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## Position paper

# “The Art of Successful Publication” ECCO 13 Workshop Report

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## ABSTRACT

Having your work published in a good journal is the life-blood of research. Publications are the key element in scientific communication and influence future funding and cancer development for the authors. Every year more and more manuscripts are submitted and competition for acceptance is fierce. The editors of EJC recently held a workshop to discuss ways to improve manuscript writing, and this paper summarises their recommendations. Choose a title carefully, keep the introduction short, avoid confusing methods with results, and use figures wherever possible. Discuss only the relevance of new findings to published literature. Above all read the specific “instructions to authors” – it is surprising how often this is ignored – at peril!

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During the 13th European Cancer Conference held in Paris in November 2005, a workshop was held entitled “The Art of Successful Publication” with excellent audience participation. Editors of the *European Journal of Cancer* (EJC) described the editorial policy of the journal and discussed ways to improve the construction and writing of papers, together with frequent problems encountered in submitted manuscripts which can detract from successful acceptance and subsequent publication. This paper reviews some of the key points made during this workshop. Whilst these comments were focused on the EJC they are of course applicable to all scientific writing.

The editorial policy of EJC is to create an international multidisciplinary journal focused on the publication of original research, whilst also encompassing reviews, discursive cur-

rent perspectives, editorials and news items, which are hopefully of interest to the readership. Different sections of EJC cover experimental, medical, radiation, surgical and paediatric oncology together with cancer epidemiology and prevention. Important aspects of editorial policy require that original material should not be submitted simultaneously elsewhere, that all authors have approved any submitted manuscript and where appropriate Ethical Committee approval and Informed Consent are confirmed. Authors are required to explain any conflicts of interest and where appropriate the source of funding. An important point made by all the presenters was to underline the value of reading the “Information for Authors”, it is surprising how often manuscripts are submitted without due attention to this!

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**Table 1 – The category of 924 original papers submitted in 2004**

Experimental	306
Clinical	302
Breast	115
Epidemiology	143
Paediatrics	58

The EJC is the official journal of the European Organisation for the Research into Treatment of Cancer (EORTC), the European School of Oncology, the European Association of Cancer Research, the European Society of Mastology and the Federation of European Cancer Societies. Currently 18 issues are published each year with over 1300 manuscripts submitted last year and 370 published. This 70% rejection rate reflects the competition to have manuscripts accepted and underlines the need to present material in a simple and coherent way. It is also of particular importance to take into account the diversity in the readership of EJC. Something that is easily understood by an expert may be difficult for readers with interest but less experienced in that particular field. Although scientific credibility should not be compromised, the way information is presented and explained is frequently not well thought out. Table 1 explains the origin of submitted material emphasising the multidisciplinary nature of this journal.

## 1. Planning a publication

The editors underlined the essential importance of planning a publication in detail, indeed even emphasising that a research study should itself be planned with publication in mind. Editors have to make difficult choices given the volume of manuscripts submitted and will therefore focus on novelty, originality of research and on clearly presented manuscripts. The importance of reading the “Instructions to Authors” has already been mentioned but it is surprising how often people can confuse what they really want to say, which appear unclear to the target audience and even completely forget what is likely to influence an editor or reviewer. Frequent problems with clinical papers in particular include the presentation of retrospective studies with analyses which are clearly biased, papers presenting prognostic factors with such a small number of patients such that no conclusions are possible, the repetition of other peoples work, and a particular problem with non-randomised phase II studies with active agents, where inappropriate conclusions are attempted. Table 2 illustrates such an example, where one non-randomized study suggests

**Table 2 – Misleading non-randomised phase 2 studies with combinations of agents: Platins + Cetuximab in NSCLC**

RR (%) Chemo	RR (%) Chemo + C-225	Conclusion
–	64	Wow!!!
–	28	Oh-Oh!!!
32	53	Interesting
a Only in EGFR1 expressing tumors.		

a very high response rate, a second and similar non-randomised study looks vastly different, and only the randomized study may serve to provide some interpretable information. Some phase II studies must of course be published for archival reasons, but over interpretation of results must be resisted. Let us examine specific aspects of any publication by section.

## 2. Title

The title of a paper is “the signpost of your genius!” It should therefore command attention and be the key to your paper. Remember that this may possibly be the only part that everybody reads – boring titles do not encourage readers to read your work! If the paper has an unequivocal message, it is strongly recommended to try to include the message in the title.

## 3. Abstract

An abstract should be concise (approximately no more than 150 words), explain why the study was performed, identify methodology but only essential factors, summarise major results with statistics where appropriate and give a firm overall message or conclusion. Abstracts should contain all the relevant key words for future literature research. Abstracts without data are not informative and will probably lead to rejection of the manuscript.

