

EDITORIAL

WRITING IS AN IMPORTANT BUT NEGLECTED COMMUNICATION SKILL FOR MEDICAL GRADUATES

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Medical students are required to communicate knowledge, understanding, interpretation, inferences, arguments, deductions and predictions by the appropriate use of clear and concise written English. The doctor who knows English is better aware of current trends in medicine, can get or continue medical education abroad, can participate in medical conferences abroad, and can work in a team with foreign specialists. English allows the doctor to have an appointment with foreign patients in clinics. Academic writing is extensively acknowledged as a key skill for students to boost their educational performance at higher education level. Assessment through essay write-up answers should be encouraged as guessing by students is eliminated in essay examination. There is no option to select from the given possible choices and they have to provide the answer rather than selecting/ticking the good response.

Keywords: Communication skill, Writing Skill, Essay questions, Medical Writing

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Biomedical Admissions Test (BMAT) of Cambridge Assessment Admissions Testing (For assessments from August 2020 to July 2021) requires medical students to communicate knowledge, understanding, interpretation, inferences, arguments, deductions and predictions by the appropriate use of clear and concise written English.¹ Medical Schools Council (UK) describes in its 'Statement on the core values and attributes needed to study medicine' the core competence of students to have effective communication skills in all four areas of communication, i.e., reading, writing, listening and speaking.² English Fluency is vital for communication in the healthcare field. When compared with other fundamental skills such as listening, speaking and reading, writing is the most difficult skill. The English language may become very important when it comes to communicating with co-workers, bosses, and patients in a hospital or other medical setting.³ The doctor who knows English is better aware of current trends in medicine, can get or continue medical education abroad, can participate in medical conferences abroad, and can work in a team with foreign specialists. English allows the doctor to have an appointment with foreign patients in private clinics.⁴ In Pakistan, India and Singapore, English is used as a functional first language in the medical profession. English language is expanding as an instrument of international communication and education in medicine. Domestic and internationally distributed journals of medicine are published in English. The ability to write accurately in English will be a growing need but recognition of these linguistic needs must be developed in the early stages of medical education.⁵

The process of writing requires writers to have a clear understanding of the subject matter and make use of cognitive abilities. Specifically, writing helps students develop higher-order thinking skills that involve three

cognitive processes-analysis, evaluation, and creation. These higher-order thinking skills are needed for medical students to grow as successful medical professionals.⁶ In Pakistan the writing skills of the students are alarmingly weak and substandard. (Figure-1) Writing is a cognitive process that tests memory, thinking ability and verbal command to successfully express the ideas, because proficient composition of a text indicates successful learning.⁷

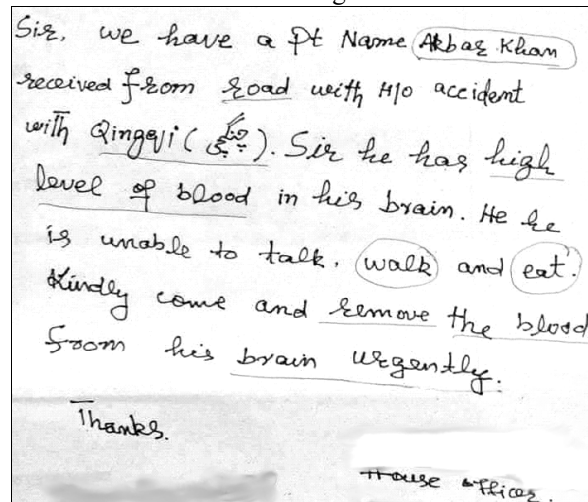


Figure-1: A sample of writing by a House Officer

Throughout his training and medical practice, a doctor has to write down i) a good and elaborate history of patient's illness, ii) investigation orders, iii) call letters to other departments/doctors, iv) referral letters and v) prescription instructions. For acquiring post-graduation, doctors write thesis or dissertation. For promotion, they have to write many research papers. Almost all postgraduate students are anticipated to have developed English language proficiency, especially, in academic writing to show mastery over the application of linguistic and communicative capability with sound

grammatical knowledge and academic vocabulary in order to produce quality texts likely to be published in an impact factor research journal.⁷ For all these endeavors, good writing skill is needed and we all know that good writing skill needs practice.

Academic writing is extensively acknowledged as a key skill for students to boost their educational performance at higher education level.⁶ During undergraduate studies, students are taught these skills through assignments and attempting SEQs or SAQs during examinations. Examination is the most powerful motivation for students to learn writing skills. Some medical universities in Pakistan are offering MCQs-only examinations to their medical graduates. This type of examination requires that students just tick the right answer and they will not be asked to write down anything. This will be disastrous for medical profession and will drastically undermine writing skills of our doctors. Our doctors will become non-competent for international medical world and this will adversely affect the flow of foreign remittances to Pakistan.

The examination system does not encourage learners' creative writing; it does not encourage our students to be analytical or critical.⁸ Most of our medical universities offer examinations which contain MCQs and SEQs or SAQs. Generally, MCQs assess superficial knowledge of the students. Therefore, assessment through essay write-up answers should be encouraged. Guessing by students is eliminated as in essay examination, there is no option to select from the given possible choices and they have to provide the answer rather than selecting the good response. It is expected that the primary role of long essay write-up would create synthesis skills in students. Therefore, medical educationists should at least revise the pattern of assessment proportion or develop alternate tool to develop the writing skills in students.⁹

Physiology paper of University of Health Sciences (UHS), Lahore has 45 MCQs and 9 SEQs. To prevent the irreparable loss to our doctors' writing abilities, we should add a long essay type question, in place of two MCQs, from Cardiovascular System or Respiratory System in First Professional paper and form Nervous System or the Kidneys in Second Professional paper to inculcate the habit of good writing in medical students.

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