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**The NIHR Research Design Service
for the East Midlands**

**The NIHR Research Design Service
for Yorkshire & the Humber**

Presenting and Disseminating Research

Authors

**Jane Schober
Andy Farrington
Anne Lacey**

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Jane Schober

Department of Nursing and Midwifery
De Montfort University

Andy Farrington

Department of Nursing and Midwifery
De Montfort University

Anne Lacey

The NIHR RDS for the East Midlands /
Yorkshire & the Humber (Sheffield)
School of Health and Related Research,
University of Sheffield

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The NIHR RDS for the East Midlands www.rds-eastmidlands.nihr.ac.uk

Division of Primary Care,
14th Floor, Tower building
University of Nottingham
University Park
Nottingham
NG7 2RD
Tel: 0115 823 0500

Leicester: enquiries-LNR@rds-eastmidlands.org.uk

Nottingham: enquiries-NDL@rds-eastmidlands.org.uk

The NIHR RDS for Yorkshire & the Humber

www.rds-yh.nihr.ac.uk

SCHARR
The University of Sheffield
Regent Court
30 Regent Street
Sheffield
S1 4DA
Tel: 0114 222 0828

Sheffield: rds-yh@sheffield.ac.uk

Leeds: rds-yh@leeds.ac.uk

York: rds-yh@york.ac.uk

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1. Introduction

It is commonly recognised that research is now an activity undertaken by more and more health care professionals. Whilst this is clearly crucial to the underpinning of evidence-based research practice, the results of such labours need to be written up clearly for others to see, understand and apply to practice. Research needs to be disseminated as widely as possible, at local, national and international levels.

The primary purpose of a research project is to gather information about an issue or problem and construct a report or article to disseminate the findings. In addition, it must be recognised that any research activity has personal and organisational benefits.

These are summarised below and you will see that they contain common features that illustrate components, which strengthen any research culture:

BENEFITS	
<p>Personal:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving patient care • Initiating change • Finding out • The search for meaning • The need to understand • Looking for causal relationships • Testing theories • Discovering the new • Self esteem and kudos • As part of a course of study • Specialist area of interest 	<p>Organisational:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving health care and well being • Planning for change and innovation • Informing policy and practice • Knowledge based approach • Encouraging an evaluative culture • Responding to policies and demands • Reacting to public opinion • Delivering measurable results • Quality and audit • Cost effectiveness • Developing evidence-based practice

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This section is for practitioners working in health and social care settings. It will help in writing up a research project and includes some tips on achieving wider dissemination. The resource pack, you will help you to:

- Understand how a research project can contribute to professional practice
- Write up a research project, ensuring continuity of presentation, coherence and flow of material
- Adopt local and national strategies to ensure your research is disseminated appropriately

2. Writing up a Research Project

Although there is a range of approaches to research, when it comes to communicating the details of research activities through the written word, there are a number of pointers you should consider. It has long been a criticism of researchers that they do not communicate their research clearly and in a user-friendly manner.

With this in mind, this section will provide you with guidelines that will help you both to understand the research project or reports you encounter as part of your professional reading and to organise, structure and communicate your own reports in an appropriate manner.

There are several ways of communicating the outcomes of a research exercise in writing. The most common is the research report, others include the research dissertation, websites, research abstracts and summaries, research articles in peer reviewed or other journals, and posters. Although they have certain features in common, there are also clear differences, which are outlined here.

2.1 The Research Report

A research report is a highly structured piece of writing that clearly states the purpose, findings and outcomes of research activity. A report may be written for a range of reasons and for a variety of audiences, therefore its length, style and detail may vary greatly. Research reports are usually produced primarily for the commissioners and funders of the project, but may also be produced for such groups as service users, multi-disciplinary colleagues, and fellow professionals.

The report is shaped and influenced by:

- The questions that need a response or answer.
- The target audience.
- The background to its production, for example, any related research, theoretical perspectives, and how the research was organised and managed.
- The style needed to communicate findings in a way that will maximise their understanding.

A report inevitably summarises key aspects of the research process undertaken to complete it. This is particularly so if a report is needed at, for example, a committee meeting, a seminar or a conference where time, attention spans and other agendas may affect the amount of detail presented. Where a report is used as a summary and reference document, the researcher often has the opportunity to describe, discuss, elaborate and evaluate aspects of the research in relation to the audience. It is important in these circumstances that a full and detailed report has been prepared first, from which the summary is extracted. This ensures that the audience is able to access the details to explain the context, scope, significance and implications of the findings. The main features of a report will depend on its themes and purpose. Gerrish and Lacey (2005, p479) suggest the following structure:

Sections of a research report

Abstract or executive summary

This should orientate the reader to the whole study. It is best written at the end after the detailed report is complete.

