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INVITED PAPER

A strategic guide to writing your first research paper

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Writing a research paper is a fundamental skill for researchers, yet many early-career scientists face challenges due to limited formal training in scientific writing. This paper serves as a practical guide for graduate students and early-career researchers preparing their first research manuscript. **Methods:** Drawing on published guidance, editorial perspectives and best practices in scientific communication, this paper outlines the key components of a research manuscript, including the title, abstract, introduction, methods, results, discussion, conclusion and references. Emphasis is placed on the IMRaD (Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion) structure, effective manuscript organisation and appropriate writing techniques. **Results:** This guide provides practical recommendations to support the preparation of clear, coherent and publication-ready manuscripts. By systematically explaining the purpose and structure of each manuscript section, it helps novice researchers develop confidence in scientific writing. Additional considerations related to manuscript revision, journal selection, submission procedures, cover letter preparation, plagiarism screening, responsible use of artificial intelligence tools and ethical conduct are also discussed. Common pitfalls that may hinder publication, including poorly defined research questions, inadequate reporting and non-compliance with journal requirements, are highlighted together with strategies to avoid them. **Conclusion:** Successful scientific writing requires clarity, organisation, methodological rigour and ethical integrity. By understanding the purpose and structure of each manuscript section and adopting best practices in writing and publication, early-career researchers can communicate their findings more effectively and contribute meaningfully to the advancement of knowledge in their respective fields.

Keywords: academic publishing, manuscript preparation, publication ethics, scientific writing

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INTRODUCTION

Writing a first research paper is a significant milestone in any scientific career, particularly in the field of nutrition, where multidisciplinary approaches and evolving methodologies can make the communication of research findings especially challenging. As publications increasingly serve as a key measure of academic productivity and professional success (Grech & Cuschieri, 2018), many early-career scientists, including graduate students and those new to scholarly publishing, often find the process of writing and publishing their first paper both daunting and overwhelming.

Publishing in a peer-reviewed journal is more than a rite of passage; it is a fundamental responsibility and an essential component of the scientific process (Busse & August, 2021). Effective scientific writing enables researchers to communicate their findings clearly, contribute to the evidence base and inform future research, practice and policy (Pettoello-Mantovani *et al.*, 2024). However, even high-quality research may have limited impact if it is not presented clearly and effectively. Therefore, developing the skills required to structure, write and revise a scientific manuscript is critical for every scientist.

This guide aims to demystify the process of writing a first research paper. Drawing on established best practices, editorial perspectives and practical examples, it outlines the essential components of a scientific manuscript, including its structure, writing style, revision process and ethical considerations. Particular emphasis is placed on the IMRaD format (Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion), the standard framework for reporting scientific research. By breaking the writing process into manageable steps, the guide seeks to support early-career researchers with the knowledge and confidence to prepare and publish their work successfully.

METHODOLOGY

Key sections of a research paper

A well-structured research paper follows a standardised format that helps readers navigate the rationale, methodology, results and implications of the study (Rosenfeldt *et al.*, 2000). Each section serves a specific purpose and contributes to the overall coherence, rigour and comprehensibility of the research paper. To produce a high-quality manuscript, it is important to understand the role and best practices for each component. Figure 1 shows the key sections of a research paper and their roles.

Title: Your research in a nutshell

The title is often the reader's first point of contact with a research paper. It should be informative, precise and engaging, providing a clear indication of the study's content while encouraging further reading (Karlsson *et al.*, 2020). An effective title often reflects the main result or central focus of the study and usually avoids framing the topic as a question. It should succinctly present important details such as the study population, study design and variables. A meaningful title such as "Impact of Intermittent Fasting on Glycaemic Control in Malaysian Adults with Type 2 Diabetes: A Randomised Controlled Trial" is much more descriptive and meaningful than a vague or generic title such as "A Study on Diabetes

