

Preparing to Write the Manuscript—The Outline

You have the idea for an article. Perhaps a rough title. Beyond that, there is work before you write sentences. Instead, start with an outline and gather initial references before you start the body of a manuscript. You've done this before. You may hate it. But it is important.

To start your outline, write the main point, purpose, subject, or a succinct purpose statement as the heading. This is for your eyes only, but you need to have the main point or subject nailed down before proceeding. Everything in your article should fit under that statement. Nothing else fits this manuscript.

Next, write objectives for that purpose. You can word them simply as major points you want to cover. Then, identify what you will cover for each major point in bullets under the major points. Don't worry, it's not etched in stone. You don't need to use Roman numerals or upper- and lower-case letters. Just format however you wish!

Now, look at each item on your list. For each bullet, strike through anything that does not build on the purpose statement or suit your audience. Keep a "parking lot" list of other ideas that don't fit the purpose or planned audience—might suit another article.

Remember your outline is a flexible plan. Change the sequence; remove or add bullets. Although it is fluid, this gives a good foundation to know where you are going. Save old drafts as you make changes. If you struggle with this, there are numerous articles and documents online to help you outline for the first time or two.

Once you have the outline and major points you want to cover, pull references. These should be solid resources related to the outline to put the flesh on your article involves. I make notes tying reference and outline bullets together.

With the outline and some references, start writing. Start where you feel most comfortable and can make progress. Introduction, review of literature, description of the problem, what triggered your interest in the project, **anywhere**.

The following example is a simple topical outline for a typical clinical article:

- Definition of the problem
- Causes and common risk factors
- Condition prevalence, prognosis, staging
- Presentation, defining signs & symptoms, appropriate diagnostics
- Treatment recommendations and guidance
- Associated risks and complications
- Implications