



# The opinions of Indian dental faculty members on harmonizing manuscript preparation and the submission guidelines of journals

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** Authors of scholarly writing are underrepresented in discussions about improving the academic publishing system. The objective of this study was to assess the possibility of harmonizing manuscript preparation and the submission guidelines of journals by assessing the opinions of dental faculty members who worked in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional survey of 1,286 participants from 16 dental schools in Andhra Pradesh was conducted from March 15, 2021 to April 15, 2021. The questionnaire addressed the participants' demographic details and perspectives on the guidelines for manuscript preparation and the need to harmonize those guidelines with the publication process. The online questionnaire was generated using Google Forms and consisted of six dichotomous, one multiple-choice, and seven Likert scale items. Descriptive statistics were obtained.

**Results:** Of the 894 (69.5%) dental faculty members who responded, 448 (50.1%) were not aware of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors' guidelines for manuscript preparation and submission. During the manuscript revision process, 792 (95.5%) had experienced difficulty with the variation in author guidelines for each journal, especially the guidelines for formatting tables, reference style, and citation of references in-text. The idea of a standardized template for manuscript preparation and submission was supported by 800 respondents (86.7%).

**Conclusion:** Dental faculty members in India experienced difficulty in manuscript preparation for medical journals due to the differing editorial policies among journals. Therefore, a standardized template providing uniformity in style and format is needed.

### Keywords

Editorial policies; Dental schools; Writing; Awareness; India

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## Introduction

**Background/rationale:** As evidence-based practice becomes the standard in healthcare, research to address clinical questions and therapeutics has increased [1], with researchers submitting their findings to scientific journals in order to communicate with the medical community [2]. However, for various reasons, authors often submit their manuscripts to several journals before being peer-reviewed and accepted in one. This often requires multiple revisions of the manuscript to conform to the style and format requirements of each journal during the submission process [3].

Journals adopt different formats in order to align with the scientific writing policies and requirements of their parent organization or society. Differing abstract formats, word count limitations, and reference styles are common [2]. Authors struggle with the constant need to adapt to the changing requirements of numerous journals in their pursuit of publication. As a result, they are frequently confronted with minor issues that can have a significant impact on their time, money, and resources, particularly when a publication is resubmitted. It can also be an obstacle to timely data presentation [3].

There are currently no uniform guidelines or protocols that ensure harmony within journal publications and conference presentations globally. The most widely followed guidelines are those provided by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) and the American Medical Association (*AMA Manual of Style*). Despite offering specific recommendations, they do not cover issues such as harmonized structure and format [3]. Furthermore, the ICMJE does not mandate that all scientific journals follow their guidelines [4].

The International Council for Harmonization of Technical Requirements for Pharmaceuticals for Human Use (ICH) developed harmonized guidelines for clinical study reports in 1995. This document described the format and content of a clinical study report that would be acceptable to all regulatory authorities within the scope of the ICH [5]. This allowed researchers in the pharmaceutical industry to concentrate on science rather than editing, formatting, and style. Authors are at the core of academic publishing, yet they are underrepresented in discussions of how to improve scholarly publishing [4].

**Objectives:** The aim of this study was to document the opinions of Indian dental faculty members regarding harmonizing manuscript preparation and submission guidelines. Data were obtained through an online survey. Three specific areas were addressed: 1) knowledge of the ICMJE guidelines, 2) key challenges that authors experienced during the manuscript preparation and submission process, and 3) possible solutions to harmonize the manuscript preparation and submission process.

## Methods

**Ethics statement:** The institutional ethical committee of Vishnu Dental College, Bhimavaram, India approved the study protocol (IECVDC/2021/UG01/PHD/Q/50). The purpose of the study was stated on the first page of the document with the question “Do you agree to participate in the study voluntarily?” Clicking ‘yes’ gave the participant access to the questionnaire.

**Study design:** This was a cross-sectional, survey-based, descriptive study. It was described according to the Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology (STROBE) guidelines.

**Setting:** A survey was conducted among dental faculty members working in 16 dental schools in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India (Suppl. 1). Initial emails were sent on March 15, 2021, followed by reminder emails after 15 days and 1 month. The objective of the study and the requested response time were included in the email’s brief statement. The responses were collected on April 15, 2021.

**Participants:** The target population was 1,286 dental faculty members (assistant, associate, and full professors) of 16 dental schools in Andhra Pradesh. The list of dental schools was obtained from the official website of the Dental Council of India and email invitations were sent to eligible participants.

