

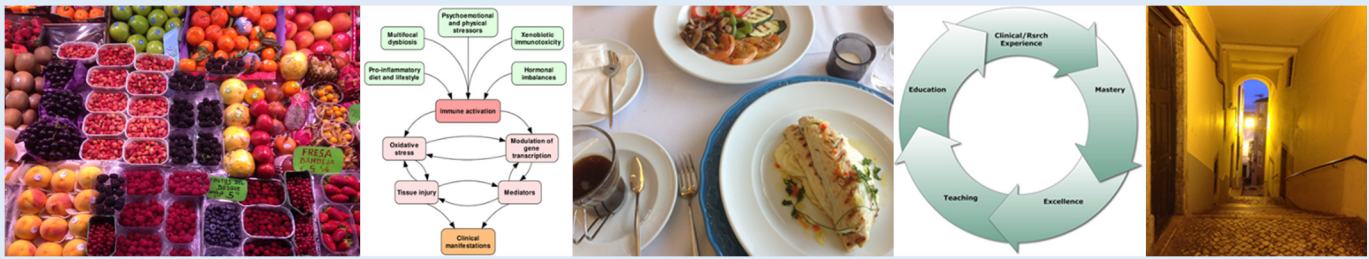
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Expert Perspectives • Clinical Nutrition • Research Methodology • Publication Analysis

How to Improve Scientific Writing and Journal Editing: A Short Narrative-Video Guide, Part I

Alex Vasquez DO ND DC FACN

Introduction

“Hello everyone, Dr. Alex Vasquez here, and today I’m going to start a different series of videos, and this time the conversation is going to focus around journal editing and writing. I’m calling this “*Editing and Writing Tips #1*”, and I’m going to start with a few of my own perspectives and experiences, then I’ll talk about a few basics, and a few influential ideas. In later videos, I will talk about some more specific examples, and then perhaps at some point we will have a review and conclusion.

Early Experiences and Influences

Very briefly I’ll talk about some of my own experiences, and the reason for my doing this is to share with you and segue into some examples that I think are very important. Basic though they might be, a lot of our success in various fields of life actually comes from respecting and appreciating and utilizing those basic concepts.

Let us start here with some of my initial experiences. I started becoming aware of language and the fact that I had some facility for it, first, when I was about 12 years old. I remember writing a poem in class, and again this is somewhat peripheral to the main topic of today, but I do remember that experience, and that was kind of my entryway, I think, into writing. I remember that our assignment was to write a poem, and I just remember writing this poem in class and it just kept going on and on, and—compared with some of my classmates—I just realized that writing for me was actually pretty easy.

Then again, when I was 18 years old and in military school, I remember in our English class we were

being asked questions, and I remember just how the answers to understanding grammar and language just came very easy to me, and I do remember feeling like I had some facility for the structure of language.

Another influential experience I had when I was about 11 years old, totally unrelated to language, is that we took, in the late 1970s or early ‘80s, a Computer Science class in our elementary school, and I remember that class also specifically having some influence on me, in terms of structuring logic. We basically had to write our own computer programs and this was back when computers were very new. Obviously today everybody has computers; back in the late ‘70s, computers were a novelty. I

“Writing comes from the entirety of one’s experience.”
Dr Alex Vasquez

I consider myself lucky to have taken this Computer Science class; it was obviously extremely basic, but we did have to write some code and what I remember from that is just the sequential manner in which communication has to take place in order to be successful. In this case, we were writing programs for computers and doing basic graphics and moving illustrations and things like that. Again, it did have some influence on me.

Also very important in my upbringing was that my father gave me a some of audio cassettes when I was in my teens, and I’ll share with you two very specific examples here.

