Editorial:
What do you want to be remembered for?

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Many years ago, in a galaxy far, far away, I was editing a journal that wanted to increase its relevance to practitioners. Borrowing a good idea from a life sciences journal (with appropriate attribution) we introduced 'Practitioner notes' - a text box on the first page of every article that set out three bullet point lists:

a. What is already known about this subject?
b. What does this research add?
c. What should the reader do differently as a result of these findings?

Under each heading there should be three (but not more than four) bullet points. There is no need for references or detailed descriptions of the methodology, just short statements in simple language.

We quickly discovered that, as well as being welcomed by the readers, the reviewers found them very useful as an introduction to what they were about to read. These three questions set the agenda for the submission and they could then assess how well the questions had been answered.

We might argue that the questions provide an alternative structure for the abstract. Structured abstracts have been around for a long time in the life sciences and help the reader to make a quick assessment as to whether the published paper is likely to be helpful in their research. But there is a key difference: while we are taught that abstracts should be the last piece of the paper that we write, the structured practitioner notes can be written at the very beginning as a memory aid for the author: this is what my paper is going to do, by telling the reader where I started my research, what I added and what I want you, dear reader, to take away from it.

A set of structured practitioner notes help your submission to stand out so that it is noticed by the editor and the reviewers, demonstrating that the author has given full consideration to the three things that a reader wants to know.

The process of writing a paper is inexorably bound up with the research itself; one flows into the other and the writing process may indicate other issues that can only be dealt with my further research.

An extreme illustration of this comes from the research of Charles Darwin who, following his initial field research on the voyage of HMS Beagle, Darwin spent two decades of meticulous research, writing his book on the Origin of the Species (Darwin, 1859). As he wrote, he tried to anticipate all of the objections that others would have to this revolutionary theory and carried out further research to counter them, with evidence from a wide range of sources and ingeniously simple experiments on a wide range of plants and animals to test and illustrate his theory. There is of course a risk in spending too much time on perfecting the research. Mr Darwin spent 22 years (1836-1858) writing his book and would have continued refining his search if it had not been for a letter that warned him that another scientist, Alfred Wallace, was working on an almost

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identical theory – and was close to publishing his findings. The contest between the two was resolved at a meeting of the Linnean Society of London where the papers from both researchers were read on the same evening (Darwin C. and Wallace, A., 1858).

The structured practitioner notes provide a means of focusing your research so that you do not lose your way. My advice to those starting their research career is to set out those three lists of bullet points on one side of a piece of paper and fix it to the wall above your desk so that it is constantly in your sight.

Inevitably the lists will evolve: you will discover other key facts that are already known about your topic and your research question may change. However, it is crucial that you keep in mind what it is that you want people to do differently as a result of your research – and from reading your paper. If your research is not going to make a difference then why do it? That sheet of paper will keep reminding you what it is that **you** want to be remembered for.

Nick Rushby
Editor-in-Chief, *Education & Self Development*

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