

Book Reviews

Creating Effective Conference Abstracts and Posters in Biomedicine: 500 Tips for Success. Jane Fraser, Louise Fuller, and Georgina Hutber. Radcliffe Publishing, 2009. 146pp. £21.99; \$39.95. ISBN 978-1-84619-311-8



Except for the fact that there are 527 tips and not 500, this book is everything the title promises it to be. For anyone involved in writing in biomedicine – whether an affirmed researcher, a medical writer, a university student, or a representative of pharmaceutical industry – this is definitely a good book to keep on the desk for reference.

Presented as a organized collection of suggestions, the text leads the reader through all steps involved in the development of abstracts and posters for a conference. The authors begin in a straightforward manner with a convincing argument for “Why you need good conference abstracts and posters” in chapter 1, and then turn to addressing the truly technical matters first of abstracts and then of posters. Chapters 2 to 5 deal with abstract planning, writing, and submission, and Chapters 6 to 19 span topics from the general guidelines for posters, to the banner, the main text, tables, graphs, charts, drawings and photos, editing and proofreading, and submission, and even make suggestions as to the best way to transport the poster to the conference venue. A final chapter is dedicated to e-presentations.

Although “conference abstracts and posters” could appear to some sceptical readers as an unassuming topic, and one on which everything has already been said, this book will convince anyone reading it to reconsider the effort that one ought to put into their abstracts and posters going to out to the next congress, as so many little things can be forgotten in the process.

The authors provide a fitting portrait of the delegates’ universe, in which the readers can easily reflect themselves. While reading through the book, I found myself quite involved: in some instances nodding in agreement with the authors’ suggestions, at others smiling in amusement at the thought that few of the suggestions even would need to be made, and at still other instances manifesting concern (“Oops, forgot to do that”) while thinking back to what I should have done for the last abstract or poster I sent out. Oh, if only I had come across this book earlier ...

Extremely user-friendly and easy to jump into at any of its 21 chapters, the text is broken down into a sequence of paragraph-long tips, each introduced by direct and informative subheadings, such as “Present your results clearly ... And precisely ... And accurately ... And [by the way] focus on those results that relate to the study objective”, just the way a teacher would do in the classroom talking

to its students. And so it is – the authors of the book, Jane Fraser, Louise Fuller, and Georgina Hutber are teachers indeed, with a background in research, too; and here they share with their readers over 20 years of experience in teaching and writing in the field of medical communication.

Reading through the pages, one can easily tell that the authors have placed great attention on their readers, putting their communication skills into practice very effectively. But I was a little disappointed with the two checklists provided in the Appendix section, one for abstracts and one for posters; these are basically just “lists”. I would have expected the checklists at least to have boxes to check for every item on the list – and perhaps signalled at the end of the book by some grey tab, and (why not?) located on a ready-to-use tear-off sheet. In the same way, I would have also liked to see some of the topics addressed in a bit more detail, such as the technical step-by-step instructions for setting up a PowerPoint presentation, or the useful list of university websites providing poster templates placed in evidence in a text box to make consultation quicker. The poor graphics of the checklists and the lack of text boxes could be more an issue of editorial choice, rather than of the authors’ intentions.

All things considered, this handbook is absolutely a precious addition to a writer’s reference toolbox, to be placed right next to other classics on writing and scientific communication. This book differs from the other classics that are on the market in four ways. It focuses exclusively on abstracts and posters, so readers can find all the information they will probably ever need right in one book. The subheadings are so informative that the reader could even go quickly through the entire book just by reading headings alone, and still get a great deal of sound advice from it. And being published in 2009, this book is up to date with the current trends in scientific and technical communication, providing mention of abstract requirements according to the recent 2008 extension of the CONSORT Statement, and on other hot issues such as conference abstracts being considered “prior publication” by some biomedical journals. Finally, it has some humour that fits in nicely with the content: take a look at Appendix I: the example of a structured abstract “Effect of hot and cold drinks on thesis-writing performance in final-year research institutes” on the effects of tea, black instant coffee, and a high-caffeine instant drink by the name of “Bluesheep™”.