**Data source/measurement:** A self-administered questionnaire was developed by five experienced dental researchers during three discrete review rounds. When there was a disagreement, the expert opinion of journal editors was sought to reach a consensus. To maximize participation, the questionnaire was kept short and included closed-ended questions only. The questions provided data on participants’ demographic details, including gender, research experience, work sector, and number of publications. Questions were created to gather information about participant opinions of existing manuscript preparation and submission guidelines and the need for publication harmonization. Furthermore, the survey collected opinions that could aid in the harmonization of publications. Participants answered six dichotomous, one multiple-choice, and seven Likert-scale questions (Suppl. 2). The online survey was created using Google Forms (Google, Mountain View, CA, USA). The Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 (KR20) was used to test the reliability of the 894 responses to six dichotomous questions, with a KR20 score of 0.5961. The reliability of 7 Likert-scale items was assessed using the Cronbach alpha test with a score of 0.8397 ( $P < 0.05$ ).

**Variables:** Variables included the 14 items of the questionnaire and the participants’ characteristics.

**Bias:** Only voluntary participants were included in the analysis. Reasons for not participating in the survey were not obtained. Therefore, the opinions of 392 professionals (30.5%)

could not be traced. It is presumed that non-participants were not interested in writing articles or were too busy to respond.

**Study size:** The survey was dispatched to all professionals in 16 dental schools; study size estimation was not done.

**Statistical methods:** The data collected were subjected to statistical analysis using IBM SPSS Statistics ver. 25.0 (IBM Corp, Armonk, NY, USA). Descriptive analysis was performed.

## Results

**Participants:** Out of 1,286 faculty members, 894 responses (69.5%) were received over 1 month from 16 dental schools (Dataset 1). However, we could not determine how many dental faculty members received the questionnaire; therefore, the number of actual responses or rejections could not be computed. Only the total target population was traceable.

**Descriptive data of participants:** As shown in Table 1, most participants were women (68%), with a mean age of  $31.37 \pm 11.48$  years, while 50.22% of the participants had less than 5 years of research experience and 13.08% had more than 16 years of experience. In addition, 91.16% worked in private institutions, whereas 8.83% worked in the public sector. Interestingly, 13.3% had not published yet and 58.05% had fewer than 10 publications during their career.

As shown in Table 2, the survey questions and results represent the opinions of dental faculty members regarding harmonizing guidelines for manuscript preparation and submission. The study findings revealed that all participants were aware of specific guidelines for manuscript preparation and submission for each journal. However, 448 (50.1%) were un-

aware of ICJME guidelines for manuscript preparation and submission, and 792 (95.5%) had experienced difficulty in revising their manuscripts following rejection due to variation in submission guidelines. The difficulty level of revising a manuscript was assessed for different sections of the manuscript on a scale of 1 to 5 (1, easy; 5, difficult). The participants found it challenging to format tables (mean score = 3.03), followed by dealing with word limits (2.92) and reference styles (2.63).

Of the 894 respondents, 776 (89.5%) agreed or strongly agreed with the need for uniform guidelines for manuscript preparation and submission. Most agreed that harmonizing manuscript preparation and submission guidelines would help authors focus on scientific content rather than adherence to the style and format of the journal. The requirement of a harmonized template for manuscript preparation and submission was agreed or strongly agreed upon by 875 participants (86.7%). Submission of manuscript files initially with later application of style and format upon acceptance and the integrated journal portal were both considered good solutions by 560 study participants (62.6%).

In Table 3, a comparison of opinions about the need for uniform guidelines for manuscript preparation and submission is presented. There was no significant difference in opinions based on gender, research experience, work sector, or number of publications by chi-square test ( $P > 0.05$ ).

## Discussion

**Key results:** The present study gathered valuable perspectives from dental faculty members in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India that provided insights into harmonizing scientific publications in journals. Scientific publications are the lifeline of the research community and play a critical role in disseminating data to healthcare providers, scientists, and researchers. The lack of harmonization across journals, however, impedes the publication process. This variability presents a challenge to authors, diluting their ability to concentrate on science and medicine. In this study, there was a perceived need for standardized or harmonized manuscript preparation and submission guidelines.

