

# Writing Articles for Peer-Review Publications: A Quick Reference Guide for PHSSR

An abundance of resources and guidelines exist for researchers writing for peer-reviewed journals. This quick reference provides a broad overview of the writing process; guidelines for determining the type of article to write; considerations for choosing a journal and submitting the article; and links to several comprehensive resources for researchers seeking to publish Public Health Services and Systems Research (PHSSR) in peer-reviewed literature. PHSSR is a field of study that examines the organization, financing, and delivery of public health services within communities, and the impact of these services on public health. Since PHSSR is an emerging discipline, this document will also provide guidance on where PHSSR is typically published—for those looking to disseminate their research and for those seeking research findings.

Whether you have published many articles during your career or have never submitted a manuscript for peer-review publication, we hope that this reference will provide you with some useful tips and resources.

## Overview of the Writing Process



### General Resources

- How to Get Your Journal Article Published<sup>1</sup>
- How to Get Published: [Video](#) and [pdf](#)<sup>2</sup>
- [Navigating the Translation and Dissemination of PHSSR Findings: A Decision Guide for Researchers](#)
  - *This guide provides case studies, key cross-cutting themes, and resources for researchers to use to ensure that their findings are timely, usable, and easily accessible.*

### Narrowing Down a Topic

The first step in writing an article for peer-review publication is to narrow down and frame or “scope out” your topic. Ask yourself:

- What systems change is being investigated?
- What is the health policy context?
- What gaps in the current literature will your article fill?
- Is this a methodologically sophisticated approach and/or the application of a new methodology?

- Who are the audiences that will be interested in your findings? Public health practitioners? Health care providers? Policymakers– local, state or federal?

Simply put, what story are you trying to tell, and to whom?

### Determining the Type of Article to Write

Next, consider what type of article will allow you to convey your message most effectively. Points to consider:

- Are you presenting a study on a systems-level issue that provides insights into the public health infrastructure? Or that investigates the public health system’s interaction with other systems? What data do you have? If your analytic approach is original, robust, and compelling, consider writing a research report.
- Are you presenting an innovation, policy development, opinion, or idea? Is your topic of broad concern to your intended audience? If your argument is grounded in the scholarly literature, consider writing a descriptive article. If your topic is based in personal opinion or experience, consider a perspective piece or commentary.

**Table 1. Article types and descriptions**

Type of Article	Description
Research Report	Original quantitative (e.g. reports of randomized controlled trials, observational studies, or other clinical and public health investigations) or qualitative (e.g. interviews, focus groups) research. Research reports may be long or short, and must follow a specified structure (introduction/hypothesis, methods, results, discussion) and contain compelling data to support conclusion(s). These make up the majority of journal articles.
Descriptive Article	Focus on timely or controversial issues and grounded in the relevant scholarly literature. They should be broadly informative, offering new insight and prompting new thinking. Some examples include policy papers; conceptual papers analyzing existing literature; descriptions of programs, interventions, or innovative practices; focused approaches to solve a particular problem; and efforts to translate research into policy and/or practice. <sup>3</sup> If the descriptions of programs involve interviewing administrators or participants, then rigorous qualitative methods need to be used for the article to be publishable (see above).
Perspective	Perspectives describe a considered view about one or more issues, propose and support a new hypothesis, or theorize the implications of newly implemented programs or innovations; they are generally based on opinion and/or personal insight (see specific journal guidelines). <sup>4</sup>
Case Study	Stories about innovations; experiences with a specific intervention; or experiences with implementing a new policy or method.

See Appendix A for a table showing which journals publish each type of article listed above.

→ Is your approach particularly new? New online open-access journals (e.g. *eGEMS*, *Frontiers in PHSSR*) exist to swiftly deliver new approaches to the field. And some traditional journals have launched blogs or research brief columns for the dissemination of preliminary and timely results. (See AcademyHealth’s brief “[Using HSR to Influence Policy Change and Population Health Improvement](#)” for a detailed background about knowledge translation for PHSSR.) It is important to communicate interim results to the field without jeopardizing peer-review publication. If these publication options aren’t suitable, consider disseminating preliminary results via presentation at scientific meetings, such as AcademyHealth’s [Annual Research Meeting](#) and the [American Public Health Association’s Annual Meeting](#), as well as practice-oriented meetings such as the annual meeting of the [National Association of City and County Health Officials](#).