1. **Earl Nightingale, *Lead the Field***: One was from Earl Nightingale, and you can find audio recordings of

Earl Nightingale quite freely and widely on the internet, and I'll provide a few excerpts from those audios later in this video and in some upcoming videos. One of the things that really helped me develop my writing ability and perhaps even public speaking ability was what Earl Nightingale called the "castle technique." The example that he gave was using the image in your own mind of what you want to communicate. In your own mind, when you are communicating with someone, you have—or in my case, *I have*—certain ideas or perhaps even a certain image or paradigm or model that I am trying to share with someone, or that you are trying to share with someone. The image that Earl Nightingale shared was that in your mind you have this huge idea, somewhat analogous to a castle. And your goal is to transfer that castle from your mind into the mind of your reader or listener. The analogy that he used was, transferring that castle, brick by brick, in a sequential and logical manner, so that eventually you have transferred your castle, piece by piece, into the mind of the other person. I found that to be a very useful analogy. I have used that technique mentally when I am constructing arguments or presenting at conferences and of course in writing books and articles. So before leaving that point, I'll just read it word for word: Earl Nightingale discussed using the castle technique of communicating whereby the communicator imagines transferring a castle, which is the overall idea, to the other person brick-by-brick, that is idea-by-idea, building each upon the other in a logical sequence. Again, I'll add some audio excerpts within these videos.



"Earl Nightingale discussed using the castle technique of communicating whereby the communicator imagines transferring a castle, which is the overall idea, to the other person brick-by-brick, that is idea-by-idea, building each upon the other in a logical sequence."

Dr Alex Vasquez

Video: <https://www.ichnfm.org/journal2019a>

2. Denis Waitley, *The Psychology of Winning*:

Another audio cassette that I kind of "apprenticed myself to" very early was a series of audio cassettes, and also a book, from Denis Waitley PhD, who taught that "Winners take full responsibility for the success in the communication process. ... Winners take full responsibility for being certain that you understand what they are saying."¹ I will here use a recent example from my journal editing experience: I just read and reviewed an article for publication wherein the authors assumed that the reader had supremely detailed knowledge about a certain subject that most educated readers would not have, and people who are unfamiliar with the topic would have no chance at all of understanding this article. So obviously that is an article that needs to be at least partially rewritten or at least fine-tuned, but what I could see very clearly in this particular article is that the authors were assuming a certain level of knowledge that was really inappropriate for even for an educated audience, let alone an audience that may not have known the specifics of what they were discussing. So again, any time I am writing, or any time you are writing, we collectively need to take full responsibility for that communication process. For example, when introducing new terms in an article or a presentation, we have to define those terms. Now if I am presenting to an audience of doctors, I can assume they know certain things of course, so I don't have to start from Biology 101. But even in that setting, a quick review of some basics often helps to set the stage and refamiliarize people with the language and the vocabulary that we are going to be using as I develop the more advanced concepts. So again, responsibility is with the author to ensure that they have structured the conversation, the book, the article, the presentation in such a way that they attendee or the reader or the listener has a chance of following along without too much effort. Again going back to that article that I recently reviewed: even I as the editor, found myself struggling to understand what these authors were saying. I could only imagine that someone perhaps distracted or marginally disinterested would give up on such an article, even though it was only a few pages. **If the effort required to read something on a voluntary basis is too much, especially these days when people have a million distractions, people will not persevere through that process. And ultimately that means a failure of the communication process.** Because a **writer—and the reader—only succeeds, at best, if the person reading the article actually finishes reading the article** and actually has a chance to consider the argument being proposed. But in this particular case,

the language was so cumbersome and the terminology was so undefined that I think most readers would simply bail out of that experience.

"The successes of the writer (attempting to teach) and the reader (attempting to learn) both depend on the reader's reading of the article. A poorly written article denies that opportunity to both persons."

