

Navigating the Publication Process

Edward J Wawrzynczak

Introduction

Writing a manuscript for submission to a scholarly journal can be a daunting experience. As a first-time author, you must marshal complex information and create a coherent narrative, while following detailed instructions for manuscript preparation and understanding editorial guidelines and publication rules. It is entirely reasonable the novice should feel uncertain, if not somewhat trepidatious, at the prospect of navigating an unfamiliar publication process. Even experienced authors can feel intimidated!

As Journal Editor of *Topics in the History of Medicine (THoM)*, I am fortunate to draw on the cumulative know-how of many expert peer reviewers, guest editors and members of the Editorial Board. If you wish to submit an article to *THoM*, I hope to help you understand what is involved, proceed with confidence, and get the most from your efforts. What follows is aimed at authors new to academic publishing but should also be of value to seasoned authors preparing to submit to *THoM*.

Writing your manuscript

Reading THoM

It is obviously helpful to have a good idea of the overall content of your manuscript before starting to write a first draft. An essential piece of preparation for submission is to peruse the volumes of *THoM* published online!

Look through multiple articles. What features do they have in common? In the first instance, study the form of the title, abstract and keywords, the introduction, main body of the text and conclusion, and the biographical details, acknowledgements and funding statement.

Digging deeper, how is the text subdivided into sections under different sub-headings, what length are the paragraphs in each section, and how are quotations handled? Try to identify those papers that help you to envisage how you might structure your own manuscript.

Papers often include relevant images and data in the form of photographs, illustrations or diagrams (collectively ‘figures’) and information presented in the form of lists or grids comprising columns and rows (collectively ‘tables’). How are these organised, described and referenced?

In scholarly journals, it is customary and important to provide explanatory information and cite references to the sources used in writing the manuscript. Note how, in the case of *THoM*, this is achieved by means of footnotes.

Guidelines and instructions

It is useful to have thought through the likely structure of your manuscript before starting to write. Read through the instructions for manuscript preparation. These are intentionally detailed and must be followed in full. Failure to follow the guidelines may well result in your manuscript being promptly returned for correction. If in doubt, contact the Editorial Team for advice to avoid unnecessary delay.

Each journal has its unique collection of style requirements. No set of guidelines can be expected to be completely unambiguous, cover all eventualities, or be easily remembered. It is worth keeping the guidelines handy so they can be readily consulted when required. Another good way to ensure that your manuscript conforms to requirements is to check it against the published papers that served as your template.

Prospective authors should familiarise themselves with the important conditions relating to manuscript submission, acknowledgement of authorship, and conformance with ethical guidelines concerning falsification or fabrication of data, misappropriation and plagiarism. All statements based on the work of other scholars, or direct quotations from the literature, must be properly acknowledged and accurately cited.

Referencing

With the exception of linking statements and sections that represent an author's opinion, every statement, quotation, figure or table that forms part of the main body of an article should be referenced to identify clearly the source of the information presented. References support the authority of the work by giving a solid underpinning to its content. They also contribute to the utility of a paper by allowing the interested reader to investigate further.

To reference published works in *THoM* provide the author or originator, the title of the work, where and when it was published, and the volume and page numbers where specified. The detailed format varies for books, contributions to edited books, articles in journals, and articles in newspapers and other periodicals. Sources only published online should be accompanied by the appropriate weblink and the date it was accessed. In the case of unpublished materials, provide the repository and catalogue number. In each case, consult past papers for the format used to cite sources of different kinds.

Footnotes

Any information additional to the main text, including references, should be provided in the form of footnotes only (not as endnotes, in an appendix, or in a separate bibliography), as will be evident on consulting published articles.

Follow the specific instruction that allows consecutively numbered superscripts in the main body of the text and matching footnote entries to be inserted automatically and simultaneously. Using the 'insert footnote' command in Word ensures that each footnote has a unique number. If you need to cite a source for a second time, insert a new footnote and refer back to the note in which the source was referenced the first time. Note how an abbreviated form of the original citation should be used.

In general, an article should make sense without the need for the reader to consult the footnotes extensively. Explanatory notes should be kept to a minimum and additional comments added to references only for clarity and to help guide the reader.

Figures and tables

All figures and tables should bear a caption that provides a good description, attribution to the source and a suitable reference to allow a reader to access the item or underlying data independently. For images sourced from institutional collections, tell the reader who created it and when, the name of the institution, and the catalogue reference and a weblink where available.

You need to ascertain the source of the original image, check whether it is under copyright, identify the conditions under which it may be used, and understand what licensing conditions apply. If the relevant materials do not belong to you, are not in the public domain, or are not officially available to use in an academic paper under suitable licence, it is your responsibility to obtain formal permission to reproduce them when publishing in *THoM*.

People

Aim to introduce the key individuals in your article early and fully in the main text as the narrative develops. On first appearance, provide a person's name in full, followed by their years of birth and death, where known. Alternatively, approximate dates, or known years of birth or death only, are acceptable. If details are unavailable, state 'dates unknown'. The same applies to historical precursors or contemporaries.

If you wish to refer to the work of other scholars, you cannot assume that the reader will know who you are talking about if you simply mention their names in the text, especially if there are numerous individuals involved in the historical narrative. Inform the reader if they are an author, historian or specialist. Alternatively, simply refer to the individual's work in a footnote.

