

# Top Ten



tips on

## turning an assignment into an article

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Sara Wickham

Quite often, we receive emails at *Essentially MIDIRS* like the following:

*I am a student midwife who is interested in writing for your journal and am attaching an assignment for which I received an 'A'. My tutor suggested it would be good to publish it, so I am sending it to ask whether you think this is possible. My assignment is 6,000 words long and I understand that your word limit is lower than this, but if you think it is worthwhile, I could make it shorter.*

Our reply is usually along the lines of:

*Thank you for sending us your assignment. From a quick glance we can see that it is well written and includes some interesting points but we are unfortunately not able to comment closely on submissions of this length and we would be unable to publish it in its current form, because it is an assignment rather than an article. We would be happy to look at it again if you would like to reduce the word count and work it into more of an article format - the following points may be helpful and we are attaching our author guidelines which are definitely worth having to hand as you write.*

The 'following points' that I refer to above have now been turned into this top ten tips article in order to share them with a wider audience. I think I probably speak for at least some other journal editors as well when I say that helping new writers get published (and this also includes people doing post-registration study and those who simply want to write about their current passion) is one of the best parts of my job. However, none of us have unlimited time and the more work you can do to your essay before you submit it, the higher the chance that it will 'fit the bill' and begin the journey to publication. So this is an 'editor's eye' view, but also based on many years of experience as a writer as well, and hopefully it will help you get your work fit for publication and have you able to search for yourself on the MIDIRS Reference Database in no time!



# 1 Imagine you're the editor...

Put yourself in the place of the editor and think about what they are looking for when they read submissions. This will depend a bit on the journal you want to publish in so I can only speak for *Essentially MIDIRS*, but I am generally looking for articles that are interesting, that perhaps contain new thinking (or maybe that cover an area that is known about but in greater detail or in a new way) and that will be of interest to readers. Before doing anything else, make sure you know what it is you want to say. What is the key point here? What is the title? What else has been published on this area recently? What is different about your article? Why will it be of interest to midwives and other readers? If you were the editor of the journal you're sending it to, would you publish it? If not, what would turn it into something that you would publish?

# 2 Get down to the bare bones of your work

One of the key differences between an assignment and an article relates to the audience and the way it is written. Assignments are written for lecturers, they need to reference all the right things and evidence that you have met learning outcomes. An article needs primarily to be of interest to the reader (who probably doesn't mind if you cover all the learning outcomes but wants to read something interesting and ideally new). Look critically at your assignment. What are the key kernels of wisdom or information that could be usefully shared, and what could be removed because it was necessary for your assignment but is not necessary or essential in an article?

For instance, readers of journals already know about codes of conduct and many of the other reference points that you will have been expected to address in your assignment, so, unless your article is specifically about that, you can often remove those kinds of paragraphs.

## 3 First person or third person...

Is your article going to be written in the first or third person? Reflective journal articles are not generally written in the third person or passive voice (ie where you discuss 'the author' as if she or he were another person). All journals are different so do check with the specific guidelines for the one you're submitting to, but at *Essentially MIDIRS* we are very happy for you to write in the first person, locate yourself in the centre of your experience and/or talk about your own interpretation of situations, evidence etc. Think about whether the tone of your assignment might be better altered when you present the information in article form.

## 4 What is the pivotal point in your story?

In essays that are reflecting on practice, you often have to cut down the story and/or put it in an appendix because of word count restrictions. You need to gain balance with this in an article - people like to read stories, though we need a bit of a point and/or some analysis as well - if you remove some of the content that is non-essential, you will hopefully have room to include some story detail as well as keeping that balance. Journals don't often publish stories without a 'point' though, so think about what the point of your story is, and whether you can restructure your work to make the point clearly or in an interesting way.

## 5 Draw a quick plan of your article

When you wrote your assignment, you might have had some sort of plan or mind map before you started. It may be worth going back to the drawing board and making a similar plan for your article. Don't be daunted by the thought of starting over as chunks of your original assignment may well slot into this, perhaps with some alteration, but this is a different format so you need to think about it in a different way and starting with a new blank sheet of paper (or word document) can often lead to a much more publishable article.

## 6 Identify your best bits

Sometimes people send essays for submission in journals because lecturers have given a high mark or perhaps said in their comments that '*this is worthy of publication*'. This is great, but it is worth thinking about: (a) why they thought it was good and what they thought were the really good bits; (b) whether these are things that would be of as much interest in an article (because it is a harsh but true fact that, while your water birth essay may have been brilliant, you may not have said anything that hasn't been said in twenty other articles); and (c) how you can focus on and pull the great bits out of your essay while omitting other material which is less necessary, so...