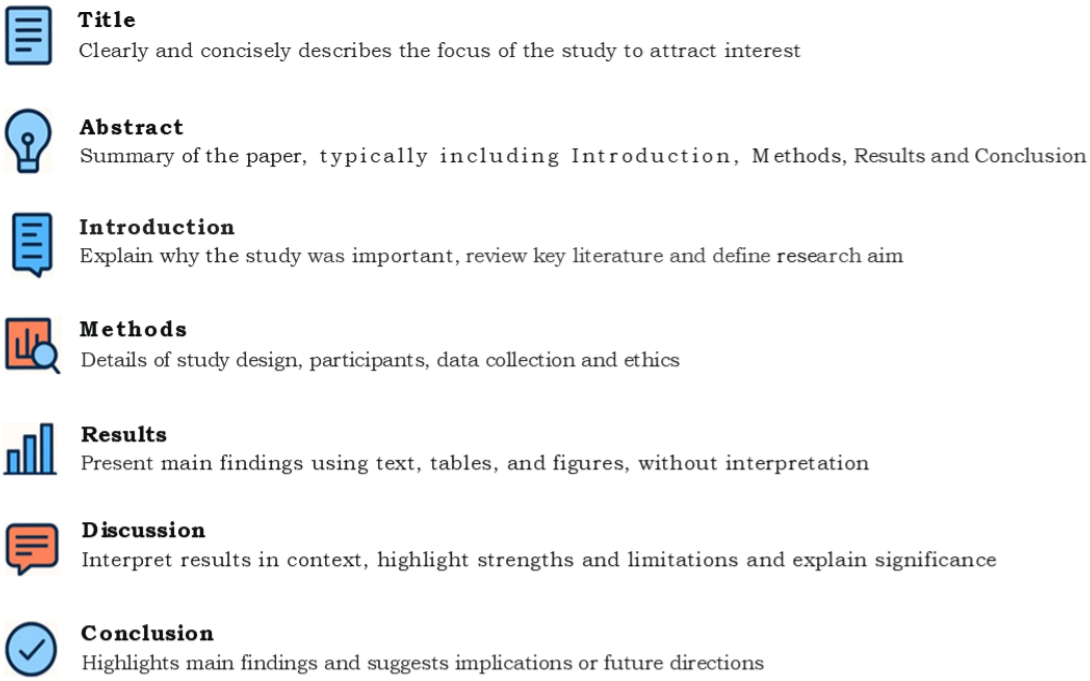

Figure 1. Key sections of a research pape

Management". Incorporating relevant keywords will increase the visibility of the paper in search engines and indexing services. Since the title must capture the essence of the work, it is often advisable to finalise it after the manuscript has been completed (Montagnes *et al.*, 2022).

Abstract: The gateway to your paper

The abstract is a condensed summary that allows the reader to quickly determine the relevance of the work to their interests. It is often the only part that is read during an initial screening, so clarity and completeness are of paramount importance (Karlsson *et al.*, 2020; Villar, 2020). A well-written abstract usually follows a structured format with sections for background, methods, results and conclusions (Rosenfeldt *et al.*, 2000). It should succinctly describe the aim, design, setting, key findings and significance of the study, avoiding excessive jargon and unexplained abbreviations. Keywords should also be included at the end of the abstract, and authors must adhere to the journal's word limit, which is often 250–300 words (Villar, 2020). Abstracts generally should not contain citations unless specifically required by the target journal.

Introduction: Setting the stage and stating the "why"

The introduction establishes the context for research, explains its importance and positions it within the existing body of literature. An effective introduction begins by framing the general problem and then narrows to the specific issue being addressed (the "upside-down triangle" approach) (Busse & August, 2021). It should briefly summarise the existing literature, highlight a knowledge gap and

explain why this gap is important. The final paragraph must clearly state the research question, objectives or hypotheses (Kallestinova, 2011). For example, an introduction on dietary change could end as follows: "Given the increasing shift from traditional diets to ultra-processed foods among Malaysian children, this study aimed to investigate the association between snack consumption and nutritional status in children aged 6–12 years." The introduction should be concise (typically 1-1.5 manuscript pages) and cite only the most relevant literature. It should clearly answer the "So what?" question, demonstrating the study's necessity and potential contribution.