Dr Alex Vasquez

Some other early experiences I had are that I started writing articles in my early 20s and also reviewing for the *Journal of Naturopathic Medicine*. And what I'll state later is that writing certainly helps the editing process. So, if I'm a writer and then I'm tasked with editing an article, the fact that I have writing experience obviously helps me edit that article, but the reverse is also true. Editing is a critical process of reviewing someone else's work, pretty much word for word, and looking at it from the author's perspective, from one's own perspective, and also trying to kind of intuit the experience of the reader so that as a good editor one has to imagine what would this reading experience be like for someone who doesn't have a specialty degree in this topic, or for someone who works in whatever field that is, whether they are a nutritionist or a dietician or a nurse practitioner, or a physician, or a politician. **"Good editing" requires that perspectivism and gaining that perspectivism** as a reviewer or editor will also help the writing process as well because a characteristic of **being ultimately what is considered "a good writer" is writing in such a way that your message, or the message, is accepted and accessible by a larger audience.**

Here is another citation. Early in my 20s I read a book called *Zen in the Art of Writing* by Ray Bradbury. One of the things he said that I remembered from that book is, "Read poetry every day of your life." I am sure most of us would like to have time to do so; I certainly do not. I do not read poetry *every day*, but I do read some poetry and I certainly do read a lot of what we might just call "literature." And I'll give you two citations to that as well, especially with regard to the work of Ayn Rand and Friedrich Nietzsche. So, as I've already alluded, I've certainly reviewed and edited for many journals and professional magazines by now. I've also published approximately 100 articles and letters and also books ranging from small letters and introductions and overviews to my largest book, which in *Inflammation Mastery*, which is 1200 pages and I've estimated it to be about 1.5 million words, plus diagrams.

Nonliterary experiences, which I feel are important to my own writing ability and my perspective, include some of the following. I do think, and Nietzsche says this as well, and I'm sure other authors have said this as well, **writing comes from one's entire experience.** So you know anything that you've lived through or in my case anything that I've lived through is going to find its

way out in the things that we talk about and the things that we think are important. For example like I read a lot of psychology and philosophy. I'm sure that anybody who's followed my work knows that intuitively whether I say it outright or not. Philosophy and psychology are kind of woven into my work, even if I'm talking about nutrition and biochemistry and physiology and pathophysiology.

I think the fact that I grew up in the '80s and listened to punk rock when I was a teenager, I think that influences my writing even now as a mature, older adult. In fact some of the music that I listened actually segued into the books that I read and specifically when I was about 18 or 19 years old I read a book—*One from None*—by a punk rock artist or singer named Henry Rollins.² That book actually totally changed my life and that was probably my formal introduction into writing by reading his work which modeled some ideas for me. Also, growing up as I did in the '70s and the '80s in Texas, I think that that influenced me. Skateboarding, I also participated in martial arts—kung fu, jiu jitsu, and Tae Kwon Do—when I was younger. Also, I went to military school. And in military school we took a series of classes called Leadership Development and, of course as you would expect, part of Leadership Development is clear communication.

By now I've published, again, somewhere around 100 articles in various publications, and I have listed some of those here (in the video presentation) as well. I've written books; I've written articles. Those feed one into the other because I use my articles to justify what I'm saying in the book and to peer-review that information. When I write books, that is my way of consolidating a lot of information which then I use for rapid publications when the time arrives for me to publish an article.

"Sports and games teach us to respect forms, styles, rules, and structures for the purposes of participation and success. They teach us to "master the territory" within a given sphere."

Dr Alex Vasquez

List #1: How to Improve Scientific Writing

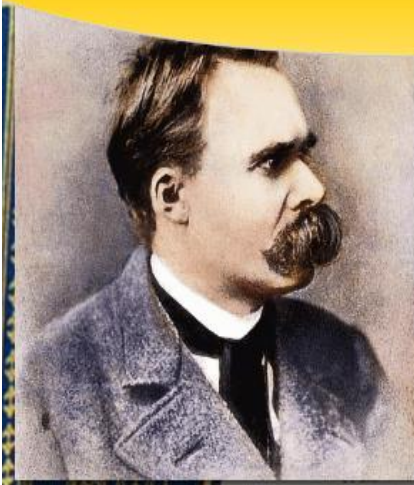
On the next page let's get into some specific writing and editing tips, and again I'm calling this basically "Presentation #1" or "List #1."