## 7 Be your own editor, and be ruthless!

Be prepared to ditch large chunks of your assignment. Most articles are shorter than the average written assignment, so something is going to have to go, although you can always save it elsewhere and re-use it another time if it makes you feel better. One way of doing this is to print a copy of your assignment, grab a highlighter pen and be ruthless about what is useful and interesting and what can be ditched on this occasion. This especially applies to sections where you have had to include references to evidence your reading and understanding which may not be that relevant in the article, codes of conduct for instance. Another example is where people define things at the beginning of an assignment. This is not necessarily needed in an article, although there are always exceptions, so use your judgment.

## 8 Focus on the practice elements, rather than the academic

On the subject of saving for another time, reflective assignments are sometimes designed to get you to evidence your understanding or proficiency in more than one area, eg reflective cycles AND a particular practice scenario. Sometimes it is better in an article to remove the detail on the reflective practice cycle and concentrate on what you had to say about the practice scenario. Or *vice versa*. Editors and readers are not nearly as concerned that you understand Gibbs (or whatever model you used), as lecturers are. This is particularly the case if you are writing a shorter piece, for instance in the Joined-Up-Knowing section of *Essentially MIDIRS* or for a journal that has one-page articles reflecting on practice.

## 9 Tailor your article to the journal in question

It is essential to read articles in the journal that you are thinking of submitting to. What kinds of formats / tones / styles have other authors used? Do you feel your article is similar, and does this give you ideas as to how you could improve or build upon your work to turn it into an article? I'm sure you read articles all the time, but if you take a little time to read with the idea in mind of writing something similar, it can be quite helpful.



## And last but not least, check your spelling and punctuation

# 10

As with an essay, it is always useful to ask a critical friend and/or possibly a tutor to read what you have written and comment with suggested changes before you submit it. It is true that many journals (*Essentially MIDIRS* included) uses peer reviewers and a proofreading process before an article gets published, so your work will be checked in a supportive way and you will almost certainly be asked to make some changes further down the line, but don't rely on the journal's proofreaders rather than doing it yourself: the more you can do to make your article look good, fit the requested criteria and be of interest to readers before you submit it, the more likely you are to get your name in print.

When you've got your article into shape and are ready to submit, a further couple of dos and don'ts are worth bearing in mind:

- Do check the author guidelines again and make sure you're sending it to the right place and in the format they ask for. To be honest, we are fairly laid back about fonts and stuff like that at *Essentially MIDIRS*, but not all journals are, and it gives a good impression to have included all the details requested in the author guidelines.
- Don't submit to more than one journal at the same time. Yes, it can be frustrating to have to wait a few weeks for the peer reviewer to look at it and for the editor to get back from holiday and reply to you, but there are few things that annoy editors more than to use their time and resources to work on an article only to discover that the author has submitted it elsewhere, had it accepted and that their time has gone to waste and they now have a gap where they thought your article was going to go.
- Do feel free to be creative if you are submitting to the kind of journal that looks like it is open to that, and several are these days. As above, just make sure your article meets the criteria in the author guidelines, but don't feel it has to be exactly the same as everyone else's or that you can't explore new ways of approaching a topic.
- Do keep trying even if your first submission isn't accepted. It may be worth submitting it to another journal or (and you can usually judge this based on the feedback you will have received) it may be that you need to consider a different topic or approach. Don't let rejection put you off; it may simply be that yours is the fifth article on suturing (or postnatal depression or abdominal palpation, or whatever) that the journal has received this week and they already have enough. Or it may just be that you need more practice, so do take account of any feedback you receive and don't give up!

Finally, do enjoy the process. I realise that some of this might sound like a lot of hassle, but that's because I've tried to be really thorough and it is honestly not as onerous as it might sound. Many people enjoy writing for publication more than they enjoy writing assignments because they are able to be more creative and don't need to stay 'within the lines' quite so much. Once your article has been accepted (as I sincerely hope it will be), this is only the beginning of the publishing journey, and when you open your copy of *Essentially MIDIRS* or another journal to see your article in print you will be really glad you made the effort.

Good luck, and we look forward to receiving your articles!



### Sara Wickham

is a midwife, teacher, author and researcher who divides her time between working as the Editor of *Essentially MIDIRS* and as an independent midwifery lecturer and consultant. She has lived and worked in the US and New Zealand as well as the UK and is the author of more than 200 books and articles relating to birth and midwifery.