

Turn Your Dissertation in Medical Education into a Publication

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BACKGROUND

You have put so much time and effort into writing your dissertation, so why not go one step further and publish it? If only this was as straightforward as it sounds. In our experience, students who publish their dissertation find the outcome extremely rewarding. However, writing an academic paper can be time consuming and requires a different skill set from writing a dissertation. If you are feeling overwhelmed by the whole idea of turning your dissertation into a publication, this How To is for you. Here, we will unpack the process, provide you with writing tips, and give you links to further resources and support that will help you in your writing journey.

WHAT SHOULD I DO FIRST?

Speak with your supervisor

You must speak to your supervisor before starting to write a paper. They will have expertise in the field and may help you to decide whether your dissertation is ready for publication as a paper, which journals might be interested, and which aspects of your dissertation are likely to be of interest to the academic community. Additionally, they may be able to help with the writing.

Agree who will be the authors and the order of authorship

It's important to decide who will be the authors of the paper early, ideally before you even start writing. You may need to be ready to have some difficult conversations regarding authorship and the order of authors, so here is a quick reminder of who is, and isn't, an author. To qualify as an author of a paper, someone must have:

- made substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work; AND
- drafted the paper or reviewed it critically for important intellectual content; AND
- given final approval of the version to be published; AND
- agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved (ICJME 2023).

Someone must meet all four criteria to be an author, and all those who do meet those criteria must be named as authors; other contributors should be acknowledged.

This may include people who helped you with parts of the work, such as funders, librarians, colleagues and even your supervisor, in case they do not meet all four criteria. Whoever does the bulk of the drafting and writing is usually the first-named author. The person who prepares and submits the paper is known as the corresponding author. Their job will be to make sure the paper is correctly formatted and submitted and to liaise with the editor and the other authors over revisions and corrections. Issues around authorship and who is responsible for what aspect of writing and publication are best sorted out before you draft the paper. Leaving it until later in the process is unwise because it may lead to disagreements and confusion.

WHAT DO EDITORS WANT?

Writing a dissertation is not like writing a paper for publication because the purpose and readership in each case are entirely different. Editors and reviewers care mainly about their readers and subscribers, so their priorities and criteria are different from those of a supervisor or examiner (see Figure 1). Understanding these differences is pivotal to the writing and publication process.

Examiner	Editor/Reviewer
Has no choice but to read your work	May read only the title and abstract before deciding
Understands your work and methods	May not know anything about your work
Is acquainted with the literature and context	May have expertise in a completely different field or paradigm
Is looking to see if you have reached a standard	Needs to be persuaded that your work is trustworthy
Is reading in order to give you feedback	Is reading to see if your work will affect readers' thinking or practice
Is often comparing 'like with like'	Is probably reading lots of different papers

Figure 1: Priorities of examiners vs. editors/reviewers.

Writing something that meets the editor's needs for content that will interest general readers of the journal means that you will need to keep some important questions in mind:

- Why would another medical educator find your work interesting?
- What does your work offer that has not been done before, and in what way does it contribute to existing literature and practice?
- What would you want someone to know or do after reading your work?

Keeping these thoughts in mind will help you to identify which parts of your dissertation are the essential things to put into your paper. Remember, most medical education editors (and their readers) want work that is original, academically rigorous, and that has educational importance.

MY DISSERTATION IS SO LONG. HOW DO I CUT IT DOWN?

Thinking about who you are writing for will help you decide which aspects of your dissertation are most (and least) important to a reader. Here are some tips on how to cut down your work.

Reformat the introduction so it sets the scene in context and provides a succinct rationale of the paper.
Shorten the content to a maximum of three key points that you want to make in the paper. (Remember – what would a general reader want to know about your work?)
Cut down the literature review significantly. Focus on recent, relevant, and authoritative work. Twenty or so references will be plenty to start with. Readers who understand your work will know the broader literature so you don't need to go into minute detail; those who don't know the literature will want just the key texts.
Shorten and tighten the methods section. For example, if you used a well-known methodology or technique, you do not need to describe it in detail; a reference that will point readers to more information is probably enough. Fine details about data handling or collection may also not be required.
Data presentation: make sure that your tables, figures, quotations and other types of data actually add to the text. Do not waste space repeating data that are presented graphically, and don't bother repeating in graphic formats data that are best described in the text.
In the results section, focus mainly on providing the results that will support the key points that you decided on (as outlined above).
In the discussion section, focus on the key points and show how they relate to the aims of the paper. Try to address the question of how well your data provide answers to the questions you raised at the beginning of the paper.

ADDITIONAL PUBLICATION OUTPUTS FROM YOUR DISSERTATION

Your dissertation may be a springboard to a whole range of other publication opportunities such as:

- **A literature review:** if you did an extensive and systematic literature search, there may be scope for reporting it in the peer-reviewed literature, perhaps as a discussion paper or scoping review.
- **An essay on methodology:** if your methods were particularly original or unusual in the field, why not consider writing a short paper explaining the philosophical underpinnings, process, and benefits of your approach?
- **Rapid responses and letters to the editor:** after writing a dissertation or thesis, you are in an excellent position to critique other recent papers published on the topic. Look out for these, and if you see one that you feel you can comment on, why not consider writing a short letter to the editor, pointing out where your work adds to, confirms or disagrees with the original paper?
- **Teaching outputs:** if your work has practical significance for people working in the field, why not consider writing a 'How to...' guide, an information booklet, textbook, course or slide deck?
- **Multimedia:** don't forget the power of social media. Writing a blog, webinar, tweet, video or podcast can help get your work out there.
- **Conferences:** short communications and posters are great writing practice. They can be an excellent way of getting critical feedback and in helping you work out what other people in the field find interesting about your research.

If you are planning on writing a number of outputs, however, don't forget that each output must be different and distinct. Writing too many overlapping outputs is frowned upon.

CONCLUSION

Writing for different audiences is a key skill in academic life. Dissertation and thesis students planning to publish aspects of their work need to consider the differences in expectations between an examiner/supervisor and a professional editor/reader and write accordingly. Editors are looking for well written work that has academic rigour, originality and educational importance for their wider readership so identifying which aspects of your dissertation a general reader of a journal would be interested in will help you get published. There are plenty of ways to cut down your dissertation, mainly by focussing on key messages and avoiding repetition. You may also find that your dissertation can support more than one academic output, enabling you to maximise the impact of your work.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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