

# Reading, Writing, Reviewing: “The Anatomy of an Article”

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It is clear to all professionals working in the health field today that it is increasingly difficult to keep abreast of the medical literature. The biomedical literature is expanding at a rate that doubles every 10-15 years and increases 10-fold every 35-50 years.

For most of us, the time allotted for reading the literature is decreased as other responsibilities increase. Therefore the need for a process to select material which is interesting, pertinent, valid and applicable is important.

Although reading and reviewing material is a critical and continual part of our professional lives, the writing of a “piece of medical literature” often is not considered. Medical writing has become dull, depersonalized and not interesting. The relationship between editor and author is too formal. Fear of rejection and inadequate training in syntax and the application of the scientific method turn away individuals who do have information which should be shared by healthcare professionals. Worthwhile ideas whether presented as a “letter to the editor,” “book review,” “original article,” or “literature review” can be timely and informative.

This column will present a method of selecting and reviewing material from the medical literature and assist the individual in understanding the requirements of a medical journal and its editorial staff. Using material from the literature, we will dissect different types of articles and outline the writing and editing of an “individual piece of scientific information.”

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## The Book Review

As the medical literature expands, the need for interested and competent book reviewers becomes important as we depend upon the judgment of the reviewer as a guide in selecting and buying books. There are specific steps that can be taken in appraising a book. Learning the basic skills of book reviewing will increase the average reader’s ability to understand and appreciate a book. Since the book reviewer is oftentimes a specialist in the field that is being reviewed, bias and nonobjective statements may be offered. The reviewer must be honest, balanced, show enthusiasm and especially courage. Readers expect intellectual appraisal as their decision to buy and read the book can depend upon the review.

Book reviews are either DESCRIPTIVE or EVALUATIVE.

### I. Descriptive review:

- A. Makes book’s existence known

- B. States author, publisher, price

- C. Elaborates table of contents

### II. Evaluative review:

- A. Review material

- B. Offer opinions

- C. Does not assist in the decision to buy or read the book.

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- **Safe, accurate medical devices** and products designed for the special needs of NICU patients

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## The Necessary Steps to Successful Book Review

- I. Read the guidelines which should be provided by the publisher for instructing the author.
  - A. Most "information to authors" sections in journals do not provide this information
  - B. It is important to know the desired length of the review. 350-700 words should suffice.
- II. Read the book
  - A. First reading – skim the book noting table of contents, length of chapters, intended audience, general appearance, legibility, clarity of illustrations. Notes should be taken so that the final review will include this information.
  - B. Second reading – slower with more concentration. Mark passages in the margins or use inserts to make notes. Consider the following:
    1. Is the material well organized?
    2. Is the material presented well?
    3. Are the facts accurate?
    4. Is the information up to date?
    5. Is the experimental work presented?
    6. Is the style clear, informative and most important readable?
    7. Is the syntax clear?
    8. Is there a useful index?
- III. Response decision – book reviewing is not a passive process. The reader depends upon an objective review of the material but wants to know your opinion. It is best to let your thoughts "sit" for a day or two before writing the opinion portion of the review. This part usually is the last paragraph of the review.
- IV. Be aware of your style – It is important to write in an informative, interesting manner. But do not do this at the author's expense. Be wary of the self-promoting reviewer who is as interested in his/her reputation as the material at hand. State your bias early in the review if necessary. Do not compare this work with others in the field. Be critical of organization and material incorrect or left out. Even suggest a method to include such material in a future edition, but do not compete with the author.
- V. Do not review the book of a close friend or distant enemy. The former review will not be objective and the latter will test your true credibility.
- VI. If you are not familiar with the material presented and do not have the time to carefully review the information it is best to return the book and decline the review. Although well-intentioned with the thought of learning new material, the review of a book which has unfamiliar information is difficult to write, and you will lose enthusiasm quickly.
- VII. Do not read other reviews before doing your own. Avoid promotional material as well since quotations from other sources can be misleading and add to bias.
- VIII. The review itself:

- A. The first paragraph should attract the reader's attention. In this section the author's purpose and intended readership should be mentioned.
- B. The second paragraph should deal with a general overview of the content with a statement about the presentation of the scientific material. This part can be expanded to include a more careful content review if applicable. Additions or deletions can also be offered at this time.
- C. The third paragraph should discuss the unique aspect of the book, its strengths and weaknesses.
- D. The final paragraph consists of a summary statement with comments about clarity, style, references, and readability. The reviewer's opinion should be stated in this section.

## Example of a Book Review

### **High-risk Infants: Identification, Assessment and Intervention**

L. Rossetti. Boston: College-Hill/Little, Brown. 1986. Pp 238. \$27.50. ISBN 0-316757578.

WHAT happens to babies after discharge from the intensive care nursery? All need careful assessment as they develop; and, when a handicap is detected, the child and family will need continued, skilled help to make the most of his or her abilities. Dr Rossetti is an associate professor of speech pathology whose aim in writing this book has been to equip and inspire psychologists, social workers, teachers, speech and occupational therapists, and other professionals for this important but often neglected aspect of care. He provides a wealth of information for the newcomer to the world of developmental and speech assessment. Unfortunately, it is buried in a mass of circuitous and confusing language: "the high risk infant is an infant who because of low birthweight, prematurity, or the presence of serious medical complications associated with or independent from birth weight or prematurity, has a greater than normal chance of displaying developmental delay or

later cognitive or motor deficits or a combination of these that can be linked with the high risk status present in the neonatal or postnatal period".

The first chapter contains some basic obstetric and neonatal data and a description of the high-risk infant. The second has data on normal infant development, and the third is a rather patchy review of developmental outcome for high-risk infants which omits key references by Saigal and by Stewart, although the latter's review of the world literature (with her name misspelt) is mentioned in chapter 1. The fourth chapter is a helpful review of the needs and difficulties of the parents, while the remaining three discuss infant assessment, early intervention programmes, and co-ordinating the efforts of the professionals who serve high-risk infants and their families.

Of most practical value are probably the 39 pages of appendices, which include a glossary of medical terms, some examples of hospital discharge summaries, and two bibliographies of books and materials for infant assessment. This book has many mistakes and weaknesses, and would have been the better for simpler English. However, it is a step in the right direction, and a highly motivated newcomer would probably find it of some use.

## Comments:

1. The first sentence "What happens to babies after dis-



charge from the intensive care nursery?" This sentence is an eye-catching opening and leads the reader to continue.

2. In the first paragraph starting with Dr. Rossetti and ending with speech assessment, the purpose and intending audience are presented.
3. The next sentence starting with the word "unfortunately" and ending with the words "postnatal period" is a run on sentence and although the writer of the review includes some negative comments (which often important) is difficult to get through.
4. The paragraph describing the chapters is helpful, but I believe it is too detailed.
5. In the final paragraph, the word "probably" in the first sentence should be deleted. The writer points out the mistakes and weaknesses and ends by saying that "a highly motivated newcomer would probably find it of some use."
6. The number of words is 380 which is within a range which is not too cumbersome.
7. Based on this review, I would not purchase this monograph.

Disclosure: Dr. Martin indicates no relevant disclosure.

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