1. **Work to the develop the skill of writing, even if you have natural ability:** First of all, and perhaps obvious, is that writing is a skill. Some people have natural talent, just as with athletics, and fluidity with words and a natural instinct for logic. Other people don't have this and they either do or don't develop these abilities, but certainly all of us can improve our abilities and that improvement is a continual process. So one thing I will say is to not expect that you have writing talent if you've never worked to develop that talent. And certainly getting a PhD or MD degree

does not make one a talented writer. I'm going to emphasize this just a little more so please bear with me: you would never expect to be a good athlete, let's say a triathlete. You wouldn't necessarily expect to even complete a triathlon if you hadn't trained for it. And you would not enter into a mixed martial arts contest if you had not trained for it for years. What I do see in some of my reading and editing

is that—I'm guessing—some people have the assumption that having a PhD degree or an MD degree makes them a good writer; in my experience working with many different journals over at least about 20 years now, that is certainly not the case. So, more concretely I'll say a person who has read a book on grammar is going to have certain talents and abilities and fluidity with language and the structure of language more so than a person who has never read a book on grammar. The same thing is true of reading a book on logic or philosophy or rhetoric or psychology. All of those things will improve one's writing to a measurable degree. And, again, that's why I say writing is a skill. That does not simply mean, and it does not have to be limited to, reading books on grammar and basic structure of language. *Any reading* will help one's writing as well, but one has to engage in that process to develop that skill and talent. And, again, the fluidity with language which comes with exposing oneself to language at a certain level and also at a certain frequency. Reading Facebook blogs is not the same as reading Ayn Rand or Friedrich Nietzsche. Many or perhaps most people—first of all—do not read very much these days, and secondly, when they do read—what are they reading? They're reading blogs; they are reading very short articles, or they are reading pulp fiction or some junk entertainment book. That is probably *not* going to develop literary skill in the same way that would reading a famous novel or psychology or philosophy book that has survived for hundreds of years. And I'm certainly not saying there that things that are popular therefore have merit. But in a certain sense some books that are popular have that popularity based on their merit. I will just use a quick but perhaps obvious

Ayn Rand read my Zarathustra, based her book on its main character and themes, then misrepresented my entire philosophy in the introduction to her book. Laughably, she called me a "mystic" even when Martin Heidegger more accurately stated that my work "was the end of metaphysics."



20TH CENTURY Collector's Notes

The Fountainhead
by Ayn Rand
Illustrated by Victoria Vebell

after years of writing and rejection, *The Fountainhead* was finally scheduled for publication in May 1943, Ayn Rand wrote, "The Fountainhead does not make me famous,



example, and that would be Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*. Ayn Rand's *Fountainhead* has been considered one of the most influential books, especially in American society. Now, I could say that that has good and bad justification, and I can also, in my opinion, say that people have misread that book because the messages contained within that book are often not the messages attributed to that book. The same thing is true of Nietzsche's writing as well. Some books might be popular, but that does not make them good, but some books that are popular are popular for a reason. Ayn Rand's *Fountainhead* is a masterpiece, whether you agree with her or not, or whether you like her or not. I personally don't like her; I find that she has many personal flaws and the people who knew her would also say the same. I'm not a fan of her necessarily *as a person*, but her book *The Fountainhead* is a bonafide literary masterpiece.

2. **Writing will improve your editing, and editing will improve your writing:** As I said before, writing will improve your editing, and editing will certainly improve your writing. Writing talent facilitates editing talent and vice versa. Gain as much experience with critical, logical, structural language as possible to become "well rounded" with various types of experience.
3. **Explain everything, and do so with concision:** My third tip is to make an effort to explain *everything efficiently*. Again, I refer back to Earl Nightingale's concept of the castle technique. Experienced readers do not mind a quick review, and the more scholarly of them will appreciate your concision. If you can, then summarize something very quickly. Let's say we are going to talk about mitochondria in clinical medicine³, and I give a one paragraph or five sentence

review of mitochondria, the scholars will enjoy that and the novices need that in order to orient them to the material that follows. Again as I say here, the more scholarly readers will appreciate your concision and the new students need the definitions. Make both groups happy and you'll be well received, which of course is your goal. You are responsible. Do not make your reader struggle to understand you—again, unless you are really writing to a specialized audience such as Nietzsche was—because the ultimate result is that **if you make your work too complicated then your work will not be popular, and your work “needs to be popular” in order for you to get your message out.** Don't make your reader struggle to understand you because this will result in your being unread or unpublished, or just not gaining the popularity that you want in order to disseminate your ideas, which of course is your ultimate goal.