Methods: Ensuring transparency and reproducibility

The methods section provides a detailed account of how the study was conducted, enabling readers to evaluate the rigour of the study and allowing other researchers to replicate the work (Stenson *et al.*, 2019). Clarity and completeness are essential. This section includes the study design (e.g., randomised controlled trial, cohort study and cross-sectional survey), the setting and the characteristics of the participants, including inclusion and exclusion criteria. The section should detail the instruments, tools and procedures used for data collection (Rosenfeldt *et al.*, 2000). Provide comprehensive descriptions to ensure replicability for novel methods or customised methods. For established methods, it is sufficient to briefly describe the method and cite relevant references. It is important to specify statistical methods such as regression models or significance thresholds and to describe ethical approval, e.g., "Ethical approval was granted by the University Research Ethics Board (Reference: JEP-2024-020)." Subsections such as study design, participants, ethics, measurements and statistical analysis help to organise the content. The methods section should be written in the past tense and must not include any results. It is often recommended as the starting point in writing, as its technical and objective nature makes it easier to write (Rosenfeldt *et al.*, 2000; Stenson *et al.*, 2019).

Results: Presenting your findings objectively

Results should be presented logically and objectively, without interpretation or discussion (Murphy & Bolderston, 2021). The results should be clearly linked to the study aims and described both in the text and in visual representations, such as tables or figures (Rosenfeldt *et al.*, 2000). Arranging the results in the same sequence as the Introduction and Method sections will improve understanding and prevent confusion as the reader progresses through the manuscript (Snyder *et al.*, 2019). Summary statistics should be reported with exact values, such as means, standard deviations (SD), percentages and confidence intervals. For example: "Children in the highest tertile of sugar-sweetened beverage consumption had a mean body mass index of 19.6 (SD 2.5) compared to 17.8 (SD 2.2) in the lowest tertile." Tables and figures should be used strategically to highlight important comparisons and results. Ensure they are self-explanatory and properly labelled. Report only those results pertinent to the research question, and avoid redundancy between text, tables and figures.

Discussion: Interpreting findings and highlighting significance

The discussion section interprets the results within the context of existing literature and theoretical frameworks, emphasising the novelty and significance of

the findings (Makar *et al.*, 2018). It begins with a summary of the most important results that address the research question, followed by interpretation through comparison and contrast with previous studies, highlighting both consistencies and discrepancies (Busse & August, 2021). For example, "Our finding that a plant-based diet intervention improved cognitive function in older adults aligns with several prospective cohort studies but contrasts with a recent trial that found no effect, potentially due to differences in intervention duration or dietary adherence." This section should highlight both the strengths and limitations of the study (Rosenfeldt *et al.*, 2000). A limitation could be: "The cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences," while a strength could be: "A large, representative sample strengthens the generalisability of our findings." It is important to discuss the implications for public health, policy or practice and provide specific recommendations or directions for future research. Avoid introducing new results in the discussion (Murphy & Bolderston, 2021). Interpretations should be supported by the presented data.

Conclusion: The take-home message

The conclusion provides a concise synthesis of the study's key findings and significance (Kallestinova, 2011). It should succinctly summarise the principal findings and their direct relevance. It may briefly suggest future research avenues but must not introduce new information or claims not substantiated in the main body. A good example is: "This research demonstrates a significant association between maternal vitamin D deficiency during pregnancy and an increased risk of low-birth-weight infants in a Malaysian cohort. These findings highlight the critical need for targeted prenatal screening and supplementation programmes to improve maternal and child health outcomes in Malaysia." If the journal does not require a separate conclusion section, this can be incorporated as the final paragraph of the Discussion (Villar, 2020).

References: Acknowledging sources and ensuring credibility

Proper referencing supports the credibility of the manuscript and enables the reader to find the original sources (Murphy & Bolderston, 2021). All claims, especially those in the introduction and discussion, must be supported by cited literature. Authors should prioritise high-quality, peer-reviewed sources and avoid unnecessary or excessive citations. Citation management tools such as EndNote, Mendeley or Zotero are invaluable for managing references and formatting them according to the journal's guidelines (Rosenfeldt *et al.*, 2000). For example, a journal that follows APA style will require different formatting than one that uses Vancouver style. References must be carefully checked for accuracy and completeness prior to submission.