**Interpretation:** The variations in journal specifications at the time of manuscript preparation/submission can be attributed to several factors. Interdisciplinary variations, journal size differences, available staff and resources, journal priorities, target readership, and stylistic preferences are only a few of those factors. Although many of them are understandable factors, when taken together they contribute to dissimilar guidelines that are difficult to navigate when revising a rejected manuscript for a new journal [6]. The development of a harmonized template would be a watershed moment, allowing the

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of study participants in a survey on the challenges of manuscript preparation and submission in India (n=894)

Characteristics	Category	Number	%
Gender	Men	286	32.00
	Women	608	68.00
Research experience (yr)	≤ 5	449	50.22
	6–10	256	28.63
	11–15	72	8.05
	≥ 16	117	13.08
Work sector	Public	79	8.83
	Private	815	91.16
No. of publications	≤ 10	519	58.05
	11–20	212	23.71
	21–30	70	7.82
	31–40	47	5.25
	≥ 41	46	5.14

**Table 2.** Responses to a questionnaire on the challenges of manuscript preparation and submission in India

Serial no.	Questionnaire items	Number <sup>a)</sup>	%
1	Do you know that each journal has specific guidelines for manuscript preparation/submission?		
	Yes	894	100
	No	0	0
2	Are you aware of ICMJE guidelines for manuscript preparation and submission?		
	Yes	446	49.9
	No	448	50.1
3	If yes, do you know that many journals do not follow ICMJE guidelines for manuscript submission?		
	Yes	212	23.7
	No	682	76.3
4	Did you experience rejection of any of your manuscripts?		
	Yes	848	94.9
	No	46	5.1
5	If yes, did you resubmit your rejected manuscript to any other journal?		
	Yes	829	92.7
	No	65	7.3
6	If yes, did you experience difficulty in revising your manuscript according to other journal guidelines?		
	Yes	792	88.6
	No	102	11.4
7	If yes, indicate the level of difficulty in revising according to other journal guidelines: 1-easy to 5-difficult (No. of respondents)		
	Abstract revision (634)	2.04 <sup>b)</sup>	
	Reference citation in text (633)	2.77 <sup>b)</sup>	
	Referencing style (633)	2.63 <sup>b)</sup>	
	Figures/tables formatting (633)	3.03 <sup>b)</sup>	
	Word limit (633)	2.92 <sup>b)</sup>	
8	Manuscripts are sometimes rejected because of formatting, styling and structure.		
	Strongly disagree	47	5.3
	Disagree	94	10.5
	Neutral	283	31.7
	Agree	399	44.6
	Strongly agree	71	7.9
9	There is a need for uniform guidelines for manuscript preparation/submission.		
	Strongly disagree	71	7.9
	Disagree	23	2.6
	Neutral	0	0
	Agree	377	42.2
	Strongly agree	423	47.3
10	Harmonizing manuscript preparation with the submission process will save authors time.		
	Strongly disagree	24	2.7
	Disagree	23	2.6
	Neutral	24	2.7
	Agree	355	39.7
	Strongly agree	468	52.3

(Continued to the next page)

**Table 2.** Continued

Serial no.	Questionnaire items	Number <sup>a)</sup>	%
11	Harmonizing the manuscript preparation/submission process will allow authors to focus on scientific content.		
	Strongly disagree	24	2.7
	Disagree	0	0
	Neutral	72	8.1
	Agree	471	52.7
	Strongly agree	327	36.6
12	Creating a harmonized template would be a milestone in streamlining the manuscript writing process.		
	Strongly disagree	24	2.7
	Disagree	23	2.6
	Neutral	72	8.1
	Agree	496	55.5
	Strongly agree	279	31.2
13	Initial submission of manuscripts with application of format and styling after acceptance is a good solution.		
	Strongly disagree	72	8.1
	Disagree	72	8.1
	Neutral	190	21.3
	Agree	373	41.7
	Strongly agree	187	20.9
14	An integrated journal portal for easy submission of manuscripts is needed (common portal for all journals).		
	Strongly disagree	24	2.7
	Disagree	23	2.6
	Neutral	71	7.9
	Agree	446	49.9
	Strongly agree	330	36.9

ICMJE, International Committee of Medical Journal Editors.

<sup>a)</sup>Totals vary (n=894) because of missing data for some questions. <sup>b)</sup>Average value.