4. **Read science to get the rhythm and logical structure of science:** I have read, since my early 20s, thousands of articles and book pages, especially primary research and major reviews, and again even within science we find some authors are notably good with their skill in writing and communication of supremely complex and novel ideas. I have a few authors for example within the rheumatology field and I try to read everything that they write because not only is their work incredibly progressive, but their manner of communicating that work is also what I consider to be a positive influence on my own reading ability, ultimately editing ability, and all of this ultimately comes down to one's thinking ability. So as I said again, read science to get the rhythm and logical structure of science.
5. **Read literature to get a certain style and cadence that lends some style to your work:** Some people are considered masters of language and for good reason. Again I can refer you back to Friedrich Nietzsche's work, arguably quite complicated, especially if you do not have an overview of his psychology and philosophy and what he was trying to accomplish. But Nietzsche was a very talented writer, and he is well-known among philosophers and writers as having a very unique and innovative style of communication. Difficult though that might be at times, **reading Nietzsche will make you a better writer and a better reader**, just like that experience has done for me. Again, Ayn Rand's *Fountainhead*, an absolute masterpiece; I have probably gone through that particular work somewhere between 50 and 100 times.
6. **Make every word count:** When you are writing, make every word count. And one way that you can really learn this discipline is by authoring letters, which I have done from the start of my writing experience. I published my first “formal” kind of “big

league” letter when I was about 24 years old. I wrote a letter for the American College of Rheumatology's journal, *Arthritis and Rheumatism*.⁴ That was my first experience in writing again kind of a high-level letter. But I have written many, again what I would consider high level letters in other journals, especially more recently. And what I'm trying to communicate in giving you those examples is to say that what writing letters forces you to do, what it forces me to do, is to take a lot of information and compress it into a certain word limited space, typically 500 words, 250 words, or most recently in my experience with the *New England Journal of Medicine*, 175 words. So like look at my experience of writing books where the space is relatively unlimited. I might have to take ideas that have spanned over 40 or 50 pages and compress those into 500 words or 250 words. Doing that forces me to select every word with ultimate precision. And doing that multiple times has certainly helped me gain an appreciation of how to use language in a more precise and concise manner because ultimately I think one of the goals that a good writer should always keep in mind is what I call intellectual density. And that is trying to convey the most information possible with the least amount of space and effort and time required by the reader. Ultimately what I want, and ultimately what you want, is for the reader to leave thinking, "Wow. I read in half a page something that completely changed my perspective or changed my life or changed my approach," to whatever that topic might be. That's writing with impact. We don't want to achieve that goal over the course of 500 pages if we can do it in 500 words. And, again, writing letters as opposed to articles ... Writing letters as opposed to articles, which are longer, and books which are unlimited, helps refine that word selecting and wordsmithing skill.

7. **Writing is ultimately your logical sequence with the reader in mind:** The more imaginary readers you can accommodate, the better. The more you have cleaned out the cobwebs from your own life and mind, the better will be your writing and editing because your entire existence will seek, embrace, and tolerate nothing less than clarity. Some of that idea actually comes from Nathaniel Branden's work on psychology.⁵ And perhaps I'll talk about that more in an upcoming video, but in the meanwhile just for emphasis let me repeat that last point, number seven. Writing is ultimately your logical sequence with the reader in mind. The more imaginary readers you can accommodate, the better. The more you have cleaned out the cobwebs from your life and mind, the better will be your writing and editing because your entire existence will seek, embrace, and tolerate nothing less than clarity.

