

Effective Medical Writing

Pointers to getting your article published

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Writing an invited commentary

ABSTRACT

An invited commentary is a short article that describes an author's personal experience of a specific topic. Unlike a review article, the author gives his own opinions and perspectives. It typically addresses a current, hot and often controversial subject. It may take two formats, namely, provide an expert author's personal views of and insight into a current hot topic, or add balance to another paper being commented upon, with addition of the author's own perspective.

Keywords: commentary, invited commentary, medical writing, opinion, perspective, scientific paper

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INTRODUCTION

The invited commentary, also known as a commentary, is a short article that describes an author's personal experience of a specific topic. The subject may be a controversial one, and the author's perspective is provided. This type of paper should also outline the various viewpoints that exist. Invited commentaries are therefore quite different from review articles, with which they are often confused.⁽¹⁾ Commentaries are usually invited by the editor. Only potential authors considered to be an expert on the subject would be so invited. Hence, being asked to contribute an invited commentary is usually regarded as an honour. However, writing a good commentary is difficult, and both experience and finesse are required. The invited commentator is expected to provide insight on a particular topic to the readership.

Invited commentaries may also be known by other names, depending on the house style of individual journals. For example, in *Annals of Internal Medicine*, they are known as Perspectives (defined as an "essay representing opinions, presenting hypothesis, or considering controversial issues"); in the *American Journal of Roentgenology*, they are called Opinions (defined as a "short article giving the

author's personal judgement on a controversial topic"); in the *Canadian Association of Radiologists Journal*, they are named simply as Essays (defined as a "short article dealing with controversial issues or current affairs relevant to journal readers, and which cannot be presented under other formats"); while in the *Medical Journal of Australia*, the "For Debate" article provides "discussion of a controversial topic and may consist of a longer article discussing a controversial issue or two shorter articles by authors with opposing views". Therefore, for this category of paper, it is particularly important to carefully study the target journal's Instructions to Authors and to construct the submitted manuscript exactly according to the prescribed guidelines.⁽²⁾

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

An invited commentary may be classified into two broad categories: it may be based on a current hot topic, or it may be commissioned to accompany an original paper on the same topic. A current hot topic may be a subject that is assessed by the editor as being currently important or relevant to journal readers, or one that is controversial as to require opposite or further views. The invited commentator is also expected to give a balanced overview on the subject and to discuss the different aspects and their relevance. The invited commentator should be aware of the journal readership and tailor his commentary accordingly.

Box 1. Types of invited commentaries:

1. Stand-alone commentary
 - highlights a controversial hot topic or essay presenting the author's opinions/experience
 - provides the author's perspective
2. Commentary accompanying an original paper
 - gives opposing viewpoints to provide a balanced overview
 - provides the author's perspective

If the commentary is regarding an original paper published in the journal, it is incumbent on the invited commentator to be intimately familiar with the article and its references. If the paper projects a controversial

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view, then the commentary may aim to give an opposing viewpoint to provide balance, so that readers who are less familiar with the subject are presented with both sides of the argument. In writing an invited commentary, there is potential for differences in opinion, expertise or experience. If there is controversy and debate on the subject of the review, commentators should not be afraid to express their personal views and opinions based on experience. It is also legitimate to provoke debate, if appropriate, where there is uncertainty. The commentator should however be particularly careful, especially if he does not agree with the paper being commented on, as the authors of the article commented upon may be given the opportunity to rebut the commentator's views.

The structure of an invited commentary varies according to whether it is a stand-alone commentary or whether it was commissioned to accompany another article (usually an original article) in the same issue of the journal. There are also varying requirements, depending on the individual journal's Instructions to Authors. In general, commentaries are short, with a small number of references limited to those used to support the author's opinion. It usually has no or a limited number of tables and illustrations. Stand-alone commentaries are usually longer and more structured than those written to complement another article. The latter may consist of only one to two paragraphs of text, including concluding sentences with a take-home message.