**Table 3.** Comparison of opinions about the need for uniform guidelines for manuscript preparation and submission

Characteristics	Category	Response					P-value
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	
Gender	Men	8 (0.9)	0	25 (2.8)	142 (15.9)	111 (12.4)	0.665
	Women	16 (1.8)	0	47 (5.3)	329 (36.8)	216 (24.2)	
Research experience (yr)	≤5	12 (1.3)	0	36 (4.0)	237 (26.5)	164 (18.3)	1.000
	6–10	7 (0.8)	0	21 (2.3)	135 (15.1)	93 (10.4)	
	11–15	2 (0.2)	0	6 (0.7)	37 (4.1)	27 (3.0)	
	≥16	3 (0.3)	0	9 (1.0)	62 (6.9)	43 (4.8)	
Work sector	Public	3 (0.3)	0	6 (0.7)	39 (4.4)	31 (3.5)	0.856
	Private	21 (2.3)	0	66 (7.4)	432 (48.3)	296 (33.1)	
No. of publications	≤10	14 (1.6)	0	44 (4.9)	274 (30.6)	187 (20.9)	1.000
	11–20	5 (0.6)	0	16 (1.8)	112 (12.5)	79 (8.8)	
	21–30	2 (0.2)	0	6 (0.7)	37 (4.1)	25 (2.8)	
	31–40	1 (0.1)	0	4 (0.4)	24 (2.7)	18 (2.0)	
	≥41	2 (0.2)	0	2 (0.2)	24 (2.7)	18 (2.0)	

writing process to be streamlined. Harmonizing the structure, style, and format of manuscripts and applying them globally is necessary and worthwhile. This would allow authors to focus on technical/scientific content rather than struggle with style and format. For example, journals and publishing houses could agree on using superscripted numbers, numbers in brackets, or an author-year format for citations within a text. A consensus on using Harvard or Vancouver style for the reference list could be reached [3]. Publishers are aware of writers' frustrations with formatting and attempts to solve the problem have been made. Some journals have stated that the format of a document has no bearing on the acceptance of a manuscript if it contains all required elements. Some publishers have policies that do not require writers to use a particular manuscript format when submitting their work (e.g., Elsevier's Your Paper, Your Way and Taylor & Francis' Format-free submission) [6].

A significant proportion of survey participants (92.0%) stated that authors spend too much presubmission time on formatting manuscripts. In the broader context of researching, writing, and submitting a paper, this presubmission period may not seem significant to an individual researcher, but in general it was a cause for concern. In fact, the actual number of authors frustrated with the current system is likely to be much higher since most manuscripts are rejected by the first journal to which they are sent, and others might never be published despite being submitted to other journals [7]. Indeed, it would be fascinating to investigate how much time authors spend attempting to meet journal guidelines for manuscript preparation and submission. Moreover, many research papers lose their relevance and significance by the time they are published in journals.

The authors' opinions stress the importance of harmonizing all inter-journal discrepancies and establishing standard guidelines for a broad scope of disciplines. ICMJE's uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals are designed primarily for authors who submit their work to ICMJE member journals. However, many non-ICMJE journals choose to follow these guidelines as well. The ICMJE advocates this practice but cannot oversee or enforce it [5]. Establishing a global task force or committee on manuscript preparation and submission requirements might be one way to address these issues [6]. A committee, including experienced journal editors, publishers, active researchers, and peer reviewers from various disciplines and geographic locations, could work to identify critical standards for uniform journal guidelines [8,9]. Admittedly, it is no easy task to harmonize publishing guidelines while duly considering unavoidable journal-specific needs. Perhaps the solution to these issues is to change the emphasis and discuss the technical spe-

cifics and discrepancies in the context of a larger picture. This could provide direction for future research on harmonizing manuscript preparation and submission guidelines.

**Comparison with previous studies:** A survey conducted by D'Souza et al. [10] found that most authors viewed manuscript preparation to be the most difficult aspect of the publication process, emphasizing the need to make the journal publication process more author-centered. Cerejo [11] reported that East Asian authors experienced similar difficulties in academic publishing. A significant proportion of authors found journal submission guidelines unclear and felt that journals need to consider the needs and challenges of authors.

**Limitations:** Subjects of the study included dental professionals from 16 dental schools in India. Therefore, it is difficult to generalize the results to professionals in other fields and other countries.

**Conclusion:** The majority of participants in this study had experienced difficulty in revising a manuscript after rejection due to differing submission guidelines among journals and agreed that a harmonized template could help minimize authors' pre-submission or preparation time. The findings highlight the need for harmonizing manuscript preparation and submission guidelines to help facilitate a more reasonable experience in publishing for authors.

## Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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The authors received no financial support for this article.

## Data Availability

Dataset file is available from the Harvard Dataverse at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/XMCSA6>

**Dataset 1.** Raw response of 894 dental professionals from 16 dental schools to a questionnaire on harmonizing manuscript preparation and submission guidelines

## Supplementary Material

Supplementary file is available from the Harvard Dataverse at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/XMCSA6>

**Suppl. 1.** List of 16 dental schools with their cities and number of professionals in Andhra Pradesh state, India

**Suppl. 2.** Survey questionnaire on harmonizing manuscript preparation and submission guidelines

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