

HOW NOT TO WRITE A MEDICAL PAPER. A PRACTICAL GUIDE

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Thieme, 2016

ISBN 978 9 38506 229 2 eISBN 978 9 38506 252 0
pp 104 Price €9.99 US\$10.99 £8.00

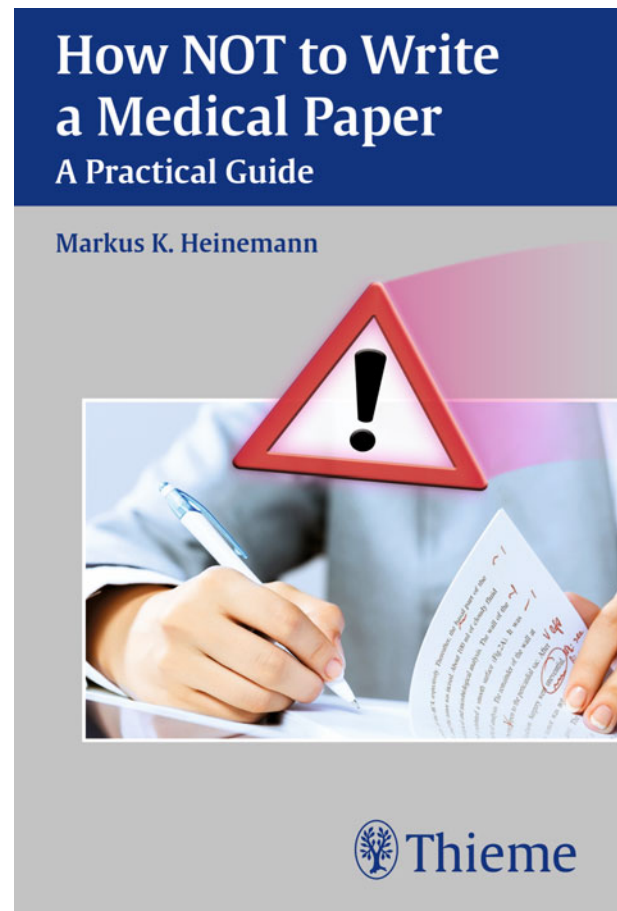
A title such as this has to attract any author (or indeed reviewer or editor), whether novice or veteran. Imagine then the care that went into every sentence of this review, having just read a book filled with examples of bad scientific literature!

My first reaction on searching through a very large exciting parcel, from this quality publisher, was a simple 'Oh!' This book proves smaller (i.e. in page size) and shorter (85 miniature pages of text) than I had anticipated. Wise advice is to 'leave them wanting more' and this book does prove as cheap as a single beef burger at that new London venue, that we are assured is fit for purpose, to watch association football.

It is witty from the opening paragraph and I will not spoil that by reproducing the sentence that follows it. The author edits a thoracic and cardiovascular journal, and, memorably, looks at fictional studies, especially of asphalt and its many associated diseases! There is a good generic message throughout, however. There are many boxed 'Bad examples of...' to illustrate errors in submission (which I wanted to revise to 'Examples of bad...', but let us not be too pedantic). I was impressed that one A Speer, from 'Spandau University', could still claim co-authorship of a paper as on page 17!

'Why Editors Accept or Reject Manuscripts' proved a surprisingly short chapter, largely reproducing a US article from 2001. The chapter 'Types of Scientific Articles' is probably the converse of the book title, but invaluable. If it makes authors learn the meaning of the acronyms CONSORT or PRISMA, or recognise a forest plot, all well and good. Chapter 4 is entitled 'Manuscript Components: Dos and Don'ts' and comprises half the book content. Topics include authorship (at quite some length), title, abstract construction (excellent coverage for which I found myself nodding in agreement throughout) and statistics. This paragraph is getting too long, I have learnt from this book. Stop.

The chapter on the review process and subsequent alterations to the manuscript contains some very sound advice (please do track changes, we would all beg you). 'Publication Ethics' covers plagiarism, and duplicate submission and publication (I am convinced that is an unrecognised, but major, issue), and even data fabrication. 'Good to Know' is once more off-topic, but a nice summary of the publication process after acceptance.



'Final Advice' is just two pages of text but, alone, justifies the price of the book. Especially thought-provoking is a brief discussion of the correct order in which to write the paper, starting with the methods and finishing with the title.

This is not a book about research methodology, but instead how to sit down and write up the finished work (even if the title suggests only coverage of the pitfalls). I will still treasure my very dated copy of Edward Huth's 'How to Write and Publish Papers in the Medical Sciences' (Williams and Wilkins, 1990), as long out of print and far more expensive. This, instead, is a small handbook, packed with sound advice and at a bargain price. If even one single message sinks in from a reading of this, it is worthwhile. The author is skilled, and I would happily have invested far more for a much longer book. Whether I could afford that, in a few years, with the Pound/Euro exchange rate sliding, I doubt. For now, I would certainly rather spend my money on this book, than on the catering at my team's new home ground.

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