Acknowledgements: Recognising contributions and disclosing support

This section allows acknowledgement of individuals or organisations that contributed to the research but do not meet authorship criteria, such as those who provided technical assistance or statistical consultation (Baker, 2012). It is also the place to disclose funding sources and grant numbers. For example: "The authors thank Dr. Aida Bakar for her expert advice on the statistical analysis. This study was supported by a grant from the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia (Grant No. FRGS/1/2024/STG02/UKM/02/1)." Transparent acknowledgement

of support promotes ethical authorship and academic integrity (McNutt *et al.*, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Writing style and tone

Effective scientific writing is based on clarity, brevity and logical structure (El-Omar, 2014). Authors should use simple, precise language and adhere to the rules of good grammar, spelling, punctuation and style. The goal is to convey complex ideas in a way that is understandable without compromising on scientific integrity. Each paragraph should be able to stand on its own while contributing to the continuity of the narrative, ensuring a logical flow from one section to the next (El-Omar, 2014). Irrelevant information should be strictly avoided as it can distract from the main message and weaken the impact of the work. The tone of scientific writing should be objective and professional. While the passive voice traditionally predominated in scientific texts, especially in methods texts, active voice is now encouraged in most parts of a manuscript to improve clarity and engagement (e.g., "We recruited participants" instead of "Participants were recruited") (Kallestinova, 2011). The use of tense should follow standard scientific conventions. Past tense is generally used when describing methods and results (e.g., "The data were collected using..."), whereas present tense is typically used for established facts, interpretations and general conclusions (e.g., "These findings suggest that...").

Revision and editing

Rewriting is an indispensable part of producing high-quality scientific work (Kallestinova, 2011). Revisions should be made at both the macro and micro levels. At the macro level, authors should evaluate the overall organisation, logical flow, and content coherence of the paper, ideally guided by a detailed outline (Kallestinova, 2011). At the micro level, attention should be given to sentence structure, word choice, grammar, punctuation and spelling (Rosenfeldt *et al.*, 2000). Practical techniques to improve writing include reading the text aloud to identify awkward phrasing, reading sentences backwards to spot grammatical errors and reviewing the manuscript line by line to assess flow and clarity. Authors should try to streamline the content by deleting redundancies and superfluous details. It is also beneficial to solicit feedback from mentors, peers or even non-experts to ensure the message is clear and accessible to a broader audience (Busse & August, 2021). Authors should remain receptive to feedback and view constructive criticism as an opportunity to strengthen their manuscript. After revisions, authors should read the manuscript from start to finish to ensure the narrative is logical and compelling. Numerous typographical or referencing errors can frustrate reviewers and undermine confidence in the quality of the manuscript (Murphy & Bolderston, 2021).

Ethical considerations

Ethical integrity forms the foundation of responsible research and scholarly publication. Violations of research ethics can include data manipulation, plagiarism, redundant publications and inadequate disclosure of conflicts of interest (Johnson, 2008). Plagiarism, including self-plagiarism, where an author reuses their own published material without proper citation, undermines the credibility

of research. Similarly, redundant publications and "salami slicing" (i.e. splitting a large study into several papers that are only marginally publishable) distort the scientific record and are unacceptable practices (Norman & Griffiths, 2008). Another concern is ghost-writing, whereby individuals contribute substantially to manuscript preparation but are not appropriately acknowledged, thereby raising issues of transparency and potential conflicts of interest. All research involving humans or animals must be approved by an institutional ethics committee, and this approval must be clearly stated in the manuscript (Johnson, 2008). Proper ethical conduct also includes correct attribution of authorship, transparent disclosure of funding sources and honest presentation of data. Adherence to these standards ensures the credibility of the research and promotes trust in the scientific community.

