

LETTERS TO THE MJM

12 TIPS FOR POTENTIAL MJM AUTHORS

Dear MJM,

I joined the editorial team at MJM in March 2003. Over the last year I have greatly enjoyed being an external editor for MJM and welcome the opportunity to get involved with the production of such a high quality journal. My duties as an external editor primarily involve reading and commenting on papers submitted to MJM. However, as the number of papers that I have been involved with accumulates, I have noticed that authors tend to make a number of common errors. In general these are errors in presentation and style, rather than science. I have summarised these here as 12 tips for potential authors.

1. Above all, remember that the editors are busy people. Although we all try to be as objective and constructive as possible, like examiners and members of a job interview panel, we will be influenced by first impressions. Pay attention to details and don't let poor presentation let you down.

2. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Writing a paper for publication is a skill that can take years to develop. Many faculty members will be more than impressed that you are even attempting it and more than willing to offer advice on style, presentation and content.

3. Read the "Instructions for Authors" on MJM's website (<http://www.mjm.mcgill.ca>). These detail clear directions concerning the presentation and structure of manuscripts, manuscript length and the citation of references. If you do not stick to these instructions it gives the editors the impression that you do not care much about your work.

4. Be clear what your aim is. Decide what you wish your aim to be and state this unambiguously as early in the paper as possible. When you have finished check that you have achieved your stated aim and that this is clear from your conclusions.

5. Use headings and subheadings - even if the instructions for authors do not require these in the type of article you are writing. Headings help to structure your thoughts and, therefore, your writing. They help any argument you are trying to make flow in a logical order and should help you avoid repeating yourself.

6. Keep your writing specific and simple. Go through every sentence and ask: what do I mean by this sentence? Have I said exactly what I mean? Is there any way it could be misinterpreted? Are there any unnecessary words? This process can be time consuming until you are used to it, but the result should be a much better piece of writing which requires much fewer revisions if accepted.

7. Remember that MJM is an international journal. Don't assume that all your readers will be Canadian or even North American. If you are referring to some procedure or policy that is particular to Canada you must explain it for someone who has no knowledge of it.

8. Remember that MJM is a general medical journal. If you are submitting a paper on a particularly specialised topic, you must be careful to explain it for a general audience who have a broad knowledge of medicine but not necessarily specific knowledge of the topic you are discussing.

9. If you are reporting original data, remember that data description is not the same as data analysis. Provide an appropriate statistical analysis of your data and make sure you are clear what the results of your statistical tests mean.

10. Never confuse association with causation. A relationship between two variables does not mean that one causes the other, it merely means that the two are associated with each other. Association is a necessary, but not sufficient, criterion for establishing a causal relationship between two variables.

11. Remember that medicine and biomedical sciences are complex and evolving fields in which there are always controversies and differences of opinion. Learn how to search the literature and critically appraise the papers that you find. Make sure the sources you cite are up to date and that you do not rely on a limited number of sources.

12. Always proofread your work before submission - and then proofread again. Many papers submitted have numerous basic spelling and grammar mistakes which should have been spotted before submission. If you cannot be bothered to read your work why should the editors or readers of the journal? If English is not your first language, ask someone who is fluent in English to help you check your work before submission.

I hope that these points will be of use to authors considering submitting manuscripts to MJM.

Yours faithfully,

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Jean Adams is in the final year of a three year PhD research fellowship. She obtained her medical degree in 2001 and also has a BMedSci degree in health psychology and psychiatry. Her current research focuses on socio-economic inequalities in health.