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Round Table: *Quality Assessment of Grey Literature*

“Uniform Requirements” for grey literature: proposal for the adoption of “Nancy style”

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Background

In the last international conferences on Grey Literature (GL), the Internet “sea change” suffered by GL was deeply analysed under its different nuances, coming to the conclusion that the characteristics initially associated to this production have been completely upset. The main advantages of the Net regard information retrieval, document usability and availability against an increased level of responsibility for its authors and issuing organizations.¹

This 7th International Conference on GL is devoted to open access, the movement exploring the most effective and affordable strategies for serving the interests of research, researchers, institutions and societies that support research, as stated in the famous Budapest meeting in 2001, the starting point for the development of the Budapest Open Access Initiative (BOAI). The purpose of that meeting was to accelerate progress in the international effort “to make research articles in all academic fields freely available on the Internet”.² Since then, the BOAI has been developing successfully all over the world and involves different kinds of publications from pre-print to journal articles.

In this context, GL has now all rights to be included among the useful documents to be shared by the global scientific community and represents the greatest challenge in the information transfer process. Yet, in many cases, it will benefit from a proper re-styling to be exploited at best: when a document containing unique and precious information meets a formally correct production in absence of profit implications, success is guaranteed. This International Conference helps us to find the way.

GL: no more a supporting but a leading role

Journal articles and books have always been playing the role of main actors in the scientific publication arena. Information transmitted by these means is accurate, refereed, correctly promoted, traceable and available for all those who have the privilege of working in a research institute or can otherwise afford the cost of purchasing it. On the contrary, up to now, GL has been generally considered of minor importance, mainly because it was difficult to retrieve, poor in formal quality, produced in limited number of copies, and addressed only to small groups or “invisible colleges”: it was a Cinderella that is now going to become the leading actor on the information stage.

¹ De Castro P, Salinetti S. Quality of grey literature in the open access era: privilege and responsibility. *Publishing Research Quarterly* 2004;20(1): 4-12.

² <http://www.soros.org/openaccess/>

Since the beginning of the 80s, after the York Seminar³, with the production and diffusion of a specific standard for technical reports, the ISO 5966/82⁴, the formal requirements for a correct presentation of GL started to be applied by issuing organizations, thus contributing to improve the quality of documents and their retrieval through bibliographic databases.

In the 90s thanks to the wide use and development of Desk Top Publishing (DTP) programs and later the diffusion of the Internet, GL production underwent a further impulse towards a better quality and availability. The interest for GL has been widely increasing at all levels: the “grey” attribute has no longer negative implications, but remains only to identify a genre that is now completely different from its first samples produced before the 80s (technical reports of very poor editorial quality but high information level).

In this framework, now that the ISO 5966 is out of date, we believe that it is important to give all GL producers the possibility to dress up their Cinderellas with a flick of a magic wand. How? Producing a “Nancy style” from seven mice and a pumpkin, meeting at GL7!

Thus our Cinderella will finally take off her old ash rags and put on a proper wedding dress to show her best look for a royal marriage! Cinderella will become a princess and her poor origin will be hardly traceable. On the contrary, the freshness of her new look associated with her precious old virtues (unique and original information which cannot be found elsewhere) will represent the best chance to conquer the heart of the entire realm of science! Let’s avoid breaking this spell and let everybody stop to admire her elegance, her beauty and inner richness.

“Nancy style”, the magic of Cinderella: six horses, a coachman and a coach to be introduced at Court

The production of a valuable and formally correct document is strictly associated with the existence and application of reference standards that should be commonly followed by all possible GL authors and producers.

In the biomedical field, everybody knows what the *Uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals*, better known as “Vancouver style”, are.⁵ A short story of this “style” will help understanding why we are proposing a “Nancy style” for GL.

Vancouver was the place where a small group of editors of medical journals met in 1978 to reach an agreement for a common format of manuscripts submitted to their journals. Since then, these guidelines, which were initially based only on the format of references to be included in the publication, have been developing in scope and also the number of journals using them is widely increasing.

