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Artículo de revisión

N. Cano-Ibáñez y Col

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WRITING CONVINCING MANUSCRIPTS FOR PEER-REVIEWED MEDICAL JOURNALS: DRAFTING A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW ARTICLE.

Naomi Cano-Ibáñez [1,2,3], Carmen Amezcua-Prieto [1,2,3], Marta Maes-Carballo [1,4,5], Sandra Martín-Peláez[1,3], Khalid Saeed Khan[1,2,3]

1. **Department of Preventive Medicine and Public Health, University of Granada, Granada, Spain. ncaiba@ugr.es; carmezcua@ugr.es; marta.maes.md@gmail.com; sandramartin@ugr.es; profkkhan@gmail.com.**
2. **CIBER of Epidemiology and Public Health (CIBERESP), Madrid, Spain. ncaiba@ugr.es; carmezcua@ugr.es; profkkhan@gmail.com.**
3. **Instituto de Investigación Biosanitaria de Granada (ibs.GRANADA), Granada, Spain. ncaiba@ugr.es; carmezcua@ugr.es; sandramartin@ugr.es.**
4. **Department of General Surgery, Complexo Hospitalario de Ourense, Ourense, Spain. marta.maes.md@gmail.com.**
5. **Department of General Surgery, Hospital de Verín, Ourense, Spain. marta.maes.md@gmail.com**

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CORRESPONDENCE: Dr. Marta Maes-Carballo Department of Preventive Medicine and Public Health, Faculty of Medicine, University of Granada, Avenida de la investigación, 11 18016, Granada, Spain. Tel +34958241000. Ext: 20287. Email: marta.maes.md@gmail.com

review article**.**

ABSTRACT

Researchers preparing systematic review articles frequently face rejection by journal editors and peer-reviewers, leading invariably to time wastage in the rejection-resubmission cycle. In addition to undertaking the review work, authors need to understand the manuscript assessment mechanisms and the publication process within medical journals. Prospective registration boosts the authenticity of the review. The abstract is the most important part of the manuscript as it will make the first impression. The article structure is normally pre-determined according to the journal´s instructions, and compliance with writing checklists is mandatory. It is a good idea to deploy checklist items in writing up from the beginning. Introduction and discussion sections may not be hard to draft if one follows a structured approach. This article will help familiarize authors with unwritten rules about the publication of reviews, giving

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writing tips to increase the probability of the manuscript being accepted on the first submission.

KEYWORDS: Medical writing, systematic review, meta-analysis, publication, peer-reviewed journal.

REDACCIÓN DE MANUSCRITOS CONVINCENTES PARA REVISTAS MÉDICAS REVISADAS POR PARES: REDACCIÓN DE UN ARTÍCULO DE REVISIÓN SISTEMÁTICA.

RESUMEN

Los investigadores que preparan artículos de revisión sistemática se enfrentan con frecuencia al rechazo de los editores y revisores de revistas médicas, lo que conlleva indudablemente a una pérdida de tiempo en el proceso de presentación-rechazo y nueva presentación a otra revista. Además de emprender el trabajo de revisión, los autores deben conocer los mecanismos de evaluación de los manuscritos y el proceso de publicación en revistas médicas. Un registro prospectivo de la revisión sistemática potencia la autenticidad de la misma. Por otra parte, el resumen es la parte más importante del manuscrito, ya que causará la primera impresión. La estructura del artículo suele estar predeterminada de acuerdo con las instrucciones de la revista, y el cumplimiento de las listas de comprobación de la redacción proporcionadas por cada revista es obligatorio. Por lo tanto, es una buena idea basarse en estos elementos de la

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lista de comprobación desde el principio. Las secciones de introducción y discusión no deberían ser difíciles de redactar si se sigue un enfoque estructurado. El presente artículo ayudará a los autores a familiarizarse con las normas no escritas sobre la publicación de revisiones, dando consejos de redacción para aumentar la probabilidad de que el manuscrito sea aceptado en el primer envío.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Escritura médica, revisión sistemática, meta-análisis, publicación, revista revisada por pares.