### Selecting a Journal

Once you decide on the type of article to write, the next step is to identify one or more appropriate journals. Though protocol prohibits the simultaneous submission of articles to more than one journal, it is wise to identify two to three potential publishers of your work in case the first attempt with the priority journal is not successful.

To maximize your chances of being published, look at the articles in your citation list—as well as those articles’ citations—to see where they were published. If you are citing a journal’s articles, this indicates the journal’s areas of focus and signals a good fit for your article.

Unless you have a specific reason otherwise, a general guideline is to focus on peer-reviewed, U.S.-published journals. If you are not sure whether your article is a good fit, contact the editors to gauge their interest in the topic. Editors appreciate inquiries, and even if they say they are not interested, they may provide helpful feedback.

### Some Questions to Consider as You Select a Journal:

- Does your topic fit the journal’s aims and scope? Have they recently published articles related to your topic? Do they publish the type of article you would like to write?
- Who is the journal’s audience (e.g. policymakers, practitioners, researchers)? Does it align with your intended audience?
- Does the journal have an upcoming theme or special issue on your topic?
- How often is the journal published? How many articles does it publish each year? What is the journal’s acceptance/rejection rate?
- What is the response time (i.e., once you submit, how quickly are they able to review and respond?) Is there a publishing backlog (i.e. once accepted, how long until your article is published?)
- What is the journal’s rank and impact factor (average number of citations received per paper published in the journal during the two preceding years)? Find impact factor [here](#).

### Resources to Help You Select a Journal:

- [Springer Journal Selector](#): matches keywords or text (such as your draft abstract) to relevant Springer journals (2000+ total)
- [Checklist](#) to help decide which journal to submit to<sup>5</sup>
  - Square checkboxes = advantageous or neutral characteristics
  - Circular checkboxes = negative characteristics; avoid these!

## Writing the Article

As you write your article, be sure to adhere to the selected journal's instructions for authors regarding:

- Authorship
  - This can be a point of contention when writing in groups, so establish expectations for roles and responsibilities early in the writing process. See the ICMJE guidelines for authorship [here](#).
- Page and/or Word Limits
- Article Components
  - e.g. Title, **Keywords**, Abstract, Introduction, Body, Discussion/Conclusion, References
  - Because PHSSR is a relatively new field, its definition is evolving. Insights into effective keywords may be gleaned from this report: **HSRProj Update: Public Health Services and Systems Research, 2003-2011**.
- Formatting
  - e.g. Double/single spaced, margins, section headings
- Citation Style
  - e.g. **APA**, **Vancouver**
- Permissions and Approvals
  - e.g. IRB approval, registration of clinical trials, permissions for reprinting copyrighted material
- Ethical Considerations
  - e.g. Author approval for submission, disclosures of conflict of interest, attestation that paper has not been submitted or published elsewhere
- Submission Process
  - e.g. Cover letter, electronic/paper submission, supplementary materials

## Writing Resources:

- **EQUATOR Network** (Enhancing the Quality and Transparency Of health Research): this website has a resource center with information for authors, as well as a library of resources and reporting guidelines for writing different types of articles.
- **STARE-HI** (Statement on Reporting of Evaluation studies in Health Informatics)
- **Writing about Innovations**: editorial with guidelines for writing descriptive articles about health innovations.
- **SQUIRE** (Standards for Quality Improvement Reporting Excellence): guidelines for writing about quality improvement with accompanying **checklist**.
- **IHI Webinar**: “Preparing Your Improvement Work for Publication”

- **How to Write and Publish an Academic Research Paper**: 101 Tips from JournalPrep.com

## Submitting the Article

Before submitting the article, proofread carefully and ask a colleague or “fresh pair of eyes” to read your manuscript and provide comments.

Academic writing and publishing is a difficult process, and realistically your article may not be accepted on the first try. Whether the journal rejects or accepts your article, keep in mind the following:

- It is your job to defend your effort and communicate the importance of your topic to the reviewers.
- Reviewer comments reflect their perspective on a particular piece of work, not on you. Do not be offended or overly discouraged by them; use the opportunity to improve your publication.
- If asked to revise and resubmit the article, be sure to address all comments and provide some rationale if you deviate from what was suggested.

