), and patient-centered outcomes research (PCOR). Click [here](#) for more information.

Once you have selected a journal:

- Read its aims, scope and instructions for authors
- Read recent issues to familiarize yourself with the types of articles they typically publish

Writing The Article

As you write your article, be sure to adhere to the selected journal’s instructions for authors regarding:

- **Authorship**
  - This can be a point of contention when writing in groups, so establish expectations for roles and responsibilities early in the writing process. See the ICMJE guidelines for authorship [here](#).

- **Page and/or Word Limits**
- **Article Components**
  - e.g. Title, keywords, abstract, introduction, body, discussion/conclusion, references
- **Formatting**
  - e.g. Double/single spaced, margins, section headings
- **Citation Style**
  - e.g. APA, Vancouver
- **Permissions and Approvals**
  - e.g. IRB approval, registration of clinical trials, permissions for reprinting copyrighted material
- **Ethical Considerations**
  - e.g. Author approval for submission, disclosures of conflict of interest, attestation that paper has not been submitted or published elsewhere
- **Submission Process**
  - e.g. Cover letter, electronic/paper submission, supplementary materials

Writing Resources:

- **ICMJE**: Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals
- **EQUATOR Network** (Enhancing the QUAlity and Transparency Of health Research): this website has a resource center with information for authors, as well as a library of resources and reporting guidelines for writing different types of articles.
- **SQUIRE** (Standards for Quality Improvement Reporting Excellence): guidelines for writing about quality improvement with accompanying checklist.
- **STARE-HI** (Statement on Reporting of Evaluation studies in Health Informatics)
- **Writing about Innovations**: editorial with guidelines for writing descriptive articles about health care innovations.
- **Preparing an Article for Academic Medicine**: PowerPoint with useful tips for writing descriptive articles in general as well as for this specific journal.
- **How to Write and Publish an Academic Research Paper: 101 Tips from JournalPrep.com**
- **IHI Webinar**: “Preparing Your Improvement Work for Publication”
- **IHI/Hastings Center Report**: The Ethics of Using QI Methods to Improve Health Care Quality and Safety

Submitting the Article

Before submitting the article, proofread carefully and ask a colleague or “fresh pair of eyes” to read your manuscript and provide comments.

Academic writing and publishing is a difficult process, and realistically your article may not be accepted on the first try. Whether the journal rejects or accepts your article, keep in mind the following:

It is your job to defend your effort and communicate the importance of your topic to the reviewers.

Reviewer comments reflect their perspective on a particular piece of work, not on you. Do not be offended or overly discouraged by them; use the opportunity to improve your publication.

If asked to revise and resubmit the article, be sure to address all comments and provide some rationale if you deviate from what was suggested.

Acknowledgments

AcademyHealth wishes to acknowledge the support of the Commonwealth Fund and the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology in developing this resource.
# Appendix A. Article Types and Corresponding Categories in Major Journals

Click the journal name to view the journal’s instructions for authors and detailed descriptions of each type of article.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journal Title</th>
<th>Research Report</th>
<th>Article Category</th>
<th>Perspective</th>
<th>Case Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Medicine*</td>
<td>Research Reports</td>
<td>Articles</td>
<td>Perspectives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJPM: American Journal of Preventive Medicine*</td>
<td>Research Articles</td>
<td>Current Issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes Spectrum*</td>
<td>Research Articles</td>
<td>Features</td>
<td>Departments</td>
<td>Guest Editorials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Affairs</td>
<td>Research Articles</td>
<td>Theme Articles</td>
<td>Narrative Matters</td>
<td>Narrative Matters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Services Research</td>
<td>Research Articles</td>
<td>Policy Impact Articles</td>
<td>Research Briefs</td>
<td>Debates/Commentaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JAMA: Journal of the American Medical Association*</td>
<td>Original Contributions</td>
<td>Viewpoint</td>
<td>A Piece of My Mind</td>
<td>JAMA Clinical Challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JAMIA: Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association*</td>
<td>Research Applications</td>
<td>Research Applications</td>
<td>Case Reports</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Healthcare for the Poor and Underserved*</td>
<td>Original Papers</td>
<td>Original Papers</td>
<td>Heroes &amp; Great Ideas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Milbank Quarterly*</td>
<td>Articles</td>
<td>Articles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Care Research &amp; Review *</td>
<td>Empirical Research</td>
<td>Review Articles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New England Journal of Medicine</td>
<td>Original Research</td>
<td>Clinical Practice</td>
<td>Editorials</td>
<td>Brief Reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Special Articles</td>
<td>Current Concepts</td>
<td>Sounding Board</td>
<td>Clinical Problem-Solving</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Participated in February dissemination workshop. Additional journals listed in Appendix C.
Appendix B. Author Resources from Publishers

- Elsevier: Journal Authors’ Home
- Sage: Journal Author Gateway
- Springer: Journal Author Home
- Taylor & Francis Group: Author Services Website
- Wiley-Blackwell: Author Services

Appendix C. Instructions for Authors for Specific Journals

- Academic Medicine*
- American Journal of Medical Quality
- American Journal of Preventive Medicine*
- Diabetes Spectrum*
- e-GEMs (new publication opportunity!)
- Health Affairs
- Health Promotion Practice
- Health Services Research
- International Journal of Technology Assessment in Health Care
- JAMA: Journal of the American Medical Association*
- JAMIA: Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association*
- Journal of Healthcare for the Poor and Underserved*
- Journal of Public Health Management & Practice*
- Medical Care Research & Review*
- The Milbank Quarterly*
- New England Journal of Medicine
- Population Health Management
- Telemedicine and E-Health

*Participated in February dissemination workshop

Appendix D. Books Available for Purchase


Endnotes