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Avoiding Common Problems During Online Submission of Manuscripts*

Stephen J. Welch

Online submission of manuscripts is normally fast, relatively easy, and timely. However, failure to follow journal instructions, omitting required aspects of manuscripts, and other problems can delay or stop the submission and peer-review process. This article discusses common problems encountered during online submission and advises authors on how to avoid those problems and maximize the efficiency of the online submission process. (CHEST 2007; 131:1591-1594)

Key words: conflict of interest; medical writing; online manuscript submissions

Abbreviation: IRB = institutional review board

Since the first installment of the “Medical Writing Tips of the Month” section in 2006,^{1,2} various authors have tackled a number of topics that pertain to the preparation of manuscripts, structure of papers, and the actual submission process³⁻⁶ (Table 1). The topic for this month will be a revisit of the first topic,¹ with additional information about specific problems that are commonly encountered in the online submission process. Hopefully, pointing out some of the most common errors will assist current and future authors in preparing their manuscripts appropriately and avoiding delays that result from the errors we are about to discuss. In many cases, our editorial office will “unsubmit” a manuscript that suffers from the problems described in this article, and request that the author fix the problem(s) and resubmit it before the peer-review process can begin. The following topics are some of the most

common problems encountered from submissions to *CHEST*. Although some of these mistakes will not necessarily result in rejection of a manuscript, they might erode the credibility of the authors’ efforts and typically result in delays in processing the manuscript. Avoiding these mistakes will expedite the manuscript through the peer-review process.

COMMON PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN THE SUBMISSION PROCESS

Word Counts

Adhering to suggested word counts is important for clarity of presentation and economy of editorial space. The latter reason has a financial component. Word counts are often suggested or required by journals in order to ensure uniformity of length within departments or sections. Defined word counts also help guide authors to be concise and focused in the writing process. Most editors prefer short, to-the-point articles. In the immortal words of writing and editing gurus Strunk and White: “Omit needless words!”⁷

In addition, publishing is a business, regardless of whether the publisher is a commercial for-profit entity or a not-for-profit medical society. Some publishers have page limits each month and therefore suggest or require word limits to help maintain and predict reasonable (economical) article lengths. This assists in meeting page count limitations, bud-

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Table 1—Topics Covered So Far by the Medical Writing Tips of the Month Section*

| Date | Topics |
|----------------|---|
| March 2006 | Preparing Manuscripts for Online Submission: Basic Information and Avoidance of Common Pitfalls |
| April 2006 | The Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals Recommended by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors |
| May 2006 | Some Concrete Ideas About Manuscript Abstracts |
| June 2006 | How Authors Can Cope With the Burden of English as an International Language |
| July 2006 | Writing Successful Grant Applications for Preclinical Studies |
| August 2006 | Graphs |
| September 2006 | Goodbye Ghostwriters! How To Work Ethically and Efficiently With Professional Medical Writers |
| October 2006 | Documenting Research in Scientific Articles: Guidelines for Authors; Reporting Research Designs and Activities |
| November 2006 | Writing an Application for a Human Subjects Institutional Review Board |
| December 2006 | How to Make a Good First Impression: A Proper Introduction |

*All articles are online at <http://www.chestjournal.org> and have been made open access (free to view).

getting processes, and issue planning. For all these reasons, a journal may be very strict about its word count requirements.

In January 2006, *CHEST* changed its format, launched many new sections, and subsequently imposed new word counts to help the journal become leaner and easier to read.^{8,9} Authors have been slow to adopt these word counts, and it is extremely common for our editorial office to unsubmit manuscripts and ask authors to pare their article down. This invariably results in delays that could be avoided by thoroughly familiarizing oneself with the Instructions to Authors. Therefore, be sure to check the instructions to authors for any journal for defined word counts before you submit a manuscript. In many cases, journals cannot afford to be flexible on this issue.

Figures

Most journals, including *CHEST*, require that individual figure files be submitted each as a separate file, typically in high-resolution (300 dots per inch), and in specified formats such as .gif as specified in our Instructions to Authors. However, we commonly receive figures in wrong formats, such as .pdf, at resolutions too low, and lumped together into one file such as a PowerPoint (Microsoft; Redmond, WA) file or imbedded within the manuscript file, all of which are incorrect ways to submit figure files. Be sure to follow a journal's instructions for figure file submission, and if you are unsure of whether a figure complies with those instructions, enlist the assistance of someone in your institution who knows figures, such as a graphic designer or information technology specialist.

