

# Writing a Case Report in English

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## SUMMARY

A well-written case report is a clear, concise and informative paper, aimed at professionals from different fields of medicine, with the clear purpose to explain what lesson is to be learnt from the experience. The aim of this paper is to suggest useful guidelines for writing a good case report. It briefly reflects different "moves" in this piece of academic writing, thus outlining the required form, as well as the four principles of good writing: clarity, honesty, reality and relevance.

**Keywords:** case report; clarity; honesty; reality; relevance

## INTRODUCTION

As a piece of academic writing, a case report belongs to the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), more precisely for medical purposes. It is a very specific type of text, required to be clear, concise, informative, and aimed at professionals from different fields of medicine.

## "MOVES" IN WRITING ACADEMIC TEXTS

Genre analysis is very useful in analyzing texts in ESP because it focuses on the distinguishing features of different texts. It began with Swales' model of "moves" and "steps" where each "move" describes a writer's purpose and the content of what he/she wants to present. As suggested by Dudley-Evans and St John [1], this type of text analysis could be very useful in organizing a piece of writing and providing an insight into relevant language forms.

This model, which describes specific sequences of "moves", is flexible and can be modified depending on the type of text, subject area and journal requirements. Most academic texts begin with an introduction and end with a discussion and a conclusion, which is sometimes a separate section. However, in a case report, due to a very limited number of words (usually between 1,000 and 1,500) and a clear single aim to provide learning points for the reader, introduction is appropriately short and conclusion is usually unnecessary. Case description is the core part of this piece of writing and should typically include the following "moves":

- case presentation – presenting features, medical, social or family history (e.g. *A 76-year-old female, with a blameless medical history other than well-controlled depression, was referred for urgent investigation due to weight loss and diarrhea.* [2]);
- examination findings (e.g. *A flexible sigmoidoscopy demonstrated severe diverticu-*

*losis and a subsequent CT of the abdomen showed a linear foreign body in the stomach but no other abnormalities. On subsequent questioning, she recalled unintentionally swallowing a pen 25 years earlier.* [2]);

- investigation results (if relevant) (e.g. *A gastroscopy demonstrated a plastic felt-tip pen sitting in the lumen of the stomach without evidence of any gastric damage.* [2]);
- differential diagnosis (if relevant);
- treatment (if relevant) (e.g. *The case was discussed at the gastrointestinal multidisciplinary meeting and the consensus of opinion was that despite being there for 25 years without causing any problems, the pen should be removed as there has been at least one case report of a duodenal perforation caused by an ingested ballpoint pen.* [2]);
- outcome and the patient's progress (e.g. *It was subsequently removed in a combined endoscopic and ear, nose and throat procedure under general anesthetic. The pen was still in working order.* [2]).

Discussion usually concludes a case report and should clearly state its purpose, including the necessary learning points (usually at least three) for the readers (e.g. *This case highlights that plain abdominal x-rays may not identify ingested plastic objects and occasionally it may be worth believing the patient's account however unlikely it may be.* [2]).

## FOUR PRINCIPLES OF GOOD WRITING

All academic texts should be clear, formal, relevant to the topic, and backed by evidence. With regard to this, we reflect on the four principles of good writing.

The Clarity Principle is the first principle of good writing. It states that "a writer should make everything clear to the reader he or she has in mind" [3].

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Even though a lot of scientific papers are written in a fairly complex and pompous style, this is not always the best way to clearly convey wanted information. A scientific paper can still be formal without being unclear and complex. Formality can be achieved through the appropriate choice of grammatical features and vocabulary, rather than ambiguous sentences. For example, writers of academic texts should avoid short verb forms (*didn't*) and use full forms instead (*did not*); they should use more formal linking words (*however* instead of *but* or *only*), passive voice instead of active; they should keep the point of view objective and impersonal (*the aim of this paper is to...* instead of *in our paper we wanted to...*).