Today, the border line between grey and open literature becomes less and less clear above all in terms of online availability, therefore it seems particularly important to call the attention of all GL authors and producers on the necessity to draw up a reference tool for writing and editing their products that now are mainly distributed through the Internet. This is particularly relevant in the absence of a proper standard for the presentation of scientific and technical reports (the best sample of GL) since the valuable but not up-dated ISO 5966, produced in 1982, was withdrawn in the year 2000, and not yet replaced by a new standard.

Following the red thread of both the relevant editorial issues contained in the last edition of “Vancouver style” (October 2005, <http://www.icmje.org/>) and the basic principles of the ISO

³ Alberani V, De Castro P. Grey literature from the York Seminar (UK) of 1978 to the year 2000. *Inspesl* 2001;35(4):236-47.

⁴ International Organization for Standardization. *Presentation of scientific and technical reports*. (ISO 5966/82). Geneva: ISO; 1982.

⁵ International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. *Uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals: writing and editing for biomedical publication*. ICMJE: 2005. Available from <http://www.icmje.org/>. Last visited: 31/10/2005.

5966, a proposal is presented and discussed to reach an initial consensus on what might lead to the adoption of *Uniform requirements for the production of institutional reports: how to write and distribute grey literature*. This is particularly useful now that open access is widely shared also by the GL community.

Seven mice, magically transformed into six horses and a wonder-coachman, led Cinderella to the castle. Our mice to reach the “castle” of consensus are represented by the following seven items:

1. *Ethical considerations*

They regard responsibilities of the authors of reports and their issuing organizations mainly in terms of scientific quality and financial implications. They also take into account the appropriateness and relevance of peer review and possible conflicts of interest, privacy and confidentiality.

2. *Publishing and editorial issues*

They include considerations associated with intellectual property (copyright) and the new responsibilities arising from electronic publishing.

3. *Report structure*

It is the most powerful mouse allowing reaching the desired goal, i.e. the clear understanding of the report content. A well designed structure includes Front matter, Body of report and End matter – each part containing different kinds of information which may be compulsory (i.e., bibliographic information in the Front matter), recommended (i.e., structure of the Core of report), or optional (i.e., non textual material or Appendices) (Figure 1).

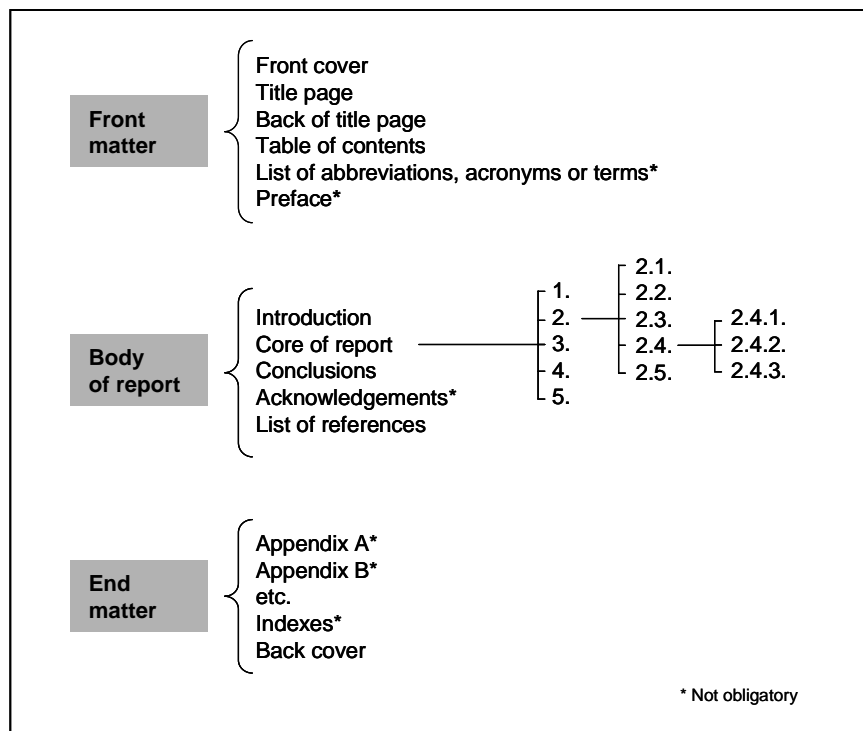


Figure 1. Recommended structure of a report

4. *References*

They are the sources of information used in the report and shall be correctly placed and cited in the reference list to permit their retrieval.

