

THE PREPARATION OF MEDICAL LITERATURE

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With a Chapter
CHARTS AND GRAPHS

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THE PREPARATION
OF MEDICAL LITERATURE

To my father

JOHN GROSVENOR CROSS, M.D.

PREFACE

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK is to present in convenient form the practical techniques of preparing medical literature for publication in journal or book form. The book is concerned strictly with techniques, not with literary criticism.

By medical literature is meant the kind of writing which physicians and allied scientists have evolved as suitable for communicating clinical experience and scientific investigation to their colleagues. This kind of writing is not confused with any other specialized kind of writing.

Some of the information presented in this book can be found elsewhere, but the physician would need to look through a number of books to find it, or to wade through considerable material which is not pertinent to his needs. The book also describes in detail other techniques which authors ordinarily have to learn by time-consuming experience because these techniques are rarely taught in schools and available written descriptions are too brief to be very useful to writers. Finally, the book includes explanations of certain publishers' conventions which sometimes seem a little arbitrary to authors who have no way of knowing the reasons for them; actually most of these conventions are determined by practical limitations of the printer's craft, a specialty with which few authors are likely to be conversant.

The techniques presented in this book are as far as possible representative of generally accepted procedures rather than of the personal preferences of any individual, writer, or publisher. Where differences of opinion or preferences are likely to occur, these differences are pointed out. Some methods of writing or of gathering material may serve more as a point of departure from which authors will work out methods which suit themselves.

The book is planned to meet the needs of any author of any degree of experience or skill in writing. It therefore includes some material which will be useful chiefly to the inexperienced writer who in preparing for the very demanding profession of medicine may have had relatively little time to develop skills in a second specialty, that of assembling material for a paper, and writing it in professional form. A more experienced man may find the book useful only for special purposes.

For example, a man who has written a large number of highly successful papers may find some suggestions which will somewhat simplify his work when he first undertakes a book. Or a man who is using a large series of illustrations for the first time may be uncertain just how to mark them so that they will be correctly placed with reference to his written text. A man with excellent basic skills in writing may need some special information on proofreading when his first galley proofs come back from the editor.

Since doctors are very busy men, every effort has been made to make the book convenient for reference purposes. Techniques are presented as far as possible in the order in which writers actually use them. Most chapters are short, headings are numerous, and the text is written as concisely as possible. Techniques which can be most easily explained by means of illustrations are illustrated.

While the book is planned primarily for doctors, it may also be useful to certain other people who are also concerned with work on strictly medical literature. Foremost among these is the doctor's secretary. Secretarial schools do not teach their students how to type papers for publication, but many secretaries can learn these techniques rather quickly, and some can learn also how to save the doctor a certain amount of work with other smaller details. Some parts of the book have been written so that the author can at his discretion ask his secretary to study them. The book may also be useful to those who are teaching medical writing in medical colleges, or to those who assist physicians in various ways in the preparation of their papers or books. It may perhaps help to orient the young editor whose training has been largely in the very different field of journalism. Lastly, the section on illustrations may contain suggestions for the younger illustrator who has not yet had time to study his drawings in publications.

Finally, if this book proves useful, a new edition may be needed later. Any constructive comments or suggestions will be appreciated and carefully considered when the time comes for a new edition. The book is written for doctors, and no-one can know as well as they exactly what they want from a book on writing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

MANY PHYSICIANS AND OTHERS associated with them in preparing or publishing medical literature have made helpful suggestions or have assisted the author in locating desirable material. While all these people cannot be specifically mentioned, certain ones have been so particularly courteous in lending material or in making comments that the author wants to express her appreciation rather particularly.

First are the 45 editors of outstanding journals who so fully and thoughtfully answered the questionnaire on reasons for accepting and rejecting manuscripts. Since few signed their responses, they cannot be thanked individually; but each one has contributed something to a chapter which, because of their answers, should be especially useful to the inexperienced writer.

Second, the author wishes to thank the physicians and their editors or publishers who have so generously permitted outlines and paragraphs from their work to appear as examples of successful medical writing. Such contributions are acknowledged at the usual places. Without these authoritative examples the book would be much less useful.

Third, the author wishes especially to express her gratitude to those authors and their publishers who have loaned fine tables, charts, photographs, and line and half-tone drawings. Obviously a section on illustration would have been impossible unless outstanding examples were published. Several professional artists or medical art professors have been generous with ideas and comments for the chapter. Miss Baty, who wrote the fine chapter on charts and graphs, and Miss Daisy Stilwell, free-lance medical illustrator, have read the entire section on illustration and have made comments such as could be made only by the practicing artist.

Miss Gertrude Annan, Librarian of the New York Academy of Medicine, and Miss Anna Frances Burke, Librarian of the Cornell University Medical College library, have been kind in permitting us to reproduce library catalogue cards and call cards from their libraries, and have also been kind enough to read the chapter on sources for medical references. Dr. Alice E. Boehm found some of the best examples for the section on style and suggested many ideas which were useful here and there

throughout the book. My brother, Grosvenor M. Cross, has been helpful with special problems of illustration. My sister-in-law, Ruth M. Cross, has been of inestimable help with her expert proofreading.

If this book presents usefully the accumulated experience of doctors who write, and of others who edit or publish medical literature, the thanks are due chiefly, however, to the many men with whom it has been my privilege to work over the course of many years. It is from them that what is most useful has been learned. Finally, a special word of appreciation is due to the publisher. It is Lippincott's deep interest in publishing a book which would be really useful to the physician-writer which has made the book possible.

L. M. CROSS

INTRODUCTION

DEFINITION OF MEDICAL WRITING

WRITING IS COMMUNICATION, using written words. The first requirement is something the author believes is worth communicating; the second requirement is someone to receive the communication, that is, a reader. Between the two stand the medium of communication—written words. Unless these words clearly express what the author has to say, communication fails, or is unsatisfactory. This definition would, of course, cover any kind of writing and is therefore not an adequate definition of medical writing.

The particular way in which any medium of communication is used always has been—and inevitably always will be—determined by three considerations: (1) what the author has to say; (2) the people to whom he wants to say it; (3) the author's technical skill in using his medium of communication. In addition, there are always certain publication conventions developed for the sake of clarity and consistency which need to be observed. Because writers in different fields of knowledge have different material to communicate and wish it to be read by people with different interests, they naturally select somewhat different words and put them together somewhat differently. Doctors, lawyers, historians, novelists, and poets, naturally write differently.

Professional medical writing can be distinguished from other kinds of writing in terms of the three fundamental determinants of specialized kinds of writing: subject, reader, and the kind of skill which has been accepted as suitable to medical communications.

The subject is, of course, medical or allied research or clinical experience, and the reader is a colleague of the author. The reader, like the author himself, starts to read a paper or book if the subject is one which he believes will be useful to him in his own practice or studies. He continues to read only if he finds that the paper is as valuable as he had hoped, or approximately so. Unless the reader finds the subject useful to him and the study valuable nothing will persuade him to consider that paper "interesting."

Like the author, the reader is a busy man. He is therefore likely to read even a valuable communication only if it is logically enough organized and clearly enough written so that he can understand the content with only a reasonable amount of time and effort. He may toss aside a paper which is abstrusely written simply because he has not time to figure out its meaning.

The most successful medical literature is, therefore, factual, rather formal, concise, somewhat concentrated, logically arranged, clearly written, and to the popular writer rather "dry." Doctors like this kind of writing because they read scientific literature for information and they do not care to wade through a lot of fancy "writing" to get it.

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