Introduction

This section describes the background to the study and the context in which it was undertaken.

Aims of the research

The aims, research questions and any hypotheses to be tested should be stated clearly.

Literature review

A comprehensive literature review will set out the available knowledge before the research commenced. The length and depth of this review will depend on the audience of the report. An academic dissertation requires a substantial section critically appraising the available evidence, whereas policymakers are likely to require a more concise summary.

Research design

A clear description of the conceptual framework used, the methodology adopted, and data collection methods selected is required to give the reader an understanding of the research design.

Access and ethical approval

All research conducted in a health care context should have obtained ethical and research governance approval, and a statement to this effect should be included. Other access negotiations and procedures for recruiting and gaining consent from research participants will be given. Copies of consent forms and information sheets may be included in an appendix.

Sampling

This section will provide details of how sampling was done, sample size calculations, and the composition and characteristics of the sample obtained.

Data collection

A full account of how data were collected, data collection tools and outcome measures used will be given here.

Data analysis

A description of how the data were analysed is necessary, as well as a full presentation of the results. For quantitative research, this will be in the form of tables and figures, with a narrative commentary. For qualitative research, the results will be presented in words, with verbatim quotations from interviews, field notes etc. as supporting evidence. Qualitative research reports often include discussion within the presentation of the results, rather than keeping the two sections separate as suggested below.

Discussion and conclusion

This section gives the researcher the opportunity to reflect upon the findings in the light of previous literature, and to draw conclusions. Implications for practice, suggested further research, and any limitations of the study are commonly included.

Within a report, much emphasis is placed on the outcomes and results. It is these that the commissioner of the report is waiting for. However the credibility of the results will depend on how all other aspects of the work have been planned, managed, executed and resourced.

Reports are usually shorter than dissertations and the form and style of a report may be less formal and academic to meet the needs and interests of the audience. Accessibility is all important and conciseness and preciseness along with clear visual representation of findings are essential characteristics.

Key bullet point summaries of:

- Findings
- Implications
- Recommendations

for example, can alert the audience to significant features which can be followed up in the main report as well as being tools for focussed discussion. An Executive Summary may be included at the beginning to provide a short summary for those not wishing to read the entire report.

2.2 The Research Dissertation

There are marked parallels between a research report and a dissertation. This is particularly so in relation to its structure and organisation. Dissertations are a common feature of undergraduate and postgraduate degree studies. Whether undertaking a first degree or a higher degree, the management of a research dissertation bears similar characteristics.

Where research reports and dissertations tend to differ is in their length and complexity. As dissertations are produced as part of an academic exercise, there is a need to explain, qualify and justify aspects of the study, for instance the methodology. These may be reduced and sometimes omitted from a report.

Empirical studies are usually based on factual information, experience or observation. Part of the process is to gather information and data about a problem, to question or to update previous research. Empirical studies incorporate a range of research methodologies including surveys, case studies, ethnography and experimental designs which may influence the form of presentation of the dissertation.

It is not uncommon for undergraduate students to undertake a dissertation by literature review. This approach facilitates detailed analysis of the literature pertaining to aspects of practice, treatments, historical perspectives and theory. Analysis of theory, previous research, experiences and incidents, amongst other things, give students the opportunity to develop academic skills relating to the in-depth study of a topic. A common format for the literature review is as follows:

The literature review

1. Literature searching and review
2. Critical analysis of previous research
3. Concept analysis and theoretical understanding
4. Comparative analysis of previous work
5. Discussing the significance of previous findings
6. Identifying areas for future study

The extent of the literature search is central to the quality of the review and is often more extensive than a search and analysis undertaken for an empirical study.

2.3 Common Features of Research Reports and Dissertations

Any research which is formally presented needs to adopt key attributes to ensure clarity, credibility and accessibility. Edwards and Talbot (1994, p141) suggest the following common features:

- Readability - so that it can be clearly and quickly understood.
- Clear organisation - so that the reader is easily led through the text.
- A logical reference system - so that the reader can quickly follow up any references.
- Information presented in a logical order - so that the reader does not at any point have to guess, for example, how the data was analysed or the conclusion was reached.
- Substantiation - so that each claim can be seen to be based on evidence.