## 4. Introduction

Introductions are often far too long and should only contain the essential background information which indicates why a study is relevant, and the aims of the study. It is particularly important to stress areas where there is no or very little knowledge on a specific aspect that is potentially relevant to the study. This uniqueness or novelty will add greatly to the enthusiasm of the reader!

## 5. Materials and methods

For clinical studies the methods should include a distillation of the protocol, describe appropriate populations, interventions and end points, and define statistical hypotheses. Papers without sufficient statistical hypotheses stand a great chance of rejection. It is important not to confuse results with methods. For experimental papers the methodology should identify sufficient detail, precision, accuracy and robustness of the methods used and the statistical approach to their analysis. Sufficient detail should be given to allow others to repeat the experiments using identical methodology.

## 6. Results

The results section should give a factual description of the outcome of the trial or experiment. In clinical studies baseline characteristics of patient populations, and primary results of the intervention should be shown, together where appropriate with activity, side effects and toxicity of therapy and any

secondary analyses performed. It is important to decide which results to present in figure or table form, and which to describe in words; the two should compliment each other and not represent duplication. The saying “one picture is worth a thousand words” is not irrelevant. Figures can be very helpful for the readers’ analysis of data. Tables and figure legends should be simply presented and not overly complex. Figures should have visible symbols and complete legends so that an expert reader or referee should be able to understand the meaning of a paper simply by looking at the figures and tables. It is obviously important to pay attention to statistical aspects of these. For some studies it is more and more important to make all raw data electronically available for the readers, this especially applies to microarray studies.

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## 7. Discussion

Discussions should underline the major results with appropriate comments relating them to published literature, and explaining whether or not the new data agrees or disagrees with such comparisons. Authors are encouraged to explain why new findings are relevant and to identify potential avenues for further research, but discussions should not read like a future grant proposal! Discussions should be concise and should draw the reader to a conclusion justified by the data presented.

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## 8. At the end of writing

Papers can not be written by multiple authors and inevitably one person takes the lead, but it is essential that a draft manuscript is read and commented on by all authors. It is also very desirable to have papers read by someone for whom English is their first language as in the case of *EJC*, all material is published in English. It is wise to ensure that there are no typographical errors and that layout is neat to simplify the reading process for editors. Never forget that editors and the referees from whom they seek advice are human beings and busy people!

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## 9. The review process

Manuscripts received by the *EJC* are assigned to editors with expertise in the appropriate area. In turn editors consult independent anonymous experts in the field to referee the paper. Reviewers first look to see whether this is an original contribution and refer to the introduction to explain the context. They will seek to find whether the Methods are clearly identified, the Results clearly presented and statistics adequate and robust. As advised above, referees will look to see whether tables and figures are clear and non-repetitive, if the Discussion is adequately reflective but not too long and whether adequate References are given. Reviewers will report to editors, who in turn will pass on advice about manuscripts, which may be that they are accepted, rejected or revisions are required prior to publication. A useful constructive review will explain deficiencies, duplication, assumptions, irrelevant material and identify inappropriate “padding”.

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## 10. The role of the scientific editor

Accepted manuscripts are passed to a scientific editor prior to publication. The role of the scientific editor is to ensure clarity, scientific accuracy, clear presentation of the results and conformation to the journal format. Attention to detail can be greatly helped by the authors following the “instructions to authors” to make sure that for example, only SI units and generic names of drugs are used, and an appropriate source identified for specific materials or drugs used. One of the great challenges of modern publication is to ensure rapid decision is provided to submitting authors, to encourage constructive refereeing in a timely fashion, and once accepted to publish as soon as possible. This process can be facilitated by authors providing sufficient attention to detail in structuring their manuscripts following the “instructions to authors” and presenting a clear, easy to read manuscript. The take home message is “if you can’t read don’t write” – so please do read the instructions to authors!

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## 11. Workshop discussion

During a lively discussion from the floor a variety of questions were asked for clarification but some new issues were raised. The refereeing process is a critical aspect of manuscript assessment and the question was raised as to whether or not referees are blinded to the authorship of submitted manuscripts. Current *EJC* policy does not follow such anonymity and it is clear to a referee the identification of the source of a manuscript. Whilst opening this to the possible criticism of bias it would significantly increase the time for handling manuscripts if double-blinded anonymity was enforced and it is the responsibility of the editors to only use referees who are trustworthy in this regard.

The problem of how to handle negative results was discussed and is truly problematic. A good hypothesis – experimental or clinical should result in good research which deserves publication. Negative results are important for public appreciation in order to prevent people repeating clinical trials (this could be unethical), or spending money repeating negative laboratory science. At present *EJC* has to reject 80% of all submitted work and therefore a preference is given for positive data. It is hoped that other journals can handle the archival necessity for negative clinical trials, but it is acknowledged that this is an area of ongoing discussion.

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## Conflict of interest statement

None declared.

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