## Additional Tips for Submission:

- Use a cover letter and describe what your research is about, why it is important, and how it will advance the field;
- Use plain language in your manuscript, especially in your description of methods and results;
- Make connections with journal editors and reviewers, that is “know who knows your work;”
- Always follow editor’s guidelines and proofread;
- Don’t try to persuade, let your research stand for itself.

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## Appendix A. ARTICLE TYPES AND CORRESPONDING CATEGORIES IN MAJOR JOURNALS

Click the journal name to view the journal's instructions for authors and detailed descriptions of each type of article.

Journal Title	Article Category				
	Research Report	Descriptive Article	Perspective	Case Study	Rapid Cycle Opportunities
<a href="#">American Journal of Public Health</a>	Research and Practice Articles	Statistically Speaking Going Public Faces of Public Health Analytic Essays Public Health Ethics Government, Law, and Public Health Practice Public Health Policy Briefs Framing Health Matters Systematic Reviews Public Health Then and Now Voices from the Past Images of Health Briefs	Letters to the Editor Editor's Choice Editorials On the Other Hand Commentaries	Field Action Reports	Successful peer-reviewed articles may be published online ahead of print; however they are not open-access.
<a href="#">American Journal of Preventive Medicine</a>	Research Articles Brief Reports Research Letters	Current Issues			Successful peer-reviewed articles may be published ahead of print.
<a href="#">e-GEMS</a>	Empirical Research	Protocols Model/Framework Methods Reviews Infrastructure or Architecture Reviews Policy/Governance Reviews Systematic Literature Reviews	Commentary Editorials Interviews	Comparative Case Studies	Submissions are published upon acceptance.
<a href="#">Frontiers in PHSSR</a>	Research Reports	Brief Reports Non-research Reports	Letter to the Editor Commentary		Publishes successful peer-reviewed articles within 8-10 weeks of submission.
<a href="#">Health Affairs</a>		Theme Articles	Narrative Matters	Narrative Matters	Regular Web First articles are posted online before they appear in the monthly issue.
<a href="#">Journal of Public Health Management &amp; Practice</a>	Research Brief Reports Research Articles	Practice Brief Reports		Case Studies	Articles are made freely available online immediately upon publication.
<a href="#">The Milbank Quarterly</a>	Articles	Articles	Articles		
<a href="#">Public Health Reports</a>	Original Research Public Health Evaluation Public Health Methodology Brief Report	Systematic Review Reports and Recommendations	Commentary Letter to the Editor	Case Study/ Practice	

## Appendix B. Author Resources From Publishers

- [Elsevier](#): Journal Authors' Home
- [Sage](#): Journal Author Gateway
- [Springer](#): Journal Author Home
- [Taylor & Francis Group](#): Author Services Website
- [Wiley-Blackwell](#): Author Services

## Appendix C. Recommended Books

- Belcher WL. Writing your Journal Article in 12 Weeks: A Guide to Academic Publishing Success. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications; 2009.
- Benson PJ & Silver SC. What Editors Want: An Author's Guide to Scientific Journal Publishing. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 2012.

- Thomson P. & Kamler B. Writing for Peer Reviewed Journals: Strategies for getting published. Routledge; 2012.

## Endnotes

1. "How to Get your Journal Article Published." SAGE. Web. August 27, 2012. [http://www.sagepub.com/journalgateway/files/how\\_to\\_get\\_published.pdf](http://www.sagepub.com/journalgateway/files/how_to_get_published.pdf)
2. "How to Get Published" Taylor & Francis Group. Web. August 27, 2012. <http://journalauthors.tandf.co.uk/>
3. "Author Guidelines." Journal of Healthcare for the Poor and Underserved. Web. August 27, 2012. [http://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/journal\\_of\\_health\\_care\\_for\\_the\\_poor\\_and\\_underserved/guidelines.html](http://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_health_care_for_the_poor_and_underserved/guidelines.html)
4. "Instructions for Authors." Academic Medicine. Web. August 27, 2012. <http://journals.lww.com/academicmedicine/Pages/InstructionsforAuthors.aspx>
5. Belcher WL. Writing your Journal Article in 12 Weeks: A Guide to Academic Publishing Success. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications; 2009. p. 127.