

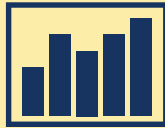
It's a Story, Not a Study: Writing an Effective Research Paper

Lorelei Lingard, PhD, professor, Department of Medicine, and Chris Watling, MD, PhD, associate professor, Department of Clinical Neurological Sciences, Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry, Western University

Advice abounds for education researchers hoping to publish their work.¹⁻³ Authors are commonly told to include a clear question and purpose statement, at least one theoretical frame for the work, sufficiently detailed methods, balanced reporting of results, thoughtful limitations, and conclusions appropriate to the research design.

Helpful though such advice is, we think it misses the fundamental point. Because what separates a mediocre research paper from a great research paper is not such bits and pieces. It is something much more essential.

A decent research paper reports a study.



But a great research paper tells a story.



What's the difference between study and story?

First, the difference is structural:

- A study lives in the methods and results of a report.
- A story unfolds in the introduction and discussion/conclusion.

Second, the difference is rhetorical:

- The study must be reported accurately.
- The story must be told persuasively.

A good story is understandable, compelling, and memorable. It needs a good study at its core, but it uses that study as a launching point to contribute to a conversation in the world about a shared problem.

Below, we illustrate the standard manuscript format according to this **story/study** concept, detailing for each section the key questions writers should ask themselves in order to achieve a good story. While we distinguish between study and story for the sake of clarity, study and story likely interweave throughout a report's sections.



We do not intend for researchers to see their reports as creative nonfiction. Published condemnations of selective and biased reporting in the clinical trials setting⁶ could equally apply to medical education research. Authors must root their stories in science. They should narrate honestly and thoroughly, and they must grapple with results that surprise, deviate, or even disappoint. This scientific storytelling approach will elevate published research, expanding its audience and raising its potential to influence.

References:

1. Bordage G. Reasons reviewers reject and accept manuscripts. *Acad Med.* 2001;76:889–896.
2. Lingard L, Driessen E. How to tell compelling scientific stories. In: Cleland J, Durning SJ, eds. *Researching Medical Education*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell; 2015.
3. @WriteforResearch, Twitter.
4. Lingard L. Joining a conversation: The problem/gap/hook heuristic. *Perspect Med Educ.* 2015;4:252–253.
5. Sword, H. *Stylish Academic Writing*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard; 2012.
6. Chan AW. Bias, spin, and misreporting: Time for full access to trial protocols and results. *PLoS Med.* 2008;5:e230.

Author contact: lorelei.lingard@schulich.uwo.ca; Twitter: @LingardLorelei

Downloaded from http://journals.aamc.org/academicmedicine by Brandon Hagan on 12/01/16. See the Terms and Conditions (http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License