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Reader-Friendly Biomedical Articles: How to Write Them! 3rd ed. Ann Bless, Ed Hull. Van Zuiden Communications BV, the Netherlands. 73pp, £21.99, \$39.95. ISBN 978-90-8523-167-7.

As Bless and Hull state in the preface to the third edition of this little blue book, “The goal of today’s researcher is to be cited. This goal considerably sharpens the requirements for reader-friendly writing” – the infallible logic being that if an article offers readers something they can use in their own work, then they will cite it. The aim of all of us, then, should be to write the readable and credible scientific article, one that does not make the reader work hard to find that all-important citeable information. In “Reader-friendly biomedical articles” we are led through the various stages in communicating science in a form that is readable, credible, and valuable.

The book is neatly divided into five chapters, the first of which describes the “Golden Rule of scientific writing” and offers easy-to-digest snippets of advice, supported by exercises on the CD that is cleverly attached to the inside back cover. Here we are taught to consider our reader – and make reading what we have to say easier by avoiding the use of unnecessary jargon and unnaturally convoluted sentences. Equally important is the need to avoid “empty sentences”, those meaningless strings of words that add nothing of value to the content.

We then move on to the structure of a scientific article – chapter 2 explains how logic should flow throughout a manuscript and the purposes of each different section. The importance of formulating a clear and concise research question is stressed – a clear question means that your article is more likely to be read, and hence cited. Don’t get “bogged down” in the Introduction, and “Data are not results”, are important messages, and we are given useful advice about the difference between actual results and the interpretation

of them – a point which seems to elude many inexperienced writers. Finally in this chapter, the last paragraph of the article is described – this is where you tell the reader how your answer to the research question changes the “bigger picture”, pointing out the value of your work.

Chapter 3 goes on to enlighten us on the Title and the Abstract – those all-important first impressions that must be carefully considered: the title serves to attract readers’ interest, and, as many readers read only the abstract, this should be a miniature version of the manuscript. There is a useful table of signalling phrases to assist in writing the abstract – and I am sure I will be making good use of this in the next months.

The value of Tables and Figures is covered in the penultimate chapter, which gives plenty of information that every research student should know before beginning to design Tables and Figures for a potential publication. How much time could I have saved if every researcher who needs my assistance had read this book! Much of the advice is common sense, but these things are so often ignored when students get their hands on the “all-singing, all-dancing” graphics software.

The last chapter is devoted to helpful hints on writing your article, and a collection of checklists, again mostly common sense, but easily overlooked in the “great citation race”. This book is aimed at the novice writer of research articles, but it has plenty to offer to the more experienced among our community.

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Units, Symbols, and Abbreviations: A Guide for Authors and Editors in Medicine and Related Sciences. Sixth edition. Denis N Baron and H McKenzie Clarke. Royal Society of Medicine, 2008. £7.95. ISBN 978-1-85315-624-3.

It has been, according to the preface, 14 years since the RSM published the fifth edition of this title (the first edition was published in 1971). This latest update was prompted by the changes and developments of recent years, particularly in relation to the use of electronic media, new recommendations in the International Systems of Units (Système Internationale: SI), and new terminology in the medical and biological sciences. Retaining the layout of the previous issues, this is a very handy, and space economic, addition to the editor’s armamentarium (to use in the daily battle against poorly presented, inconsistent text).

The volume is divided into four chapters: Units, Symbols and Nomenclature, References, and finally Proof

Correction Marks (the most commonly used of) according to the updated British Standard (2005). In fact, specialist knowledge of the subject area excepted, everything you need to correctly annotate a medical or biological text or proof is here in just 56 pages. For more specific areas, such as anatomy, genetics, pharmacokinetics, and virology, reference is made to more detailed sources. This useful little volume is well worth both the cover price and the shelf space.

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