This is a step by step guide to turning your research into a published paper. This is based on my experience on both sides of the fence - as the former editor of the medical education section at the BMJ and a current editorial board member of Education for Primary Care; and as an aspiring medical education researcher with mixed fortunes in the publishing game.

What is your main message and who is your audience?

Before you start, it is essential to be clear about what your paper or article is saying, and to whom. You should be able to explain this to someone in 2-3 sentences. If you can’t do that, then you are likely to struggle with the next steps. So spend some time working out what is the key message, and who is your main audience. Yes, your paper on medical students career choices could be of interest to all sorts of people – medical students, patients, medical teachers, GP trainers and so on. But who is the main audience? The more you can focus your answer to that question, the more likely you will succeed in finding the right home for your paper. And of course there will be lots of points made in your paper – but what is the overarching message, the thrust of your article?

So what? (How will your article help someone who reads it?)

Think carefully about how your article or paper is going to be helpful for your audience. Just writing a report of what you did is unlikely to set the world alight. But if you can state clearly to an editor (and a reader) how it will benefit them, then people are much more likely to read it, and therefore publish it. So editors and journalists are very keen on the “So What?” question. You should think about that too.
Choose your journal (s)

Now you are clear on who your main audience is, choosing a journal is much easier. What you really want is for your paper or article to have as wide an impact as possible among your chosen audience. So better to choose a journal that is read by that audience than a journal with a higher impact factor (a measure of how often articles are cited by others) but which is very rarely read by your audience. If your paper is extremely relevant for primary care in North West London, then you probably want to submit it to The London Journal of Primary Care rather than Medical Education which has an international audience. If it’s about primary care education, and not of great value to educators outside the primary care field, then go for Education for Primary Care for example. If you think there is a wider appeal, and it’s strong enough to have a chance in one of the higher impact medical education journals (ie Medical Education or Medical Teacher) then by all means have a go.

Here are some of the main medical education journals; or journals which have education sections.

**Medical Education Journals**

- Academic Medicine (The journal of AAMC)
- Advances in Health Sciences Education
- British Medical Journal
- BMC Medical Education [open access]
- Education for Health (the journal of The Network: TUFH)
- Education for Primary Care
- Foundation Years Journal (the journal of 123Doc Education)
- Focus on Health Professional Education (the journal of ANZAME)
- International Journal of Medical Education
- Journal of Graduate Medical Education
- Journal of Interprofessional Care
- Journal of Postgraduate Medicine
- JRSM Open [open access]
- Medical Education (the journal of ASME)
- Medical Education Online
- Medical Teacher (the journal of AMEE)
- Perspectives on Medical Education (the journal of Netherlands Association for Medical Education)
- PLOS One [open access]
- Postgraduate Medical Journal (the journal of continuing professional development)
- Teaching and Learning in Medicine
These are real examples from our department to illustrate the point:

1 Chellappah M, Garnham, L. Medical students’ attitudes towards general practice and factors affecting career choice: a questionnaire study London Journal of Primary Care 2014;6:117-23

This was a paper about Imperial College medical students’ career choices. Very relevant for our patch of NW London – but rejected first by Education for Primary Care. Probably not wide enough appeal for EPC – too London-centric; and not robust enough (small numbers) or wide enough appeal.


This was a study of Imperial medical students – but the findings are probably generalisable or transferable to other settings. It’s relatively original too – not much if anything written about this so far. Ideal for EPC.

3. Williams B, Amiel C. General practice registrars as teachers: a questionnaire-based evaluation. JRSM Open March 2012 vol. 3 no. 3 14

A medium sized survey with an OK response rate; and national implications of interest to GP educators and registrars. But unfortunately Education for Primary Care had just published a very similar article, so they didn’t want it. Friendly rejection, resubmit to JRSM Open (author pays model, fee paid by Imperial) ; now pubmed listed and searchable for everyone. Has been cited by two other papers already:

Clinical teaching: widening the definition

H Thampy, S Agius, L Allery - The clinical teacher, 2014 - Wiley Online Library
Background In all medical specialities, trainees are increasingly encouraged to develop teaching skills alongside their clinical professional development. However, there have been few empirical UK-based studies that have examined trainees' attitudes and understanding...

The motivation to teach as a registrar in general practice

H Thampy, S Agius, LA Allery - Education for Primary Care, 2013 - ingentaconnect.com

The General Medical Council (GMC) states that teaching should be an integral part of the doctor's role and the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) have incorporated teaching outcomes into the GP training curriculum. However, there are suggestions that...