Authorship and contributorship

Authorship carries both academic credit and responsibility for published work. According to the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), authorship should be limited to individuals who have (i) made substantial contributions to the conception or design of the study, acquisition, analysis or interpretation of data; (ii) participated in drafting or critically revising the manuscript; (iii) approved the final version for publication; and (iv) agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work (ICMJE, 2026). Individuals who meet all authorship criteria should be listed as authors, whereas those who contribute to the study but do not fulfil all requirements should be acknowledged appropriately. Contributions such as acquisition of funding, administrative support, technical assistance, data collection or language editing may not by themselves qualify an individual for authorship. Early discussion of authorship roles and responsibilities among collaborators can help prevent misunderstandings and promote good research practice. Many journals also require authors to specify their individual contributions to the work, further enhancing transparency in the publication process.

Manuscript submission

The submission stage marks the culmination of the research and writing process and requires careful preparation to maximise the likelihood of successful publication. One of the most important decisions is selecting an appropriate journal. Authors should ensure that the manuscript aligns with the journal's aims and scope, target readership and publication priorities (Busse & August, 2021). Reviewing recently published articles can help determine whether the research is a good fit for the journal. Submitting to an unsuitable journal may result in immediate rejection regardless of the scientific quality of the work.

Once a target journal has been identified, authors should carefully review and adhere to the journal's Instructions for Authors. Every journal has specific requirements regarding manuscript structure, word limits, reference style, formatting of tables and figures, and ethical declarations. Failure to comply with these requirements can delay editorial processing or lead to desk rejection (Busse & August, 2021). Careful attention to journal guidelines demonstrates professionalism and facilitates a smoother review process.

Authors should also follow appropriate reporting guidelines according to the study design. Examples include CONSORT for randomised controlled trials,

STROBE for observational studies, PRISMA for systematic reviews and meta-analyses, and STARD for diagnostic accuracy studies. Discipline-specific extensions may also be applicable, such as STROBE-nut for nutritional epidemiology studies. These guidelines promote clear, complete and transparent reporting. Resources are available through the EQUATOR Network and are recommended by the ICMJE (2026).

Most journals require a cover letter to accompany the manuscript submission. The cover letter provides an opportunity to introduce the study to the editor and explain its significance, originality and relevance to the journal's readership. A concise cover letter should state the manuscript title and article type, briefly summarise the key findings, explain why the study is suitable for the journal and confirm that the work has not been previously published or submitted elsewhere. Where applicable, authors should also disclose ethical approval, funding sources and any potential conflicts of interest (Busse & August, 2021).

Transparent disclosure of potential conflicts of interest is also equally important. Authors should declare all financial and non-financial relationships or activities that could influence, or be perceived to influence, the conduct, interpretation or reporting of the research. Clear disclosure of such relationships promotes transparency and helps maintain the credibility and integrity of scientific research.

Authors are also encouraged to screen their manuscript using plagiarism-detection software such as Turnitin or iThenticate. All ideas, data and text derived from other sources must be appropriately cited to avoid plagiarism and maintain academic integrity. With the increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in scientific writing, authors should also familiarise themselves with journal policies regarding AI-assisted manuscript preparation. Many publishers now require disclosure of AI tools used for language editing or content development, data analysis or figure generation. AI tools should not be listed as authors, and any AI-generated references or factual statements should be carefully verified before inclusion. Regardless of whether such tools have been used, authors remain fully responsible for the accuracy, originality and integrity of the submitted manuscript.

Before submission, a final quality check as shown in a practical checklist (Table 1) should be conducted to ensure the manuscript is complete, accurate and ready for peer review. This includes verifying the accuracy of references, ensuring consistency in formatting and confirming compliance with relevant reporting guidelines. Careful preparation of all submission materials can minimise administrative delays and facilitate a smoother editorial review process. A well-prepared submission creates a positive first impression and increases the likelihood that the manuscript will progress successfully through peer review and publication.