Closure

This brings us to the end of writing and editing tips number one. In the future we will of course talk about writing tips number two. I will provide some more

examples, some more excerpts, and at some point perhaps provide a review and conclusion to these ideas. Thank you very much for your attention and I look forward to sharing the next video with you. ☒

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About the author and presenter: Alex Kennerly Vasquez DO ND DC (USA), Fellow of the American College of Nutrition (FACN), Overseas Fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine:

An award-winning clinician-scholar and founding Program Director of the world's first fully-accredited university-based graduate program in Human Nutrition and Functional Medicine, Dr Alex Vasquez is recognized internationally for his high intellectual and academic standards and for his expertise spanning and interconnecting many topics in medicine and nutrition. Dr Vasquez holds three doctoral degrees as a graduate of University of Western States (Doctor of Chiropractic, 1996), Bastyr University (Doctor of Naturopathic Medicine, 1999), and University of North Texas Health Science Center, Texas College of Osteopathic Medicine (Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine, 2010). Dr Vasquez has completed hundreds of hours of post-graduate and continuing education in subjects including Obstetrics, Pediatrics, Basic and Advanced Disaster Life Support, Nutrition and Functional Medicine; while in the final year of medical school, Dr Vasquez completed a Pre-Doctoral Research Fellowship in Complementary and Alternative Medicine Research hosted by the US National Institutes of Health (NIH). Dr Vasquez is the author of many textbooks, including *Integrative Orthopedics* (2004, 2007 2012), *Functional Medicine Rheumatology* (Third Edition, 2014), *Musculoskeletal Pain: Expanded Clinical Strategies* (commissioned and published by Institute for Functional Medicine, 2008), *Chiropractic and Naturopathic Mastery of Common Clinical Disorders* (2009), *Integrative Medicine and Functional Medicine for Chronic Hypertension* (2011), *Brain Inflammation in Migraine and Fibromyalgia* (2016), *Mitochondrial Nutrition and Endoplasmic Reticulum Stress in Primary Care, 2nd Edition* (2014), *Antiviral Strategies and Immune Nutrition* (2014), *Mastering mTOR* (2015), *Autism, Dysbiosis, and the Gut-Brain Axis* (2017) and the 1200-page *Inflammation Mastery 4th Edition* (2016) also published as a two-volume set titled *Textbook of Clinical Nutrition and Functional Medicine*. "DrV" has also written approximately 100 letters and articles for professional magazines and medical journals such as *TheLancet.com*, *British Medical Journal* (BMJ), *Annals of Pharmacotherapy*, *Nutritional Perspectives*, *Journal of Manipulative and Physiological Therapeutics* (JMPT), *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA), *Original Internist*, *Integrative Medicine*, *Holistic Primary Care*, *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine*, *Journal of the American Osteopathic Association* (JAOA), *Dynamic Chiropractic*, *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism*, *Current Asthma and Allergy Reports*, *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice*, *Nature Reviews Rheumatology*, *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, and *Arthritis & Rheumatism*, the Official Journal of the American College of Rheumatology. Dr Vasquez lectures internationally to healthcare professionals and has a consulting practice and service for doctors and patients. DrV has served as a consultant, product designer, writer and lecturer for Biotics Research Corporation since 2004. Having served on the Review Boards for *Journal of Pain Research*, *Autoimmune Diseases*, *PLOS One*, *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine*, *Neuropeptides*, *International Journal of Clinical Medicine*, *Journal of Inflammation Research*, *BMC Complementary and Alternative Medicine* (all PubMed/Medline indexed), *Integrated Blood Pressure Control*, *Journal of Biological Physics and Chemistry*, and *Journal of Naturopathic Medicine* and as the founding Editor of *Naturopathy Digest*, Dr Vasquez is currently the [Editor \(2013-\) of International Journal of Human Nutrition and Functional Medicine](#) and [Editor \(2018-present\) of Journal of Orthomolecular Medicine](#), published for more than 50 consecutive years by the International Society for Orthomolecular Medicine.

