

## Using critical friends to build writing success

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**What problem was addressed?** The academic land-scape at institutions places demands on academic staff to increase publication output. In resource-poor higher education environments, experienced and published researchers are in short supply and consequently unavailable, or unwilling, to provide much-needed support and guidance to novice writers. Critical readers are able to bridge this gap by providing useful feedback and stimulating learning while pointing out weaknesses without negativity.<sup>1</sup>

**What was tried?** This single case study utilised a qualitative approach to investigate whether the use of critical readers can provide adequate scholarly input and prepare a novice writer to be confident with the first submission to a peer-reviewed journal. The novice writer drafted her first scholarly article and circulated it to three independent critical readers. The critical readers and novice writer represented four South African universities and were diverse with regard to content knowledge and writing experience. The critical readers' expertise included a dean of a faculty, a senior lecturer and a faculty development specialist.

Each critical reader gave individual written comments and verbal feedback to the novice writer. Following the feedback sessions, the novice writer recorded structured personal reflections on the process and the feedback provided. Audio-recordings were transcribed, and together with the three sets of written comments were thematically analysed using a deductive approach. Consensus on emergent themes from the transcripts was reached by all participants.

**What lessons were learned?** Feedback from the diverse group of critical readers resulted in a rigorous and in-depth review. The multiple feedback resulted in convergence of meaning for the novice writer irrespective of the divergence of the readers' input. The most experienced reader embodied a mentorship role and gave high-level guidance, and the two lesser-experienced readers were instructional in tone and provided detailed editorial feedback. The feedback focused on promoting precision and clarity of the message, enhancing the scientific style of writing and meeting academic conventions.

The structured reflections of the novice writer highlighted the anxiety at the magnitude of the changes needed, but identified the feedback as essential to the development of a plan of action.

Despite the lack of in-depth content knowledge, the critical readers could identify and address the weaknesses in the academic elements. The characteristics of critical readers and the

collaborative, non-competitive nature of the relationship are relevant to engagement with the scholarly activity of critical reading. The writer benefitted from the different approaches as well as the multiple feedback opportunities, which resulted in substantive and detailed feedback that was arguably more than that a single experienced published researcher would have provided.

Novice writers can develop their writing skills by involving small groups of academics to act as critical readers and need not be dependent on the willingness of experienced and published researchers.

## **REFERENCE**

<sup>1</sup> Dahlgren LO, Eriksson BE, Gyllenhammar H, Korkeila M, Sa'af-Rothoff A, Wernerson A, Seeberger A. To be and to have a critical friend in medical teaching. *Med Educ.* 2006;40 (1):72–8.