Common pitfalls to avoid in manuscript preparation

Several recurring pitfalls can affect the quality and impact of a scientific manuscript. A common issue is the vague articulation of the research question or rationale, which makes it difficult for readers to understand the purpose and significance of the study. Similarly, an inadequate literature review that fails to identify clear gaps or contextualise the research within existing knowledge weakens the manuscript's foundation. Methodological flaws are another major concern. These may include poor study design, lack of justification for sample size, use of non-validated instruments or insufficient detail to ensure reproducibility. Such

Table 1. Checklist for preparing a manuscript for submission

Domain	*Checklist item*
Research rationale and objectives	☐ Is the research question clearly defined and supported by relevant literature?
	☐ Does the study address an important knowledge gap?
	☐ Are the study objectives or hypotheses clearly stated and aligned with the research question?
Study design and methodology	☐ Is the study design appropriate to answer the research question?
	☐ Are participant selection, measurements, data collection procedures and statistical analyses adequately described?
	☐ Are the methods described in sufficient detail to allow replication?
	☐ Are ethical approval, participant consent and relevant registrations reported where applicable?
Results and data presentation	☐ Are the results presented clearly, accurately and objectively?
	☐ Are statistical analyses appropriate and adequately reported?
	☐ Are tables and figures necessary, appropriately labelled and non-redundant with the text?
Discussion and conclusions	☐ Are the findings interpreted in relation to existing literature?
	☐ Are the strengths and limitations of the study adequately discussed?
	☐ Do the conclusions accurately reflect the findings and avoid unsupported claims or overgeneralisation?
	☐ Does the study provide a clear contribution or novel insight to the field?
Scientific writing and presentation	☐ Is the manuscript logically structured according to the target journal's requirements?
	☐ Is the writing clear, concise and consistent throughout the manuscript?
	☐ Are terminology, abbreviations, references, tables and figures presented appropriately and consistently?
Reporting standards and transparency	☐ Has the appropriate reporting guideline been followed (e.g., CONSORT, STROBE, PRISMA, STARD or relevant extensions such as STROBE-nut)?
	☐ Are funding sources, conflicts of interest and author contributions reported appropriately?
	☐ Are data availability and other required transparency statements provided where applicable?
Publication ethics and AI use	☐ Have all sources been appropriately cited and the manuscript screened for plagiarism?
	☐ Has any use of AI tools been verified and disclosed according to the journal's policy?
	☐ Have all authors reviewed and approved the manuscript?

shortcomings raise questions about the study's validity and reliability. Additionally, the discussion section is sometimes misused to introduce new results or simply repeat findings without meaningful interpretation or comparison with previous research. Overstated conclusions, especially those not supported by the presented data, can further erode trust in the research.

A lack of novelty or failure to demonstrate significance may lead to rejection, as editors and reviewers prioritise work that advances the field. Stylistic issues also detract from a paper's clarity and professionalism. These include grammatical errors, poorly constructed tables or figures and the use of undefined abbreviations. By avoiding these pitfalls and adhering to best practices in writing, revision and ethical conduct, researchers can substantially improve their chances of successful publication.

CONCLUSION

Writing a high-quality scientific research paper is an iterative and demanding process that requires careful planning, clear communication and ethical integrity. Each section of a manuscript, from the title to the references, serves a distinct purpose in communicating the story and significance of the research. A compelling title captures attention, a concise abstract encourages further reading, a well-crafted introduction establishes the knowledge gap, and a rigorous methods section strengthens confidence in the validity and reproducibility of the study. Likewise, a clear presentation of results and a balanced discussion are essential for demonstrating the contribution of the research to existing knowledge. Mastering scientific writing extends beyond simply presenting data; it involves communicating findings in a manner that is clear, credible, reproducible and meaningful to the intended audience. Effective writing, coupled with careful revision and adherence to ethical principles, can substantially enhance the quality and impact of a manuscript. Although the publication process can be challenging, it is also highly rewarding. By approaching manuscript preparation with diligence, organisation and a commitment to continuous improvement, early-career researchers can successfully disseminate their findings and contribute meaningfully to the advancement of nutrition science. Ultimately, the ability to communicate scientific discoveries effectively is just as important as conducting the research itself, and every successful publication begins with a single, well-crafted sentence.

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Authors' contribution

Lim SM, conceptualised the study and drafted the manuscript; Poh BK, contributed to the study's conception and reviewed the manuscript.

Conflict of interest

Poh BK is currently the Editor-in-Chief of the Malaysian Journal of Nutrition. Lim SM declares no conflict of interest.

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