
Help with writing

EDITORIAL

RAGNHILD ØRSTAVIK

ragnhild.orstavik@tidsskriftet.no

Ragnhild Ørstavik, MD, PhD, assistant editor-in-chief of the Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association and senior researcher at the Norwegian Institute of Public Health.

If you have not written a scientific paper before, you need guidance. The Journal is now launching the website tastaturet.no (in English: the keyboard), which gives simple advice on the different stages of the process.



Photo: Einar Nilsen

Many good books have been written about writing. My personal favourite is William Zinsser's *On writing well*, first published in 1976 [\(1\)](#). He starts by telling a story of how he was invited to address a group of students about writing, together with a surgeon. The latter has started writing as a recreational activity after spending busy days at the hospital. The students ask questions which the two of them answer, each from their own periphery of the world of writing.

Is it easy to write? Yes, replies the surgeon. No, replies Zinsser. Do you edit your own manuscripts? No, replies the surgeon. Yes, replies Zinsser. What do you do when you have writer's block? Go fishing, replies the surgeon. Persevere, replies Zinsser. Do you use metaphors? Love them, replies the surgeon. Seldom, replies Zinsser.

Why does Zinsser answer this way? Because he earns a living by writing. He knows that writing can be difficult, that no first draft is good enough, and that a text is only finished after numerous rewrites. He knows that he cannot go and do something else each time he has writer's block, because then he would not get his work done. And he knows that while metaphors and ambiguities underpin literary fiction (where the text should invite different interpretations), they can obfuscate non-fiction (where the clarity of the message is of primary importance).

Zinsser's main message is that writing is a craft, a separate profession. Writing also has its specialists and subspecialists. *On writing well* deals with writing different forms of non-fiction, including a chapter on writing about sport, which I have also read – not because I am interested in sport or wish to write about it (no, on both counts), but because the chapter is so well written. However, although the book is about non-fiction writing, it contains nothing on how to write a scientific paper for a medical journal. For that you need various sources, not just those that teach you how to write well.

Even if you are 'good at writing', you need help the first time you are setting out to write a scientific paper (and many times after that too) [\(2\)](#). You should have a mentor (preferably your supervisor), a textbook (there are many good ones [\(3, 4\)](#)), and – nowadays – an easily available website where you can look up information on what you should do. It is just such a website that we at the Journal have wanted to offer you for a long time. We are therefore now launching the website tastaturet.no [\(5\)](#), where we have collected our best tips for first-time authors of scientific papers.

«We often have to scrutinise the text to find out the actual purpose of the study, exactly how it was conducted, and what were the main results»

Why are we doing this? In our experience, when we receive manuscripts from inexperienced first authors, the topic is relevant for the Journal and the data collected is interesting. But we often have to scrutinise the text to find out the actual purpose of the study, exactly how it was conducted, and what were the main results. There are too many figures and tables, and it is difficult to understand why precisely these were selected. At tastaturet.no we want to tell you what must be included and what is unnecessary. We help you to neaten your text, so that you know which elements should go where in the manuscript. We also advise you on what to do before you start to write (spoiler: Read the author guidelines!), what should be included in the cover letter, and how to respond to the feedback you may receive from the editorial board and peer reviewers.

We also provide tips on methodology. In our opinion, this is a treasure trove for any author who works with quantitative research: since 2017, the Journal has included a regular column called Medicine and numbers [\(6\)](#). These are short articles that deal with everything from statistical significance [\(7\)](#) to the role of machine learning in research [\(8\)](#). All these are available at tidsskriftet.no, but at tastaturet.no they are curated and grouped so that you can more easily find the article that deals with precisely what *you* are wondering about.

Doctors who write scientific papers range from students completing a project assignment, via experienced clinicians who are starting out as researchers, to full-time professors with long lists of publications to their name. We hope that many will test out tastaturet.no. If you have tips regarding topics that are missing, or suggestions for improvements, we would be happy to receive them.

Happy writing – with and at Tastaturet.

REFERENCES

1. Zinsser W. On writing well. The classical guide to writing nonfiction. 7. utg. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2006.
2. Gjersvik P. Startvansker. Tidsskr Nor Legeforen 2019; 139. doi: 10.4045/tidsskr.19.0257. [PubMed][CrossRef]
3. Nylenna M. Publisere og presentere. Medisinsk fagformidling i teori og praksis. 2. utg. Oslo: Gyldendal Akademiske, 2015.
4. Hall GM. red. How to write a paper. 5. utg. London: BMJ Books, 2012.
5. Tidsskrift for Den norske legeforening. tastaturet.no. Tips til deg som skal skrive. <https://www.tastaturet.no/> Accessed 1.8.2024.
6. Skovlund E. Tall og medisin. Tidsskr Nor Legeforen 2017; 137: 852. [PubMed]
7. Stensrud MJ, Aalen OO. Skal vi skrinlegge begrepet statistisk signifikans? Tidsskr Nor Legeforen 2019; 139. doi: 10.4045/tidsskr.19.0311. [PubMed][CrossRef]
8. Giskeødegård GF, Lydersen S. Maskinlæring i medisinsk forskning. Tidsskr Nor Legeforen 2023; 143. doi: 10.4045/tidsskr.23.0196. [PubMed][CrossRef]

Publisert: 19 August 2024. Tidsskr Nor Legeforen. DOI: 10.4045/tidsskr.24.0419
Copyright: © Tidsskriftet 2025 Downloaded from tidsskriftet.no 20 December 2025.