Original, robust appraisal of a new simulation method in assessment. Hot topic at the time, and Kneebone is a big name in that field. This paper looked at 360 medical students in a real OSCE exam, compared the marks in ventriloScope station to those in other stations; and questionnaire about attitudes of students, examiners, and patients.

Final point – you could decide to aim at the top of the list – if you have the time and commitment to re-submit to your next choice if you aren’t lucky. Or you could just aim straight at your best target. It’s up to you. The golden rule though, is never submit to more than one journal at a time.

Read the journal (s)

The best way of reducing your chances of acceptance is by not knowing the journal you are submitting to. So if you aren’t a regular subscriber, read a few recent editions carefully. See what style they use, and what sort of topics have been covered. Check specifically if they have covered your topic in the last three years or so. If they have, and it’s sufficiently different – that could be good – it proves that they are interested in the subject. You could mention that in your letter to the editor (editors often can’t remember what they published last year). If it’s virtually the same study, then probably not so good.
Read guidance for authors on website

Just as you would before an exam – read the rules of engagement. Luckily every journal will have clear guidance for authors on their website or in the back of the journal. These are often very detailed about what sections they have, what sorts of articles they don’t accept, and the structures and word counts they require. This makes your life very easy - if you don’t read this stuff and follow it, then you are wasting your time.

Write a structure or plan – using the guidance from journal; or our template for writing an education research article

Before you write everything out long-hand, I would recommend putting a plan or rough structure down first. Bullet points to structure your line of argument, perhaps a note about references you might use at each point. Use the template I have prepared if you want – or use the journal’s structure if they are specific of course.

Discuss this plan with someone whose opinion you trust

Now is the time to send it to someone you trust to have a look at. They can act as a friendly editor. Relish their feedback – it nearly always improves what you have written. Get rid of unnecessary bits, sacrifice the detours from your line of argument, make sure the word count is right, and the number of references too. It’s great to get someone else not too close to your work to tell you which bits they don’t fully understand – don’t get upset at this, see it as useful feedback (the editor is unlikely to understand it either).
Think about references; which ones and what format. Use a reference software package such as Refworks or End Note,

Do make sure your references are in the correct format, and you have the right number. It annoys editors if you send in too many, or they have to spend ages checking links or re-arranging your formats. Reference software makes this job infinitely easier – you can format and re-format at the press of a button.

Write a cover letter; check you have all ingredients ready to submit

Make sure you have everything they ask for, including acknowledgements, contributorship details, questionnaires or protocols. Mention ethical approval. The cover letter doesn’t need to be long, but it should cover a pithy description of your paper, why you think it would interest the readers of that particular journal, and whether it adds to an existing interest the journal has.

Outline that you have ethical approval, that you haven’t submitted anywhere else simultaneously, and that you act as guarantor for the paper. Many journals will have detailed advice on this bit.

Don’t underestimate the abstract!

Many journals will make initial triage judgements on the basis of the abstract alone. So make sure this complies with their guidance, that it includes the key points and no more, and that it is engagingly written with a clear message. Do not rush this at the last minute or give it to the most junior member of the team – it’s too important.

Submit

One paper to one journal at a time.

Prepare for rejection.
There are generally three options when you send a paper to a journal. If it’s interesting enough the editor will send to a reviewer or two.

- Reject without external review
- Reject after review
- Accept with revisions based on reviewers’ comments

I have never heard of anyone having their paper accepted without any revisions requested. Reviews can be very instructive and helpful and these days, because they are not anonymous usually, they are generally more constructive and professional than in the past. If you are rejected the editor will usually give reasons, and usually it won’t come as a major surprise to you. If you are rejected after review, you can use the reviews to think about how to improve and submit elsewhere – perhaps thinking more realistically about who your audience really is.

**NB:** Rejection is part of the academic publishing process – get used to it, relish it even. Even the most successful professors and Nobel prize winners will have had plenty of papers rejected. They probably sent them to the wrong journal at the wrong time.

**If accepted with revisions - address revisions, and provide a letter to show that you have addressed each point in the reviewers’ report.**

Address the reviewers’ comments carefully and make a note of each point you have addressed so the editor doesn’t have to go scouring through the paper to check which bits you’ve changed. If you have satisfactorily addressed each point (and some you may not agree with – if you are very confident, you can argue your case for ignoring reviewer’s suggestions), then you have a strong chance of publication.

**Repeat until accepted...**