

Style

The nuts and bolts of writing papers

Number 5. Structure of the paper

RALPH FOOTRING, Scientific Editor, *British Journal of Psychiatry*

Summary

Most papers require a summary, including literature reviews. Something snappy is recommended: why was the study done, how was it done, what was found, and so what? Four sentences should suffice — it is, after all, a summary. Some authors include an analysis, a consideration, a few ifs and buts, and a good deal of reflection.

Headings

If you say that five matters are to be discussed and you then launch off into some subheadings, it is important that there are five of them. Also, it is neater if you use the same phrase for a heading as you might be using in a list or in a figure.

What sometimes happens is that an author throws in some subheadings to cover a few ideas and then reverts to the main discussion. However, the tail end of the discussion is then under a subheading, leaving the readers to figure it out for themselves, when they were all rather hoping for an easier time of it all. It is best to avoid the situation altogether, but if it does arise, leave a line space to show the more alert reader that you're up to something tricky.

Tables

Tables are by nature rather dull. They are good places for dropping a lot of numerical results where those who care to can find them and those who do not care to can be pleased not to have to battle through them in the text. However, some authors with very

important numerical results, far from dropping them off elegantly in a table, show them off in a table *and* battle through them in the text.

Figures

Figures should not be used to advertise important results, but to summarise trends and differences. I sometimes think that more use could be made of flow diagrams to trace the course of a complicated experimental procedure, for example where there is a large initial sample divided and subdivided into many smaller groups.

Practical advice

The points I made earlier about repetition are relevant here (February issue, p. 82). Read through the headings on their own: do they follow a logical progression? Is there a respectable amount of text underneath each one? Could some long, difficult passage be broken up by a heading or two?

With regard to tables, it is worth asking whether they tell the reader anything: long lists of insignificant results clearly do not.

One final point to bear in mind is whether everything is really what you have said it is. Is your figure really a table? Is your table really a figure or, more commonly encountered, really a list? (Lists can be displayed in the text, numbering the items and putting a line space above and below.) Similarly, do you have results under the methods heading, or did you slip some methods and discussion in under results?

Next month: the proof of the pudding.