A very common problem that Serbian authors have is writing extremely long sentences which are often ambiguous in English. The golden rule is that a sentence should express a single thought [4]. Serbian authors should particularly be aware that concise and direct sentences in English are better understood than long ones containing many different ideas [5]. Long sentences can usually very successfully be split into two without changing the content and meaning. On the other hand, it is also not good to write the whole paper in short (e.g. eight-word) sentences. There should be a balance between short and long sentences bearing in mind that sentences of up to 20 words are usually easiest to read [4]. Apart from splitting a long sentence into two shorter ones, a sentence can be shortened by changing finite verb forms into non-finite ones. When shortening sentences one should be careful not to change time reference, context and form of that sentence, which should correlate to other parts of the text [6]. We should be careful not to change the forms of all the verbs without leaving a single finite verb form with a clear time reference which correlates to the rest of the text [6]. Thus, for example, the following sentence can be shortened by omitting the relative pronoun and changing the verb forms in bold:

*The patient, who was admitted yesterday and who was complaining of abdominal pain, was diagnosed with appendicitis.* (long version)

*The patient admitted yesterday, complaining of abdominal pain, was diagnosed with appendicitis.* (short version)

Linking words are a very good way to clarify a text and connect ideas. They can be used for sequencing (firstly/first, secondly/second, finally), adding points or building up the argument (in addition, moreover, furthermore), contrasting and introducing contradicting arguments (however, on the contrary, on the other hand, in spite of/despite), showing results and consequences (therefore, thus, as a result, consequently), summing up (in conclusion, to summarize, in other words).

Another way to make sentences clearer and shorter (if necessary) is avoiding unnecessary words and redundancy. For example, why use *during the time that* when we can simply say *while*, or *come to the realization of* instead of

*just realize*, or *an example of this is the fact that* instead of *for example* [4]?

Clear language is especially important in presenting the text in a case report. The reader should easily understand what happened to the patient, what decisions were made and why, and most importantly, what is to be learnt from the experience.

The Honesty Principle is the second principle of good writing. It says "only say (or write) that for which you have evidence" [3]. Presenting information backed by evidence and avoiding overgeneralizations is particularly significant in a case report, since the main aim of this piece of writing is to provide learning points which the readers can later find useful in practice. Even when forced to generalize, authors can modify generalizations according to the Honesty Principle. In other words, they can use appropriate language for "hedging" generalizations (e.g. adverbs like *probably*, *likely*, *possibly*, *etc*; modals like *should*, *would*, *may*, *might*, *etc*; verbs such as *seem*, *appear*, *believe*, *assume*, *etc.*) [3].

Another important principle is the Reality Principle which says: "assume that your reader has knowledge of the world and does not have to be told everything" [3]. As already mentioned, journals which publish case reports usually limit the number of words to 1000-1500. Thus, case reports may start with a case description, without any introduction or opening section. Keeping in mind that the readers are most probably professionals from a similar field of interest, authors can safely assume that they already have enough knowledge in that area. Therefore, any background information (e.g. general explanation of the described condition), or information about previous studies on the subject would be unnecessary.

The Relevance Principle is the last principle of good writing. It "reminds us to keep to our topic and our purpose in writing" [3], and as such is of great importance for the discussion section. Most academic papers in the discussion part include reference to other published work or a review of the available literature on a specific subject. This is not typical of a case report unless, of course, the reference is necessary to make a clear point. Instead, the discussion section of a case report points out the purpose of the paper, and clearly states learning points for the reader (i.e. take home messages, for example, unwanted and unexpected effects of a drug).

## CONCLUSION

A case report is a piece of academic writing typically aimed at specific groups of medical professionals, with the main aim to explain what lesson is to be learnt from the experience. Thus, when writing a case report in English (or translating one into English) authors should bear in mind that it is advisable to use short sentences and grammatical structures which will make the text clear, concise, readable and to the point.

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## Писање приказа болесника на енглеском језику

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### КРАТАК САДРЖАЈ

Добро написан приказ болесника је јасан, концизан и информативан рад намењен стручњацима из различитих области медицине с јасним циљем да објасни шта треба научити на основу датог искуства. Циљ овог рада је да прикаже корисне смернице за писање доброг приказа бо-

лесника. У раду је дат кратак осврт на различите „кораке“ у вези с формом ове врсте академског писања. Рад такође описује четири принципа доброг писања, а то су: јасноћа, истинитост, реалност и релевантност.

**Кључне речи:** приказ случаја; јасноћа; истинитост; реалност; релевантност

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