5. *Non textual material*

It is represented by tables and figures which play a significant part in the understanding of concepts explained in the text adding value to the information given. It is not compulsory, but, when included, it shall be properly placed and arranged.

6. *Revision editing*

It is a careful reading and final consideration of the text before its release; it has the objective to ensure that the technical content of a report is clear, complete, accurate and understandable to the intended audience. There are different levels of revision mainly depending on urgency in diffusion, availability of editorial staff and budget.

7. *Instructions to authors*

They represent our coachman leading the horses to the right direction. All issuing organizations should provide guidelines for a correct production of reports including rules and suggestions for all the items described above.

And now, still using the Cinderella metaphor, what does the pumpkin stand for?

The pumpkin is the content of our document, that is its most important attribute, always prevailing on all the others! A formally correct report – with a smart layout and well balanced structure – is absolutely useless without any good substance! Needless to say, the first responsibility of any author or issuing organization regards the content of the documents produced, which may only be improved and made clearer or better understandable thanks to a formally correct presentation. Yet, a good pumpkin cannot reach the castle to join the party of the noble (prestigious journal articles and monographs) if a flick of the “Nancy wand” does not magically change it into a coach, driven by well-trained horses and lead by a coachman. All guests allowed at Court must follow a proper etiquette!

The draft “Nancy style” will be discussed in the Round Table on “Quality Assessment of Grey Literature” of GL7. It will be integrated on the basis of the different suggestions of the experts in the field, and each comment will be most welcome to reach a consensus for the best practice to be followed.

The draft is divided into 5 parts:

1. Statement of purpose;
2. Ethical considerations;
3. Publishing and editorial issues;
4. Report preparation;
5. General information on the *Uniform requirements*.

The Report preparation, including a section on Report structure (see Figure 1), is the most practical part of “Nancy Style” and considers both the layout and formal requirements for each element of the report. A careful evaluation of all the items will help authors to understand how to prepare and organize a document and why they should respect these guidelines with the objective to facilitate communication.

The *Uniform requirements* are envisaged as a useful tool for all institutions and authors producing GL in order to provide added value to their documents. They may also be used as a guide for training courses to be organized inside institutions producing GL.

The *Uniform requirements* are not for profit and, after approval, they may be reproduced for educational purposes without regard for copyright. Their free distribution and translation will be encouraged provided that the official source will always be correctly cited.

The *Uniform requirements* will be periodically updated and a list of GL producers adopting them will be available from the official authority which will be established in Nancy, if consensus is reached.

A happy end: Cinderella becomes a Princess

GL producers have been eyewitnesses of the “sea change” introduced by the DTP and the Internet and have tried to adjust old rules with new requirements, facing the difficulty of authors who are often unaware of the challenges staying behind an autonomous production of documents.

The approval of “Nancy style” will provide a useful tool to guarantee the best quality of GL as it represents the consensus reached by the most distinguished experts in the field taking in due consideration both existing recommendations and standards, as well as years of experience in the production and diffusion of technical reports.

Finally, GL might be hardly distinguishable from open literature, since production techniques and distribution strategies are not so different for the two genres and open literature, in turn, is now disguising itself in grey when entering institutional repositories and open archives.

If correctly spread and applied, “Nancy style” will forever change the poor and grey Cinderella into a Princess who will be, as in fact is, mostly appreciated by the entire community. The term “grey” will no longer be associated to poor, second class literature, but to a fresh and new production, still keeping the originality of its contents and remaining free from restrictions and limits imposed by the most strict market rules of open literature.

Thanks to “Nancy style”, the spell of Cinderella will not end at midnight!