

Approach to publishing for large health services research projects

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Large health services research projects can inform policy change and improve practice. Unfortunately, a lot of good work never gets published and its effect is lost.¹⁻⁴ Little has been written about how to improve publication success. We present our approach to supporting the publishing of our research findings—developed over several large, multidisciplinary, multiyear research studies—that addresses challenges common to many research teams including the following:

- the organization of and accountability for writing tasks;
- time commitments and coordination of writing team members; and
- the career mobility needs of authors.

Dealing with organizational and accountability challenges

Preliminary writing meetings. Near the beginning of each project, the investigators and senior project staff meet to develop an organized strategy for writing papers. The principal investigator encourages the team to identify potential ideas. The list is subsequently organized into a coherent group of papers. Members of the team then volunteer to join or lead core writing teams. Timelines are negotiated and staff are assigned to support each writing group and provide progress reports at regular intervals. If the leader of a writing group becomes unable to commit to drafting the paper in a timely manner, he or she may step down. The principal investigator then takes on the responsibility of finding someone else to fill the lead role.

Authorship. Authorship is important for academics. Our Authorship Policy, guided by the *Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals*,⁵ is available on request (whogg@uottawa.ca). An authorship contribution table is maintained for each project describing how each person has contributed. Once a paper is ready for publication, the principal investigator consults with the lead of the core writing group; reviews the authorship contribution table; and proposes the authors, their order of citation, and the acknowledgment list. The person who has contributed the most will be the first author, and this is usually but not necessarily the lead of the writing group. After the writing team signs off on the authorship attribution plan, it is sent to all project investigators for discussion and ultimately for approval.

Timelines and key deliverables. Initially, the core writing group leads produce a high-level outline of what will be addressed in the papers and identify the targeted journals. This information is shared with other writing teams to avoid overlapping publications. Timelines are negotiated for an initial draft of each paper.

Information management. A centralized database of potential journals targeted for publication saves investigators' time by providing access to the journal's general focus, types of articles it wishes to attract, manuscript guidelines, and other relevant information. Writing teams use common reference management software (eg, Reference Manager, EndNote), and the staff maintain a centralized reference database that is updated on a regular basis.

Monitoring progress. The progress of the writing groups is monitored quarterly by the principal investigator. If the timelines are not met, the principal investigator seeks to understand why. Assistance is offered where possible, but if a second deadline is not met, the lead of the core writing team might be asked to step down from this role, usually being replaced by another member of the core writing team.

Time commitments and coordination of the writing team

Writing coordinator. For large projects, assigning one of the staff members the role of writing coordinator will support the execution of the publication plan.

Writing retreats. Writing retreats, in a local setting, allow the authors to remove themselves from other commitments to focus solely on writing. These retreats can save many weeks or months compared with what would occur within regular routines.

Writing coordination meetings. About once a year, a project meeting is dedicated to coordinating the writing of the various papers. These writing coordination meetings help overcome challenges such as project "branding," duplication of effort or content, or need for additional skills to complete analyses. They also reinforce accountability to the master plan. Solutions that emerge from these meetings are then disseminated to all project members.

Review process. As a paper begins to take shape, all investigators, including those not on the core writing team, are given drafts in order to provide feedback. If they make substantive contributions, investigators who are not part of the core writing team can also be included as authors.

Career promotion needs

Career promotion needs are identified at the preliminary writing meetings and are addressed by assigning roles that give the investigator the opportunity to earn authorship.

Implementation

Our managerial approach considerably enhances our writing productivity. In the 4 years following the completion of data collection for our largest project to date,⁶ 23 articles have been published in peer-reviewed journals and 2 are currently under review.

Conclusion

This article is meant to share an approach that encourages and supports research teams throughout the process of writing for publication. In sharing our experiences, we hope to assist others in overcoming the obstacles inherent to most applied health services research environments and in moving efficiently through this fundamental step in the knowledge translation process. 🍁

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Competing interests

None declared

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