Box 2. Structures of invited commentaries:

1. Stand-alone commentary
 - Title
 - Unstructured or no abstract
 - Short introduction
 - Subheadings to organise material
 - Discussion (optional)
 - Summary or Conclusion
 - References (limited number)
 - Tables and Illustrations (none or limited number)
2. Commentary accompanying an original paper
 - Title (optional)
 - No abstract
 - Subheadings to organise material (optional)
 - Discussion (optional)
 - Summary or Conclusion (optional)
 - References (limited number)
 - Tables and Illustrations (none or limited number)

Box 3. Examples of different journal requirements for invited commentaries:

Journal	Word limit	References	Tables/ figures	Others
Am J Roentgenol	1,250	≤ 5	≤ 5	
Ann Intern Med	1,500	≤ 20	≤ 2	Unstructured abstract (≤ 175 words)
Br J Radiol	800–2,500	≤ 6		
Can Assoc Radiol J	1,000	≤ 10	≤ 2	
Lancet	700	10		
Med J Aust	1,500	25		Dot point abstract (≤ 250 words)
NEJM	900	≤ 10	1	

Box 4. Common problems with invited commentaries:

- Resembles an invited review.
- Excessively long manuscript.
- Not focused.
- Too many references.
- No clear take-home message.
- Too many tables and illustrations.

SUMMARY

A well-written commentary should be short and clear, and typically addresses a current, hot and often controversial subject. It should provide an expert author's personal opinions of and insight into a current hot topic, or add balance to another paper being commented upon, with addition of the author's own perspective.

Box 5. Take-home points:

- An invited commentary should be short and focused.
- It may address a controversial topic.
- It provides an expert's perspective on a current hot topic

REFERENCES

1. Peh WCG, Ng KH. Writing an invited review. Singapore Med J 2010; 51:271-4.
2. Peh WCG, Ng KH. Basic structure and types of scientific papers. Singapore Med J 2008; 49:522-5.

SINGAPORE MEDICAL COUNCIL CATEGORY 3B CME PROGRAMME
Multiple Choice Questions (Code SMJ 201006A)

- | | True | False |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Question 1. The purpose of an invited commentary is to: | | |
| (a) Report a previously undescribed clinical presentation in a single patient. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (b) Appraise and synthesise the literature for a specific topic. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (c) Describe a modification of an existing equipment. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (d) Provide balance to another article appearing in the same journal issue. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|
Question 2. The structure of an invited commentary includes: | | |
| (a) An optional introduction section. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (b) A detailed results section. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (c) A summary with a take-home message. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (d) At least 75 references. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|
Question 3. The following statements about an invited commentary are true: | | |
| (a) The topic discussed may be controversial. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (b) An extensive literature review is required. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (c) It should be short and focused. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (d) A detailed description of statistical methods is required. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|
Question 4. The following are common problems with an invited commentary: | | |
| (a) Indistinguishable from an invited review. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (b) Too many references. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (c) A large number of tables. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (d) Author's personal opinions are provided. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|
Question 5. The typical requirements for an invited commentary are: | | |
| (a) Word count of 800–2500 words. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (b) 5–25 references. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (c) 20–30 figures. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (d) Structured abstract of 300 words. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Doctor's particulars:

Name in full: _____

MCR number: _____ Specialty: _____

Email address: _____

SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS:(1) Log on at the SMJ website: <http://www.sma.org.sg/cme/smj> and select the appropriate set of questions. (2) Select your answers and provide your name, email address and MCR number. Click on "Submit answers" to submit.**RESULTS:**(1) Answers will be published in the SMJ August 2010 issue. (2) The MCR numbers of successful candidates will be posted online at www.sma.org.sg/cme/smj by 27 August 2010. (3) All online submissions will receive an automatic email acknowledgment. (4) Passing mark is 60%. No mark will be deducted for incorrect answers. (5) The SMJ editorial office will submit the list of successful candidates to the Singapore Medical Council.**Deadline for submission: (June 2010 SMJ 3B CME programme): 12 noon, 20 August 2010.**