It is not uncommon for reports to emerge following the completion of a dissertation. This is a very useful tool for disseminating the process and outcomes of the research, for presentation to peers, colleagues in the organisation where the research took place and as a part of the preparation process for possible publication or conference presentation.

Exercise 1

Take any research project that you have contributed to, or one that you are familiar with from the literature.

- Write one sentence about its main aims and objectives
- Describe the methodology, data collection and analysis in a short paragraph
- What were the main findings?
- Compose two recommendations that you would make as to how practice might be changed as a result of the research

You should now have a skeleton for an executive summary of this piece of research

3. Contents of a Written Report

This section provides guidelines on presenting a detailed written research report. You will have seen in the previous section that there are marked similarities between a research report and a research dissertation. Indeed some sources appear to use the terms interchangeably. This section covers both and will highlight those areas that need elaboration for a dissertation. It is worth noting that many computer software packages now provide template guides and interactive support to format reports and/or dissertations.

Presentation is important but not as important as:

- Content
- Clarity
- Order of argument.

Not all reports and dissertations take the same form and it is difficult to cover all possibilities. **You should, therefore use your discretion in following this guide and, if you have any doubts, seek advice from your supervisor and always check through any guidelines you have been given.**

3.1 Layout

The following is the usual order of the elements in a research report but will vary depending on method and the purpose of the report.

Title page

This should have a balanced appearance and consist of:

- The title which should be descriptive, yet reasonably concise
- The full name of the author and qualifications if necessary
- The organisation for which the research is undertaken
- The month and year of submission

Contents table

This should list the chapters and their main subdivisions as well as the page number on which each begins. In addition, chapter headings should be short, descriptive and to the point, items such as acknowledgements and appendices should be listed and all pages must be numbered. Illustrations, tables and figures must be clearly labelled and related to the text.

It is common practice to assign Arabic numbers (1,2,3, etc.) to chapters and lower case Roman numerals (i, ii, iii, etc.) or small letters (a,b,c, etc.) to sub divisions or separate points. An alternative method is to number sections as sub-sets of chapters, as for example:

- 1.1, 1.2, 1.2.1 in Chapter 1
- 2.1, 2.2, 2.2.1 in Chapter 2 and so on, using a decimal notation

List of tables and figures

It is helpful both for the author and readers if table and figure numbers relate as closely as possible to the relevant part of the text, thus, the first table in Chapter 3 might be numbered 3.1.

Acknowledgements

It is courteous to mention anyone who has provided significant help, facilities and resources for the research. Sponsors will expect to receive recognition for their support.

Abstract

This is a summary of about 500 words, indicating the main points and conclusions in the order described in the report. Abstracts may be 'structured' as requested for publication by many peer reviewed journals. The British Medical Journal, for example, requests abstracts in the following form:

- **objectives** - a clear statement of the main aim of the study and the major hypothesis tested or research question posed
- **design** - including factors such as prospective, randomisation, blinding, placebo control, case control, crossover, criterion standards for diagnostic tests etc
- **setting** - include the level of care e.g. primary, secondary; number of participating centres. Be general rather than give the name of the specific centre, but give the geographical location if this is important
- **participants** - (instead of patients or subjects) - numbers entering and completing the study, sex, and ethnic group if appropriate. Give clear definitions of how selected, entry and exclusion criteria
- **interventions** - what, how, when and for how long. This heading can be deleted if there were no interventions but should normally be included for randomised controlled trials, cross over trials, and before and after studies.
- **main outcome measures** - those planned in protocol, those finally measured (if different, explain why)
- **results** - main results with (for quantitative studies) 95% confidence intervals and, where appropriate, the exact level of statistical significance and the number need to treat/harm.

- **conclusions** – primary conclusions and their implications, suggesting areas for further research if appropriate. Do not go beyond the data in the paper. Conclusions are important because this is often the only part that readers look at.
- **trial registration** - registry and number (only for clinical trials)

<http://www.bmj.com/advice/sections.shtml#research>

Abbreviations

Any abbreviations used should be explained where they are first used, for example, Department of Health (DoH). If they are repeated throughout the text it is useful to provide a list at the beginning of the work.

