

Writing About Research—The Good, the Bad, and the Challenging

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Editorial

Writing About Research—The Good, the Bad, and the Challenging

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As I reflect on my eight years as an associate editor for research articles, and look forward to my new role as associate editor for review articles, I mostly think about the many wonderful manuscripts that I have already had the privilege and the pleasure to read, review, and help shepherd through the publication process. Many of these manuscripts addressed research questions that I never considered in my own time as an active researcher, and many have made contributions to the field by looking at questions from new perspectives and/or analyzing data through the lens of experiences very different from my own. To all of the authors with whom I have worked, as well as our wonderful peer reviewers and dedicated *EBLIP* team, I send my thanks and appreciation for their continuing efforts.

That said, I can't help noticing changes, not always for the better, in the practice of research and especially in the craft of writing about research for publication. Back in the last century, when I was a doctoral student, we were required to take courses that focused on how to conduct a research study and how to write a paper reporting its results. The process always began with a clearly articulated research question, the answer to which would fill an identifiable gap and contribute to the knowledge base of the field. At the end of the process, one wrote a report that showed what had (or had not) been accomplished to meet the goals set out for the study and demonstrated how the answer to the original research question could make an impact on the field going forward. The reports tended to follow the simple yet powerful rhetorical triptych, "Tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em; then tell 'em; then tell 'em what you told 'em" (and by the way, make sure that you have the appropriate evidence to support what you are telling them).

This is still a standard that we at *EBLIP* use when evaluating a research manuscript submission. However, we often find that good research is not always well reported, and our peer reviewers frequently make comments about the need for clarity in the description of the goals and theoretical framework of a study as well as in the conclusions that are drawn from the findings. In the worst examples, the conclusions drawn have little apparent connection with the stated goals of the study, or they are not supported by the evidence provided, however interesting that evidence may be in its own right. In most cases, however, the problems tend to be in the organization of the material and its presentation—perhaps reflecting a lack of attention to the writing stage of the research process. As I often told authors in my editorial decision letters, “The strength of evidence-based research rests largely on the rigor with which a study is conducted, and it is essential to provide readers with a clear description of the process so that they can evaluate the validity and generalizability of the findings.”

Writing for publication requires more than an important research question or interesting data, it requires discipline when putting the story together and making the case for why the results of a given research study are valuable to the field. Especially when addressing a question that has been asked before, the conclusions need to demonstrate how the findings from a particular research study can be used by others in their own situations and how they can be applied to influence practice and support decision making—important outcomes of evidence-based research. Each element of the research article must relate to this goal, and the clarity of the presentation is essential to the success of the process. Strong writing skills are a part of any good researcher’s tool kit and should be honed. The ability to communicate research findings in an interesting—even memorable—way increases the likelihood that the study will be regarded as a significant contribution to the knowledge base of the field. So I urge authors to take up the challenge of focusing as much attention on the writing stage of their research process as they do on the other stages and to think of their manuscripts as an opportunity to put their research findings in a broader context and demonstrate how they can make an impact on the field going forward.