

## Sports Physiology Research— Moving to Shorter and Faster Publication

Two key features of the rapid evolution of scientific communication is the move from print to online publication and to shorter, more concise articles. In its short history, *IJSPJ* and our publisher Human Kinetics have had to move with the industry to be competitive in the crowded marketplace of sports science journals. *IJSPJ* was one of the first journals launched simultaneously in both print and electronic formats back in 2006. We have maintained an active online presence with a dedicated journal Web site, online preview, and other interactive features to meet the demands of our readership. Discussions at publisher and editorial levels on the future direction of print and online publication for *IJSPJ* are continuing.

The move to shorter articles is also a challenge. In many ways, dealing with word counts is a bugbear for authors, editors, and production staff. Authors often struggle to rein in a burgeoning manuscript, and reviewers and editors are always on the lookout for “written waffle.” In 2006, *IJSPJ* was launched with a maximum word count of 4500 for original investigations. In 2009, the word count was reduced to 4000 and again to 3500 in 2011. Most competitor journals in the sports science field specify word counts from 3000 to 4500 words. Some journals are very strict on word counts, and manuscripts are automatically returned if they exceed specified limits. At *IJSPJ* we are generous enough to show some leniency and permit a slight overrun of an original or revised submission, provided the science is rigorous, the outcomes are novel and of practical interest, there is some underlying physiology, and the manuscript (and/or revisions) is well crafted.

A key metric we monitor is the length of the manuscript acceptance-to-publication queue. Online journals have changed the game now, with some journals promising a publication timeline of just a few weeks. For print journals like *IJSPJ*, the publication queue is typically longer. In recent years, our queue has ranged from 6 to almost 12 months. For several reasons, shorter manuscripts move through the manuscript review process and publication queue more quickly. Savvy authors would realize that shaving a few hundred words off their manuscript might just lead to faster publication.

Where is the best place to trim material from a manuscript? Well, this obviously varies from manuscript to manuscript, but the two areas often requiring the most scrutiny are the Methods and Results sections.

Although several generations of scientists have been trained to report all the methodological details needed for an independent researcher to adequately replicate the study, a more circumspect approach is emerging. Key points here are focusing on the essential methods, referring readers to previously published methods, or using online supplementary files. Many younger authors feel the need to prepare expansive descriptions of methods that are really secondary in nature. An obvious example is writing a paragraph or two citing finer details of measuring maximal oxygen uptake when it is essentially a descriptive or demographic characteristic only, rather than an explanatory variable or a primary outcome.

The Results section should also be subject to close scrutiny. Long paragraphs dense with numeric results and statistical outcomes are generally inaccessible to most readers. Use of supplementary files with online access is becoming more widespread and a good way to list raw data, individual results, and/or secondary outcomes. Focusing more on the outcome and effect statistics rather than a long listing of raw data is preferred. Showing all the raw data, change or difference scores, standardized changes or differences, confidence limits, *P* values, and qualitative descriptors can be overkill if there are a large number of results to report.

Another key consideration in reducing the length of manuscripts is to limit the number of figures and tables. Some journals now impose a specified maximum number of figures and tables or add a notional number of words (for example, 300 words) to the total word count for each figure or table. Simple column graphs reporting descriptive values (or even outcome measures) can be readily presented as a single line or two of text in the Results section.

It goes without saying that a succinct written presentation makes a big difference in both readability and length. Short crisp sentences and tight paragraph construction aid reading and comprehension. Of course editors and reviewers need to be mindful of not imposing their own preferences and style, but there are too many manuscripts submitted for publication that would clearly benefit from a firmer hand in the final stages of editing. This is particularly the case for authors whose first language is not English. Careful proofreading of the manuscript by a colleague proficient in written English should always be undertaken.

A plea to reviewers is to keep the specified word count in mind when assessing a paper and preparing a list of comments. Some reviewers generate a rather lengthy list of less important comments requesting changes (primarily inclusions) that if incorporated would add a few hundred words to a manuscript. Given that many submissions are at or close to the specified maximum word count, there is often very little room to move.

The era of shorter forms of communication is already with us. Shorter and faster communication need not be associated with a lowering of quality and rigor of the material, nor the degree of practical application. Authors, reviewers, and the readership deserve the standards to be rising, not falling.

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