Quotations

If a quotation is important, place it in the main text and not in a footnote. Reproduce the quotation precisely as written in the source material and identify any misspellings or unusual phrases by adding '[sic]' immediately after their occurrence. Missing words or brief explanations can also be provided in square brackets. For quotations translated from a foreign language, identify the translator, and give the original quote in a footnote.

Nomenclature

Explain briefly any technical, unusual, foreign or archaic words or phrases on their first use in the main text. Thereafter, try to use them consistently or be prepared to explain any differences in usage.

If you wish to refer repeatedly to a key phrase in your manuscript, provide a suitable abbreviation in brackets immediately after its first occurrence in the main text, and use the abbreviation thereafter.

The publication process

Submitting your manuscript

When submitting your manuscript to *THoM* in the form of a Word document, as specified in the guidelines, attach all the accompanying materials as individual items in the same email message: figures as JPEG files, tables as Word files, and captions in Word.

On receipt, your submission will be acknowledged, then evaluated by the Editorial Team (Journal Editor, Guest Editor, and Editor-in-Chief) for conformance with the guidelines, and you will be contacted if there are any immediate problems or queries.

Once your submission has been accepted as suitable for review, the manuscript and any attachments will be anonymised in preparation for peer review.

Peer review and its outcomes

The anonymised submission will be reviewed by two independent referees invited by the Editorial Team: one is likely to be an expert in the topic of the submission; the second may have expertise in an unrelated area of the history of medicine.

Referees are asked to address the suitability of the various elements of the submission, encouraged to comment on all aspects, including historical background, specific content and quality of writing, and make suitable recommendations.

There are three possible outcomes to the process of peer review. The first is acceptance for publication with minor amendments based on the observations made by the referees and additional suggestions from the Editorial Team.

Second, a submission may be accepted provisionally, subject to more substantial amendments that are required in the light of important questions or criticisms from the referees and necessary editorial guidance.

Third, a submission may be considered not to have reached the standard for acceptance, especially if the considered opinions of both peer reviewers are negative, and may consequently be rejected. In this event, the Editor-in-Chief's decision is final.

Having a manuscript submission rejected is a 'rite of passage' for most authors at some stage in their publishing careers, and potentially represents a useful learning experience, provided the decision is accepted with good grace.

Revising your manuscript

If your submission has been accepted, you will need to consider carefully the questions raised, amendments requested and further suggestions made. Some may be easily dealt with, some may require further work on your part, and some may not be feasible.

The Editorial Team will expect you to provide a reasoned point-by-point response to all the issues highlighted, accompanied by appropriate amendments to the anonymised version of the manuscript, and any required changes to the main text, footnotes, figures, tables and captions.

An author who does not wish to address the matters to which attention has been drawn, or chooses to disagree with editorial guidance, is at liberty to withdraw their submission at this stage.

The copy-editing process

When your revised manuscript is received, the Editorial Team may ask for a further independent opinion, may request clarification of some of the amendments, and may have further suggestions for improvement.

The Journal Editor will then format the latest version of the manuscript for publication and check it for conformance with house style, consistency of terminology, clarity of expression, and concision of language. This process typically throws up additional queries.

The purpose of such copy-editing is three-fold: first, to ensure as far as possible the accuracy of the content; second, to improve the readability of the manuscript; and third, to reach the quality standard for publication.

Once the copy-edited manuscript has been proof-read and reviewed by *THoM's* Editorial Board, you will be sent a pre-publication PDF and asked to check it carefully to ensure it is free from inadvertent errors.

A question of balance

Ideally, a paper intended for publication should be able to satisfy two aims concurrently: it should be well enough researched and argued to stand up to expert scrutiny; and well enough written and presented to be accessible to the general reader.

The author brings a deep knowledge of a topic and its context, envisages the 'story' to be narrated, and chooses the material to be presented and its interpretation. This is a unique contribution that one can reasonably ascribe to 'authorial intelligence'.

By analogy, what one might call 'editorial intelligence' helps to correct errors, highlight ambiguities and suggest alternatives. This is a tailored contribution intended to help an author to improve the clarity, concision and consistency of their paper.

Carefully structuring an article with a coherent narrative, logical subsections and the judicious use and placement of tables and figures is a help to the reader. The excessive use of brackets and hyphens, complex sentences and long paragraphs, and overlong footnotes acts as a hindrance.

Understanding how to navigate the publication process helps authors and editors to co-operate productively to refine a manuscript through the multiple stages required to create a finished article of high quality.

Keywords

Academic journal, Publishing, Guidelines and instructions, Manuscript preparation, Peer review, Editing and revision

Biographical details

Edward J Wawrzynczak is current BSHM Journal Editor and immediate Past President of the BSHM.

Wawrzynczak EJ. Navigating the Publication Process. *Topics in the History of Medicine*. 2025; 5: 4-9.

Topics in the History of Medicine is an Open Access publication of the British Society for the History of Medicine made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International Licence which allows unrestricted redistribution in any medium or format for non-commercial purposes provided the original work is properly credited. <https://bshm.org.uk>

© *The Author(s)*, 2025.