Another common problem with figures is the omission of a figure legend. It is crucial that each figure be labeled and identified correctly and have a legend that tells the readers what the figure is, and defines any abbreviations contained in the figure.

Conflict of Interest and Disclosures

Medical and scientific journals are under great scrutiny to be balanced and devoid of biased information. Recent incidents involving authors who had clear financial and other conflicts of interest but failed to disclose them have created controversy for leading journals.¹⁰ In addition, the specter of ghostwriting has created controversy and put some journals in an unflattering light.¹¹ As a result, many journals are beefing up their policies on disclosures and conflict of interest.

CHEST requires that all authors submit a conflict of interest disclosure (financial or otherwise), and if no conflicts exist, authors should state that no conflicts exist. It is important to note that an author can have a potential conflict, but that does not necessarily mean that a conflict exists. In addition, having a potential conflict of interest or even an actual conflict does not mean that your manuscript submission will be adversely affected. The disclosure must be made to ensure transparency in the peer-review and publication processes, as well as made known to readers so that they can make any judgments themselves. Conflict of interest disclosures for all authors should be listed on the title page of the manuscript or on a separate page within the manuscript file.

Ghost Authorship

Ghost authorship is the practice of having someone other than the listed author actually write a manuscript, and is frowned on for obvious reasons; in *CHEST*, it is not allowed. *CHEST* has added specific language about its policies regarding ghostwriting in accordance with the policies of the World Association of Medical Editors.¹² *CHEST* policies as noted in our Instructions to Authors reflect the view that any assistance with writing a paper should at the very least be acknowledged, and if substantial assistance is provided, then the writer's contributions should be

evaluated. If any contributions meet International Council of Medical Journal Editors criteria of authorship,¹³ they should be made a coauthor. If these simple instructions are followed, there will be no “ghost authorship” because any contributions will be apparent.

In addition to authorship contributions, *CHEST* policies also require that any author or contributor provide financial disclosures; if a contributor or author received payment or is under the employment of a pharmaceutical or industry-related company or a third-party communications company hired by a pharmaceutical or industry-related company, then that should be disclosed. Again, transparency is the key. Ghostwriting was written about in detail in a recent article in this section.¹⁴

Institutional Review Board Approval

CHEST requires that studies involving patient data have institutional review board (IRB) approval. Failure to get such approval will result in rejection. If you believe no IRB approval is needed for a study involving patient data, the circumstances should be spelled out in your cover letter. When in doubt as to what type of research may require IRB approval, err on the side of caution and get the approval; this includes getting approval for retrospective chart studies. For an in-depth discussion of IRB approval, see the recent article by Colt and Mulnard.¹⁵

Lack of Title Page, Structured Abstract, Cover Letter, or Other Elements

It is always baffling to think that authors fail to submit an abstract or title page of their manuscript, yet this commonly happens. Title pages are necessary within the manuscript itself to ensure the correct title, authors, author affiliations, and other key metadata are present.

CHEST has tried to ensure that abstracts are submitted by making it a required field in the submission process. However, we frequently find authors who fail to include the abstract in the body of their manuscript. Abstracts of original research are also frequently not structured, yet we note in our instructions that we require a structured abstract. Therefore, it is again important to stress to authors that they read and follow a journal’s Instructions to Authors.

The cover letter is a crucial part of any manuscript submission. This is the authors’ opportunity to tell the prospective journal why the manuscript is important, or how it differs from other studies in the literature. With increasing competition for limited

space in medical journals, authors should take every opportunity to clarify the importance of their research.

CONCLUSION

Preparing and submitting a manuscript is a complicated process. It is important for authors to familiarize themselves with and follow a journal’s Instructions to Authors to avoid problems that might delay the processing of the manuscript. Each journal has unique aspects, and therefore the onus is on authors to ensure their manuscript complies with that particular journal’s requirements.

CHEST has attempted to identify a few common problems that we see from authors, and we started “Medical Writing Tips of the Month” to provide authors with information on the many aspects of preparing manuscripts for submission. We have made these articles free to view (open access) and encourage authors to go through our archive and read the past installments. We hope that the installment this month has been informative and will assist authors in the submission process and increase the efficiency of online manuscript submission systems.

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