INTRODUCTION

Writing a scientific article is not creative writing. When writing for medical journals, the process and structure are dogmatic and inflexible. Authors need to rigidly follow the journal´s instructions as there are virtually no scope for changing the main headings, subheadings, word counts. Being successful in a publication requires authors to make a good impression on editors; without their approval, they cannot reach their readership. Furthermore, dealing with peer-review could be challenging because there is not enough good guidance available on it. Procrastination limits the opportunities for revision of the draft manuscript to a higher standard ahead of the submission deadline. A paper rejected once will probably also be rejected on resubmission. This article will familiarize authors with unwritten

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publication rules, giving writing tips to increase the probability of their manuscript being accepted on the first submission.

We will use the publication of a systematic review manuscript as an exemplar for our deliberations. Reviews are published daily. A systematic review, defined as a review of the evidence on a clearly formulated question that uses systematic and explicit methods to identify, select, critically appraise, analyze, and synthesize relevant research (Khalid Khan, 29 Julio 2011)(1), may be published as a research article or a commentary. It carries a high value in terms of citation potential and impact. It is possible to convert a thesis background chapter (García-Molina et al., 2020)(2) or a literature review into a systematic review with a little bit of effort. A meta-analysis, a statistical method to merge the findings of single studies on the same question into an overall effect (Egger & Smith, 1997) (3), is not a mandatory component of a systematic review article. Reviews of systematic reviews, technically called umbrella reviews, are replacing traditional commentaries (Aromataris E, 2020; Hartling, Chisholm, Thomson, & Dryden, 2012) (4,5). Even free deliberation in opinion articles is being replaced by systematic reviews without a structured question, called scoping review (Peters et al., 2020).

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MANUSCRIPT ASSESSMENT AND PUBLISHING PROCESS

Figure 1 shows the steps involved in the manuscript assessment and publishing process. In a systematic review project, it is important to plan the submission from the beginning. Author must start by prospectively registering the title and the protocol having identified an important research question that is valuable for practice (Chien, Khan, & Siassakos, 2012) (6). A review protocol may merit publication on its own ahead of the completed project unless the review is relatively small. At a later stage, when submitting the manuscript, the published protocol could influence the journal's assessment. The manuscript should also comply with PRISMA, MOOSE (Liberati et al., 2009; Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, & Altman, 2009; Stroup et al., 2000; van Zuuren & Fedorowicz, 2016) (7) or another relevant writing checklist which should be included as supplementary material to make a positive impression. The identification of relevant journals is a key initial consideration. Studying the aims, scopes and instructions of the journal will permit proper preparation. It is always better to come up with a list of suitable journals, ranked in order of submission in case of rejection (which is common).

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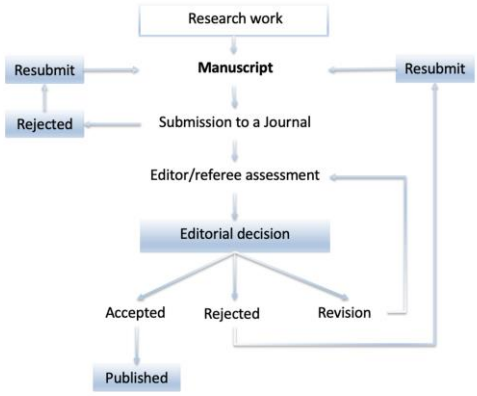

Figure 1. Editorial outline of the publication process.

Writing the systematic review manuscript should directly adhere to the instructions of the journal; this means that on every resubmission, the formatting may have to be changed. After this initial work has been done, the ideas must be located into sections described in the mnemonic IMRaD: Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion (Table 1).

Table 1. Title, Abstract and IMRAD structure of a systematic review article

(Follow PRISMA, MOOSE or other related guidelines for reporting)

Title
Abstract
I: Introduction

- Brief background (disease prevalence or burden).
- Justification for the current study based on gaps in previous reviews.
- Objectives of the systematic review.

