Boil it down.....

M. Curzon

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Brevity: concise and exact use of words in writing and speech; shortness of expression; economy in writing; expressing a great deal in just a few words.

The purpose in publishing a scientific paper in a professional journal is communication. The findings of research or clinical studies need to be available to all to increase our understanding of, in our case, paediatric dentistry. For any scientific communication to be effective, it should therefore be widely read, easily understood and the findings useful.

There has been a great increase in the number of manuscripts being submitted to the paediatric dentistry journals in recent years. No doubt, part of this has been an increase in the amount of research being carried out and also the pressure on academic and clinical staff to publish so that their curriculum vitae have a sufficient number of peer review publications. This is entirely understandable. However, it is the experience of the editorial staff of the European Archives of Paediatric Dentistry that the quality of the written presentations is declining; quantity is replacing quality.

One particular aspect that is very obvious is that far too many papers are excessively long in relation to the extent and value of the research being reported. They are long-winded, verbose, turgid, over-written or whatever term is appropriate. There is a great need for manuscripts to be reduced in length, shortened or, as I was taught as a postgraduate, 'boiled down'.

The result of the decline in quality of presentations is that much editorial time has to be spent doing the job that authors should have done themselves. Once a paper has been accepted, subject to the scientific reviewers' comments, which should always comment on the quality of presentation and accuracy of writing, a publisher makes it up for publication, which is Springer in the case of EAPD. Galley proofs are prepared and, for our journal, copies go to Jack Toumba the Editor-in-Chief, the senior author of the manuscript and also to John Roberts and me as 'copy editors'. Our task is to make sure that the quality of the published papers meets the strict requirements of EAPD. We also ensure that the papers are readily understood and thus easy to read. This is where there is a serious and growing problem.

Increasingly, it is taking a considerable amount of time, as much as 2 h sometimes, to correct a single galley proof. The three-tier system starts with John Roberts who enters corrections on his copy that is then forwarded to me. My corrections are added and then the galley proof is sent to Jack Toumba for final assessment and approval.

There are several reasons for problems: the commonest being that authors have not read the EAPD Guidelines for layout, headings, title page requirements and manuscript length. Many authors seem to have an insatiable need to report the whole history of the subject of their research at great length. Thus, the 'Introduction' can be several type-script pages long, culminating with nearly two pages of printed text. This indicates a complete lack of critical thinking and an inability to 'boil it down'. An introduction should set the scene or background as briefly as possible and indicate why the research needed to be carried out. One or two paragraphs at most, including only key references, should be quite sufficient. This problem of an overly long-winded introduction is often compounded by a following

M. Curzon (✉)
Leeds, UK
e-mail: curzongalpay@btinternet.com

‘Discussion’ where the whole text of the introduction is repeated. Introductions need to be boiled down to the simplest statement of the intent, ideally finishing with a null hypothesis.

The details given in a ‘Materials and methods’ section are clearly important. Readers must know just how a study was done and to be able to reproduce the methods exactly. But in many cases the methods are those that have been used many times before and have been clearly described by previous authors. A reference to the essential paper that describes the methods is all that is needed. ‘boil it down’. Unnecessary repetition often occurs in a ‘Results’ section when the data are clearly given in a table, but the author(s) write out the data again within the text in addition to referring to the table(s). Even worse is when the same data are written out yet again in a following ‘Discussion’, leading to an overly long, wordy, tedious discussion that should have been ‘boiled down’.

A lack of critical assessment also leads to superfluous pictures/figures. Pretty pictures of equipment sitting on a laboratory bench add nothing to the value of the research. Page space in journals is expensive as are printing costs. Accordingly, authors should look critically at their pictures, figures and graphs and ask ‘is this really necessary’. We have seen papers with several graphs, each with a different curve, when all could have been presented in one graph. Very large tables are frequently presented with a mass of data, which on close inspection is largely of no significance. There is a lack of attention to detail and good presentation and unwillingness, perhaps, for simple writing. My postgraduate supervisor described one of my earliest attempts at a scientific

paper: “Beautiful flowery English prose, Martin, but terrible, long-winded scientific writing. Go away and boil it down”.

Another area of concern is the use of references. In these days of computers, it is so easy to generate a long list of citations. Some authors seem to think that having spent hours studying the literature and compiling a list of all relevant references, they must include every one they have read as it is important to show just how conscientious they have been. But in reality they need to be critical and ‘boil the list down’ to the essential references only. Except for systematic review papers the EAPD Guideline is for no more than 30 references and many fewer would be preferable. Long-winded papers are simply not read.

We readily accept that many authors have either English as their primary language or an easy ability to write in English. Nevertheless, there is still a responsibility for authors to seek support and advice to write good scientific precise English. As editors we are happy to correct convoluted expressions, often as a result of translations from another language. But before sending us a manuscript, write it, re-write it, put it in a drawer for 5 weeks, re-write it, re-write it yet again and please ‘boil it down’.

Further reading

Curzon MEJ, Cleaton-Jones PE. Writing scientific papers for publication: “Without publication research is sterile”. *Eur Arch Paediatr Dent*. 2012;13:3–10.