Main text

Although there cannot be any rigid rules for the layout of the main text, the following points may be helpful:

Introduction

- Background to the problem/area of study, including a brief statement of what is being investigated
- The rationale for the study - reasons for undertaking the work
- Statements concerning the significance of the study and the purposes of conducting it
- If you are using a formal theory, theoretical framework, or a conceptual framework, this should be explained (*essential for dissertations*)
- Definitions of concepts and terms with appropriate discussion to set them in the context of your research (*essential for dissertations*)
- Hypothesis (not relevant to all research studies)
- The aims of the project

Literature Review

This section should be comprehensive, up-to-date and relevant, and include summaries of other related studies, articles and texts related to the area of research. Deficiencies or gaps in the literature should be highlighted so that the need for this particular study can be demonstrated. Students undertaking a *dissertation by literature review* will also need to address, in detail the following:

- The structure and organisation of the review
- The comprehensiveness of the review
- The analysis of the literature

Study Design/Methodology

This chapter should be organised in a way that suits the particular study. *Theoretical justification for the method used would normally be given in a dissertation.* In terms of the study design/methodology the following points need to be considered:

- A detailed description and justification of the data collection methods used (for example, questionnaire, measuring tools or interviews)
- The sampling approach explained and discussed
- A description of the pilot study, (if undertaken) and an explanation of whether it did or did not lead to changes in the main study (but not including data from the pilot study)
- Issues relating to validity, sensitivity and reliability
- A detailed description and justification of the data analysis methods used (for example, statistical tools, content analysis, or constant comparative methods to find categories and themes)
- Ethical issues, including how ethical and governance approval was sought and details of confirmation (documentation in an appendix)
- Specific limitations, which become apparent, may be discussed here or in the final section

Data Collection

This section should contain sufficient information to convince your reader that your data collection methods support the research approach taken. There should also be sufficient detail to allow for replication of the study. In this respect, it should include, as appropriate, details of:

- Access to the site
- Permission to collect data
- Access to respondents/subjects/clients/patients
- The where, when and (if appropriate) time of data collection
- Sensitivity to the needs, rights, privacy and anonymity of the respondents
- Ethical issues arising out of any of these points

Findings/Results

The presentation of the findings of a research project is essential to the clear communication of the outcomes of the data collection process. A combination of visual and literary description will ensure that the information presented is unambiguous and that all outcomes are included.

The presentation should be:

- Factual
- Comprehensive
- Clear
- Presented in a logical sequence
- With sufficient detail to inform the reader

Several methods exist to present research data. This section offers you a range of examples that you may select from as well as suggestions as to how they may be useful.

There are several commonly used methods for presenting data, namely tables, boxes, charts and figures. Tables generally list literary information in block form, for example theoretical models, diagnostic criteria, common features of a problem, responses to a question and lists of percentages. Boxes can be used to highlight particular findings or, in qualitative research, to supply illustrative quotes and field notes.

Figures are used to illustrate data, for example, diagrammatic representations of conceptual frameworks, flow-charts and to present information contained within a diagram. Charts also used to present quantitative data. Examples can be provided as follows:

- Bar charts (horizontal, grouped, stacked, histograms and pyramids) - useful for presenting data which is concerned with comparative totals of numbers, proportions and ratios, as for instance mortality rates for road traffic accidents by age in a given year. Two histograms can be combined to form a pyramid, for example to illustrate data relating to population and gender.
- Pie charts - useful for comparing proportions such as the percentage of men and women that access primary health care services for well women and well men clinics.
- Scatterplots - useful to plot two variables, for example the frequency of cancer in a number of specific geographical areas.
- Line charts - are generally used for describing events over a period of time, for example the number of deaths from smoking in a county over a 20-year period.

Charts are a particularly useful method of presenting quantitative data, in that the impact of the data communicates proportions and ratio more clearly than if the same data was presented in table form. Charts also facilitate the use of colour so enabling the researcher to highlight both contrasts and common themes.

You will find reference to useful guidelines for processing and presenting data in the further reading list.

Discussion, Implications, Limitations and Recommendations

In this part:

- There should be an analysis and discussion of the findings and their implications, for example, for professional practice, research and education.
- Reference to the literature review and the aims of the study should be included in the critical analysis and discussion.
- An appraisal of the overall strengths and limitations of the study should be undertaken.
- Recommendations for professional practice and further study should be made.
- Care should be taken that these do not go beyond the data arising from the study.

Appendices

These should be clear and contain items which cannot be easily fitted into the text. Examples here include copies of the questionnaire used and copies of letters requesting permission to access subjects. Reference to all appendices should have been made in the main body of the report.

References and Bibliography

These should be listed separately and should be presented consistently using an appropriate referencing system such as Harvard or Vancouver.