M: Methods

- Approvals and registrations.

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- Study search and selection.
- Description of the study participants, interventions/exposures, and outcomes.
- Evaluation of the risk of bias (study quality).
- Synthesis methods, including meta-analysis if relevant.
- Patient and public involvement.

R: Results

- Description of study selection (Figure 1 – flow chart)
- Description of study characteristics and quality (Tables 1 and 2 and Figure 2 – stacked bar chart)
- Description of the results (Table 3 and Figure 3 – forest plot).
- Other statistical information (Appendices for funnel plot etc.)

D: Discussion

- Summary of major findings.
- Strengths and limitations of the review.
- Comparison with findings of other reviews.
- Implication of the results for practice and future research.
- Conclusion.

References

Appendices

- Search strategy.
- List of excluded studies.
- Other supplementary information.

In addition to IMRaD, Title and Abstract must be written. They are crucial to success in publications. The writing plans should be discussed with the researcher's team, and the writing tasks can be distributed. The addition of the perspectives of experienced writers in the team may increase the chances of acceptance of the manuscript (Gallo et al., 2011) (8).

The manuscript will enter a multi-stage assessment process following submission. It will only progress through basic administrative assessments if it is well-formatted in line with journal style and passes a plagiarism check. References,

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preferably inserted in text using bibliographic managers, must be formatted as it is frequently taken as an indicator of the article's quality (Shokeir, 2014) (9). The plagiarism check can be performed by the authors using software, which is often provided free in most academic institutions. After passing this phase the manuscript will be read by an editor to assess its relevance according to the journal's priorities and its scientific quality considering compliance with a writing checklist. A proportion of articles will be rejected at this initial stage. Next, it will be peer-reviewed, which might recommend rejection or revision. At resubmission, a revision of the paper addressing one by one reviewer´s comments will be needed. But this alone will not guarantee acceptance unless the quality of the responses is high. Acceptance without any revisions is unusual.

We provide tips and tricks below for various sections of a systematic review article presented in the order of importance of each one.

TITLE, ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION

It is necessary to focus on the structured research question (Khan, 2006) (10) when writing the Title and the objective statement in the Abstract and the Introduction. Some examples of structured questions can be found in published reviews (Díaz-Burrueco,

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Cano-Ibáñez, Martín-Peláez, Khan, & Amezcua-Prieto; Maes-Carballo et al., 2020) (11) Title, Abstract and Introduction will be read first by the editor (Figure 1), so these should make the first positive impression. There is a need for evading any fundamental errors in these initial sections to avoid rejection at the first editorial assessment. This means writing and rewriting several times, at least a dozen times in our experience. The greater the number of times these are revised, the higher the chance of being free of errors. Any issues with grammar, spelling or structure in the Title, Abstract and Introduction will make a terrible first impression.

Title with any subtitle should be short and self-explanatory to be attractive to editors and peer-reviewers. Some of the key research elements should appear in the Title: Participants, exposure or intervention, and outcomes can be described, with study design, i.e., systematic review, appearing in subtitle. This subtitle will permit compliance with reporting checklists. The Title should preferably not include question marks nor abbreviations. Finally, the Title must comply with the journal instructions concerning word count.

Writing the Abstract on the last day before the submission is a classical practice that invariably would contribute to rejection. The first opportunity to write the Abstract of a

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systematic review should be taken when writing the study protocol, registering the study, or initiating the manuscript writing. It should be guided by the relevant writing checklists (Liberati et al., 2009; Stroup et al., 2000) (7, 12).

The Abstract, usually a structured summary of the article, is the most important part of the manuscript for reviewers to focus on. It is in the Abstract that authors make a good first impression. Only if the Abstract is well-written, highlighting the main information about the review work done, the editors will continue reading the article further. The journals may ask for an unstructured Abstract where there are no divisions of the text, the information presented in a word-limited paragraph. In this case, we recommend that authors start drafting a structured abstract, including the most common headings, e.g., background, objective(s), methods (design), results, and conclusions. Then before submission, the headings can be removed, and the remaining text combined in consolidated narrative form. The Abstract, where structured or not, should be able to stand alone and avoid undefined abbreviations. The conclusions of the abstract should be based on the main results, i.e., the answer to the question addressed in the systematic review.

