



## CAME Voice/Voix

### Easing the agony of academic writing: Tips and resources for medical education scholars (part 1)

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For many scholars, writing is a private agony. We write in order to share and develop our scholarly work, and the academic value of our work is significantly increased if it appears in print. But often writing doesn't come easily, and we're not sure how to get better. This 2-part series will review common sources of struggle in academic writing and offer strategies and resources for developing your writing skills.

**The lack of time:** A fundamental challenge with writing is making the time. Few medical education scholars have the luxury of dedicated days to write! Luckily, there are strategies to help you to use brief writing periods effectively. One is to start with a carefully designed outline of each section of the paper and only tackle one small section in each writing session, such as the opening Intro paragraph or the limitations section. Tailor the task to the time you have. Another strategy to keep the writing flowing is to use the Comment function in Word to make notes to yourself for later, such as “find reference” or “fix transition”. Finally, distinguish between ‘brain work’ and ‘busy work’ in your writing. Improving paragraph transitions is brain work: find a quiet place and time where you can give this the focus it requires. By contrast, tidying up references or tables is busy work – do it while on a teleconference. Try a few of these strategies and see what helps you to use your time as effectively as possible.

**The quest for clarity:** Many writers try to do too much in one manuscript, and clarity suffers as a consequence. Decide on your story and stick to it. Work on making it compelling to a reader. One way to address this challenge is to think of your paper as part of an ongoing scholarly conversation [1]: what has been said already, and what is your distinctive contribution? Imagine you're in a conversation with impatient listeners (who are likely skimming readers): what's your main point? Clearly distinguish your *study* from your *story*. [2] Understanding this distinction helps to focus your attention on the main message for your Intro and Discussion sections – that is, the story that your study supports telling.

**The lure of editing:** Many writers edit too soon, or edit everything at once. If you find yourself wordsmithing before the ideas are coherently laid out, a solution is to write on your computer but print out to review. This strategy will help you to focus your review at the level of ideas and constrain your tendency to edit prematurely. Having a plan for the editing process can also help you decide what to edit when. Don't try to edit everything at once: you may miss the forest for the trees. Instead, edit iteratively in three layers: for style, for structure and for story. [3]

There is no getting around the power of writing: those who write well influence their field, while those who don't struggle to be heard. These strategies and resources can help scholars in the challenging but worthwhile effort to become better academic writers.

[Part 2 of this series will appear in a future Voice article]

<sup>1</sup> Lingard, L. (2015, October). Joining a conversation: the problem/gap/hook heuristic. *Perspectives on Medical Education*, 4(5), 252-3.

<sup>2</sup> Lingard, L., & Watling, C. (2016) It's a Story, Not a Study: Writing an Effective Research Manuscript. *Academic Medicine*, 91.

<sup>3</sup> Watling C. The three 'S's of editing: story, structure, and style. *Perspect Med Educ*. 2016 Oct; 5(5): 300–302.