If you use such a format as this, the process of writing up becomes less daunting and it is possible to see how things fit together. It also allows you to divide the writing up into smaller more manageable units.

3.2 Conclusion

The credibility of research activities relies on the rigour and thoroughness of each step of the process. The relationship between the problem or hypothesis, the aims of the study, the literature review and the methodology serve to justify how the main links for the research process have been operationalised.

This, in turn, underpins the quality of the analysis if the findings can be discussed in the light of all previous stages. Research activities often raise more questions than they answer, but the research report is a means of accounting for the research process, especially to those who funded and sponsored the study. However the report usually then needs to be re-presented in alternative forms if its impact is to be maximised and the messages from it communicated to a wider audience.

The next section provides a step-by-step guide to the dissemination of research findings, including tips on presenting at a conference and getting published.

4. Disseminating Research Outcomes

Most research projects have a valuable contribution to make to the knowledge base of the discipline concerned. Researchers who are new to this process commonly underestimate the value of their work and fail to disseminate the outcomes of their efforts appropriately. It is usually necessary to adapt an original report or dissertation for the purpose of a wider audience and often time is of the essence particularly for topical subjects.

It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that the outcomes of a study are communicated effectively, which means preparing the work for local and/or national audiences. This task need not be undertaken in isolation, rather continuing to work on this with a project team or a suitable mentor will usually contribute to the overall sharing of the workload involved.

4.1 Strategies for Local Dissemination of Findings

Most health care research is intended for the public domain which means that the researcher needs to consider the method by which the outcome of the research is going to be presented to others. Locally your colleagues, managers and users are likely to be interested in work that has been developed in a context that is familiar to them, especially if they have taken part in the research themselves.

Exercise 2

What local groups and forums exist where you might be able to disseminate your research? Consider each of the following and list those potentially available to you. Make arrangements to present your research at any that are available to you.

- Clinical specialism meetings
- Research interest groups
- Trust or departmental newsletters
- User forums
- Evidence based practice mechanisms e.g. clinical governance
- Seminars at your workplace or an educational institution
- Local research conferences and workshops
- Websites

4.2 Strategies for National and International Dissemination of Findings

As well as the local dissemination of research findings it is essential that as wide an audience as possible is reached for the findings of the research to have the desired impact on health care. This means in reality the presentation and/or publication of the material at national and possibly international level. It is important, however, that prior to the dissemination of the research findings at local, national and international level, permissions should have been sought and gained from all interested parties. This includes the host organisation or institution in which the research was conducted and the agency funding the research. Equally it is the responsibility of the researcher or research team to ensure that any ethical issues regarding the disclosure of information, particularly that which is of a sensitive nature or can be related to an individual, are resolved.

4.21 Conference Presentations

Presentation of the research material, at a conference, can take different forms. Keynote addresses and other plenary sessions are often from invited speakers, but most conferences also run concurrent sessions when many researchers are able to present their work to a smaller audience. Timeslots for these are usually 15-30 minutes, and it is usual to prepare slides in PowerPoint as visual aids.

Tips on presenting at a conference

When preparing to present at a conference there are several issues to consider:

- Which group or groups of professionals do I want to present to? - Determines the choice of the conference.
- What funding is available or do I self fund? - Determines whether a national or international conference.
- Do I want to present the material orally or in written form as a poster? - Determines the type of work required to prepare the material.

Once these issues have been worked through, scan the appropriate websites and journals and look for calls for papers/contributors/presenters/participants. When you receive the information on the conference you will normally be given several options:

- A straightforward delivery of a paper to a static audience with limited feedback or delegate interaction as a main or concurrent session.
- The opportunity to try out teaching techniques or demonstrate research findings in an interactive way, by conducting a symposium, small group workshop, seminar or specialist interest group session.
- The opportunity for participants to demonstrate or publicise their work in an exhibition area as a poster presentation.

Unless you are specifically invited to speak at a particular conference, you will need to write an abstract of your intended presentation and submit it for selection by peer review. It is common practice for conference organisers to issue **abstract guidelines** for potential

contributors to a conference. These must be followed carefully to avoid rejection. You will be expected to return some or all of the following information to the conference organiser for the peer review process (although the peer review itself may be 'blinded' so that the reviewer is not influenced by the track record of the author):

Checklist

- Name
- Job Title/Position
- Previous presentation?
- Workplace
- Qualifications
- Area of expertise
- Mailing address
- Telephone, Fax and Email
- Title of paper
- Brief abstract or description of your proposed paper (typically 200-500 words)
- Choices of presentation style e.g. paper, poster etc.
- Indicate which conference theme the material fits
- Potential learning outcomes
- Keywords
- Reading list

If your paper or presentation is accepted you will then be asked to:

1. Confirm attendance at the event
2. Provide biographical details for the conference programme/delegate pack
3. Confirm your AVA requirements for presentation of the material (usually PowerPoint)
4. Provide details of your personal requirements such as diet, accommodation and access to buildings.