The Introduction section should be written after Title and Abstract. It should be a brief section of about 300

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words unless other word limits are specified by the journal. It must first include a paragraph concerning the importance of the problem addressed in the review, describing the participants, interventions, outcomes, and disease burden in terms of prevalence, life quality impact and health economic costs (Khan & Coomarasamy, 2004) (13,14) The following paragraph should explain why the study was undertaken by explaining the need to address the specific question in the systematic review. The weaknesses of previous reviews should be respectfully highlighted, using a review quality checklist, for example, AMSTAR-2 (Shea et al., 2017) (15). This allows authors to explain the knowledge gap that exists, which their review will address. The last paragraph should present the same question or hypothesis written in the Abstract under the heading objective. We can see an example of these introductory paragraphs in the literature (Díaz-Burrueco et al.) (11).

FIGURES AND TABLES

Figures and Tables must be entirely self-explanatory without referring to the text. All data symbols and abbreviations should be defined. If readers move from Abstract directly to Figures and Tables, they should find everything they need right there. The numerical results presented in the Abstract should be verifiable in the Figures and Tables. Editors and peer-reviewers look at

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figures and tables to increase their efficiency, saving time for understanding and assessment.

Thus, the coherence of the Abstract with Figures and Tables is an essential feature of a convincing manuscript. In a systematic review, Figure 1 is the study selection flow chart, Table 1 covers characteristics of the studies selected, Table 2 describe the study quality, and Table 3 (forest plot) give the results. Supplementary figures and tables are frequently required in a systematic review article, including a table of compliance with the writing checklist or a list with excluded studies and reasons for exclusion.

Table 2. Information to include in a cover letter to be submitted with a manuscript of a review article

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Basic outline

- Date, editor's name, name of the journal and other preliminaries.
- Title of the manuscript.
- Article type.
- Brief background of the study and the review question.
- Brief overview of the strength of the methods used.
- Relevance of the main findings to the journal readership.
- Statement that the submission is not previously published nor currently under consideration by another journal.
- Confirmation of the approval of all authors for submission of the manuscript to the journal.

Other information

- List of relevant studies by you or your co-authors that have been previously published, if requested by the journal.
- Potential reviewers and their contact information, if requested.
- If needed, reviewers to exclude in case there is a clear conflict of interest.
- Various disclosures or statements required by the journal (e.g., compliance with ethical standards, authors' conflicts of interest, etc.).
- Statement about compliance with reporting guidelines.

Table 3. Example of a structured answer to peer-review

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Reviewer 1´s comments		Author´s response
Abstract:		
1	Page 1: Line 35: "SDM was reported in only 40%". This line is incomplete and should read "SDM was reported in only 40% of the studies".	We appreciate the suggestion. We have modified the text accordingly.
Introduction:		
2	Page 2: Line 37-39: "Many authors have proposed personal strategies for promotion and practical application of SDM". The authors have quoted several references, however, they should expand on different proposals on strategies and practical application of SDM.	Thank you. We have added a paragraph explaining the different proposals as requested. The changes appear in the revised Introduction section as follows: "A three-step model introducing choice, describing options, and exploring preferences has been suggested.[10] Another proposal involves encouraging patients to make their own care goals that clinicians translate into treatment plans[21 25]. Option Grids and other decision aids are thought to make the SDM process easier.[26 27] Measuring SDM as a quality indicator and reimbursing professionals that actually use SDM has been floated as another idea involving incentivization[28]. "

Reviewer 2´s comments		Author´s response
1	The results of the development of the tool and the advice of the experts should be presented in the results section and not in the methods section. The methods section only needs to state what we want to develop a new assessment tool, what methods to use, etc.	As the reviewer has requested, we have moved text from "2.3. Development of a quality assessment tool" from the methods section to "3.2. Development of a quality assessment tool" in the revised Results section.
2	Inclusion of exclusion criteria, the authors included CPGs and CSs about BC management, produced by governmental agencies or national and international professional organizations and societies, in other words, the exclusion of non-guidelines. So, it is not necessary to draft excluding randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and observational studies, narrative reviews, etc.	We have removed the text as advised.
3	Page 1, line 35, 139+28=167, please check thoroughly.	We made the suggested modifications to the text.
4	Page 1, line 37, 42/101=41.6%, please check thoroughly.	We have modified the text.