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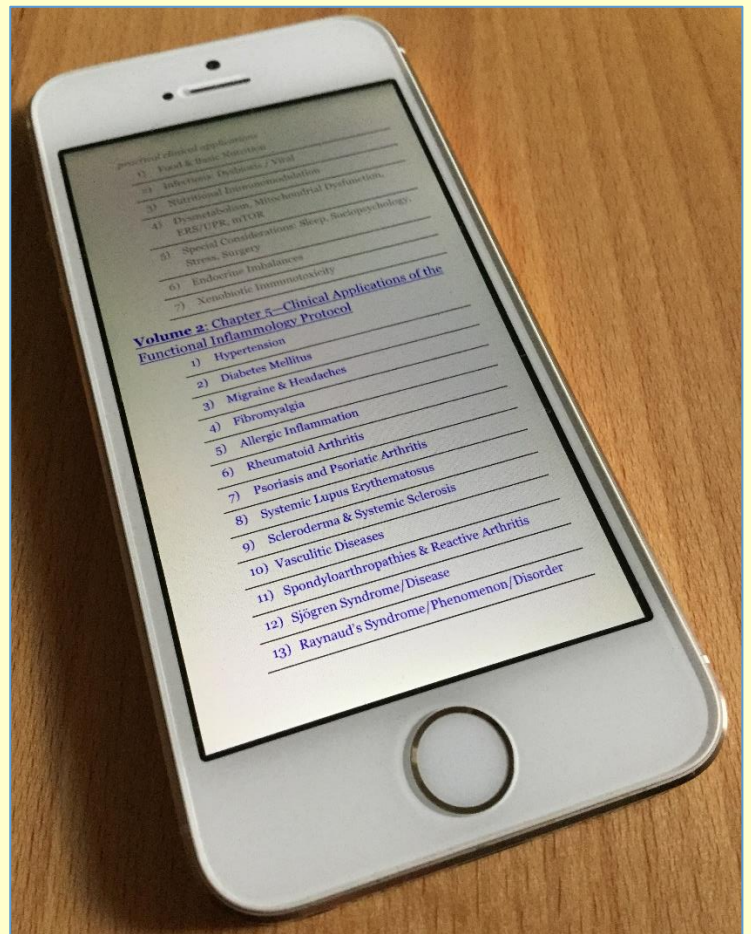
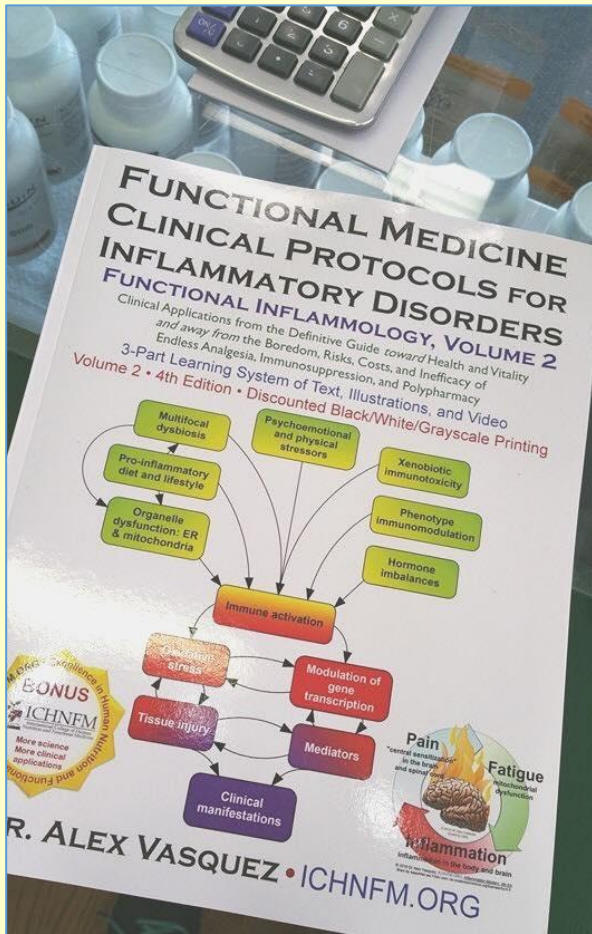
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Summary "in a nutshell" of Instructions for Authors:

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