Once your work has been accepted for a conference it is important to consider the way in which the material will be presented and how you are going to prepare it for the event. Points to think about are:

Checklist

- Volume of information on each page, slide or poster
- Using graphics and illustrations
- Using different colours
- Font, font style and font size
- Using tables and figures
- Presentation of statistics
- Using pictures and drawings
- General layout
- Timing – practice oral presentations beforehand to be sure you will not over-run
- Practical arrangements – electronic presentations can be e-mailed ahead or taken on a data stick. Posters need to be the correct size for display boards and have appropriate means of attaching them

4.22 Publication

It is quite common for presentations at a conference to be published as a set of conference abstracts, conference papers or as some form of post conference publication, however the procedure and process for publishing a research article in a professional journal is different. Tips are given below on getting published and some points that you will need to consider before starting the process.

Publication of the research material takes different forms:

- Abstract
- Short report
- Article
- Chapter
- Book

Tips on getting published

Whatever the form of publication, several questions and key points need to be addressed when working through the process of writing for publication.

1. Who needs to know? - Determines the type of audience to whom you wish to disseminate.
2. Who will be interested? - Establishes the target audience – local, national or international.
3. How much do I want to say? - Determines the length of the piece.
4. Which journal or publisher? - Needs to be considered for marketing the piece.

5. What is the house style of the journal or publisher? - Determines the style of presentation, therefore seek author guidelines.

The process of writing and successful publication of the results of a research project can take time. Publishing houses receive hundreds of articles every month and only a small percentage get published. A poor quality paper is only one of several reasons why a publisher may not accept an article. An article may be rejected because it doesn't fall within the remit of the journal, the subject matter has been covered very recently in another article, or it fails to meet the 'Instructions for Authors' in style, length, format etc. Many journals provide an initial editorial review to determine whether the article meets these requirements before sending suitable articles for peer review.

Therefore, before putting pen to paper or finger to keyboard:

- Search back through recent editions of the journal for articles which are similar to your own.
- Familiarise yourself with the style of the journal.
- Telephone or e-mail the editor of the journal you are considering submitting to and ask them if they are interested in your article.
- Look up the guidelines for authors for the journal – these will usually be found on the journal website, or at the back of a hard copy of the journal. Be prepared for your article not to be accepted by three or four journals before acceptance.
- Ask a colleague to read through your work and make constructive comments or seek out an editorial board member of a journal for their help.
- If your article is not accepted, but peer review comments are returned to you, don't give up, work on the article again and resubmit it, perhaps to a different journal
- Be patient and tenacious.
- It is common practice for publishers to issue contracts for work being prepared for publication, therefore it is important to read through the conditions and deadlines set by the publisher.

Most medical and healthcare journals now operate an electronic submission system via their website. This means that you can upload your article, together with any tables, charts and diagrams direct from your own computer. You can also track the progress of your article by logging on to the website.

All authors of research articles need help at the start of their experience.

4.3 Conclusion

Now you have worked through this chapter, we hope you are able to use it for your own research activities in primary care, and that you will take advantage of it again in the future as you take opportunities to produce research reports and disseminate outcomes.

Undertaking any research activity is a challenge but one which is essential if we are to continue to generate knowledge and understanding about what we do in health care. Research involving a range of members of the multi-disciplinary team is to be encouraged particularly as services and quality care depend on effective teamwork.

Writing up and presenting research is an all-important part of the research process and essential to its communication. Whether you produce an academic dissertation or a report or presentation, we hope the guidelines set out here have given you appropriate guidance.

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The RCN Research and Development Coordinating Centre contains tips and advice on getting published and information on different nursing and health journals with links to their web sites <http://www.man.ac.uk/rcn/publish/index.htm>

The Medical College of Ohio website that lists all instructions for authors for journals in the health and medical sciences <http://mulford.mco.edu/instr/>

Warwick University has a useful website giving advice about all aspects of oral presentation <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/cap/resources/eguides/classroom/>