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METHODS AND RESULTS

The Methods section should provide enough detail and references. It is usually divided into various sections: registration (Chien et al., 2012)(6), search and study selection, data extraction and quality assessment of included studies, data syntheses including tabulation and meta-analysis (if feasible and necessary), and patient and public involvement (Staniszewska, Brett, Mockford, & Barber, 2011) (16). The main aim of this section is to permit other researchers to evaluate if the review is well-designed and appropriate for the objective. The Methods section is the only part of a manuscript in which passive voice may override the use of the active voice in writing (Martínez, 2005) (17).

The Results section contains the output of the review, both supported by Figures, Tables, and supplementary appendices. The results must be written in an explicit and unambiguous way using precise numerical data to support the description of the findings. They should be presented following the order of the methods described. Non-statistically significant results should not be omitted. The results must report numerical data estimates of uncertainty, such as confidence intervals or level of significance. Compliance with writing checklists is a key to the authenticity of these sections.

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DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of the Discussion section is to state the principal findings, their validity, and their implications. This is not a place for writing text like in a book chapter. This section should be clear and brief (Jenicek, 2006; Rogerio Faria, Renan Cardoso de, & Eduardo Seiti Gomide, 2019; Shokeir, 2014) (18,19, 9), using a structured sub-heading if permitted by the journal. The first paragraph should give the main findings that match the numerical results given in the abstract. This will allow a reader to move seamlessly from Abstract to Discussion if they wish. The next paragraphs should cover strengths and limitations (Coomarasamy et al., 2001) (14). The latter should be written to explain the reviewer's opinion concerning the impact of the potential weaknesses in interpreting findings. After these, the authors should discuss their most important results, comparing them with those of other similar published systematic reviews, i.e., the same papers that were covered in the second paragraph of the Introduction. Implications of findings regarding practice and future research should be the final issue to describe before writing the Conclusion (Gee, 1999) (20). The Conclusion should mirror the conclusion reached in the Abstract. The Conclusion must respond to the systematic review objectives, and it may briefly mention the practical and future research implications.

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COVER LETTER

The cover letter can help to introduce the work to the journal. Authors can use the cover letter to highlight the research's significance and to convince the editors that the systematic review paper will make a good impact. It should be short, clear, and accurate using the elements highlighted in **Table 2**. Please beware that many items listed in the table may not be required unless the cover letter is prepared as a file for upload to the journal submission platform.

ANSWER TO PEER-REVIEWER

Dealing with the revision task needs proper attention to detail, which may be more effortful than writing the manuscript itself. There is a need to be polite, brief, clear, and concise (**Table 3**). Only quality response to the revisions requested leads to acceptance. Being rejected is commonplace.

CONCLUSION

Dealing with the process of writing up a systematic review for publication as a scientific article can be an arduous task for any reviewer, even for those who are experienced writers. In case of acceptance, a revision will be invariably required. We encourage revision and resubmission, taking as an opportunity to improve the quality of the written

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manuscript considering editors' and reviewers´ comments. Systematic reviewers can enhance their chances of getting published by following the guidance on how to write for a peer-reviewed journal suggested in this paper.

STATEMENT AND DECLARATION

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors declare non-financial interests that are directly or indirectly related to the work submitted for publication.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors meet the criteria for authorship and have approved the final article. NCI, MMC and CAP drafted the manuscript. KSK designed the manuscript. Authors SMP and KSK gave critical revision of the manuscript.

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