A practical guide to publishing Quality Improvement (QI) work

This guide is designed to help you move from a completed (or ongoing) QI project to a published paper. It is grounded in established QI publishing practice and builds on the experience of publishing QI work at ELFT over the last decade.

1. Why should I publish my QI work?

Publishing QI work is not just an academic exercise. Done well, it has real-world impact for others and can be professionally rewarding.

Key reasons to publish:

- **Share learning** – QI is about learning what works, what doesn't, and why. Publishing allows others to adapt your ideas rather than reinvent the wheel.
- **Improve patient care beyond your service** – your local improvement can influence practice elsewhere.
- **Career and training benefits** – publications support appraisal, revalidation, training portfolios, and progression.
- **Build credibility for improvement work** – publishing helps QI be taken seriously as a discipline.
- **Personal satisfaction** – seeing your work in print is rewarding and gives you recognition

2. How do I know if my project has a good chance of being published?

Not every QI project needs to be published, but many more could be than people realise. Journals are not looking for perfect projects, rather they are cocnenred with useful learning The following areas are strong indicators that your work has a good chance of being publishable.

Key Factor	Description	Highlights / Indicators
Innovative work	Projects that address current, relevant, and challenging issues are more likely to attract journal interest.	• Topical problem • Potential for wider impact beyond the local setting • Understudied area or limited existing literature • Novel interventions or new applications of existing ideas *Note: Innovation can be new context or combination, not necessarily something never done before*

Scalability	Journals want to know if your work could be realistically adapted in other contexts.	• Interventions clearly described and feasible • Do not rely on unusual resources or individuals • Key components adaptable to other settings • Reflection on what might need to change for success elsewhere
Impact	Meaningful and sustained improvement is valued over short-term gains.	• Clear improvement in outcome or process measures • Data over time (e.g., run charts, SPC) • Evidence of sustained change • Link between interventions and outcomes
Good Study design	QI should be methodologically sound, like applied research.	• Well-understood problem informed by data and stakeholders • Clear theory of change (e.g., driver diagram) • Thoughtful PDSA cycles, iterative testing • Appropriate use of data over time
Team commitment	Successful publication requires the team to commit to writing.	• Willingness to write within ~3 months • Clear roles and responsibilities, especially lead author • All authors understand what authorship involves

If your project meets several of these criteria, it is likely worth pursuing publication. You do not need to meet every point; journals value thoughtful, well-executed work that contributes to shared learning.

3. <u>How do I pick the right journal for my work?</u>

Choosing the right journal matters. A strong paper sent to the wrong journal will struggle. So ask yourself who might want to read or learn more about your work. Maybe this is a QI specific crowd, or it might be a group of people in your specific type of health care, mental health, diabetes care, primary care, nursing.

When choosing a journal, consider:

- Does the journal explicitly publish QI or improvement work? If not maybe write to the editor and ask.
- Who is the audience (clinicians, managers, a specialty group)?
- Is your work generalisable or highly specialty-specific?
- The journals acceptance rate and the time it takes for the journal to reach a decision. This is not to suggest a paper with a low acceptance rate should be avoided, but if it's your first time publishing something, going for something a bit easier might be a good start

Journal Name	Details
BMJ Open Quality	Interdisciplinary QI journal. Accepts full SQUIRE-style reports. Emphasis on learning, measurement, and transparency.
Future Healthcare Journal	Publishes short, practical QI reports (~1500 words). Narrative and reflective, less methodologically complex.
British Journal of Healthcare Management	Focus on operational, leadership, workforce, and system-level QI. Applied management insight rather than technical detail.
BMJ Quality & Safety	International, academically rigorous QI and safety studies. High expectations and low acceptance.
International Journal of Quality in Health Care	Global focus on quality, safety, and system improvement. Suitable for methodologically strong QI work.
British Journal of Mental Health Nursing	Nursing-focused QI, workforce, safety, and patient experience. Practical, nursing-led projects.
International Journal of Healthcare Governance	Governance, leadership, accountability, and organisational QI. Suitable for policy-relevant projects.
International Journal of Health Care Quality Assurance	Quality management, patient safety, and continuous improvement. Focus on structured, organisation-level QI.
International Journal of Health Governance	Governance, policy, and system-level improvement in healthcare. Suitable for organisational and strategic QI.

4. How do I get started?

Publishing is much easier if you plan early.

- Decide to publish.
- Agree who should author the work, what each person is going to do and who will take care of being the lead author. This person should co-ordinate the work, set deadlines, proofread, submit and co-ordinate any revisions.
- Those who agree to author should have contributed substantially to the work and agree to write the work with a specified time frame.
- Pick a journal to submit to and note their required structure and referencing style
- Set up a document for you all to work on and save it somewhere you can all access.

5. How should I organise my paper?

Most journals now expect QI work to follow the **SQUIRE (Standards for Quality Improvement Reporting Excellence)** guidelines. You can find more information about these here and detailed summary of the guidelines here

A typical structure includes:

- Title and abstract
- Introduction (problem, existing knowledge, rationale)
- Methods (context, intervention, measures, analysis)
- Results (data over time, learning from PDSAs)
- Discussion (interpretation, strengths, limitations, sustainability)
- Conclusions

6. Who should be an author – and what does authorship mean?

Authorship is about **substantial contribution**, not job title.

An author should, in general:

- Contribute meaningfully to the design, delivery, analysis, or interpretation of the work
- Be involved in writing or critically revising the manuscript
- Approve the final version
- Take responsibility for the integrity of the work

You can find more information about what authorship means in relation to peer reviewed publications via the ICJME guidelines here.

The **lead author** usually:

- Coordinates writing
- Sets deadlines
- Submits the paper
- Manages revisions and correspondence with the journal

Agree authorship early to avoid problems later.

7. What about the review process and revisions?

Most QI journals use **double-blind peer review**.

What to expect:

- Two or more reviewers assess your paper independently
- If not rejected, almost all papers receive requests for revision
- Revisions are normal and are there to improve the paper

Good practice when revising:

- Use track changes
- Respond to each reviewer comment clearly
- Keep a separate response document
- You don't have to accept every suggestion — but you must justify why

Persistence matters. Many published papers were revised more than once.

8. Publishing Models and Disseminating your learning

Broadly there are two publishing models when it comes to publishing

- **Subscription Based** – The authors do not pay anything, but access to the paper is limited to those with a subscription. Subscriptions are usually only available to those with a university affiliation, with limited access to some journals provided via the NHS Athens services

- **Open Access** – Where the authors pay a fee to the journal for their paper to be published and available for anyone to access without restriction. The fee usually ranges from £1800-£3000 depending on the journal.

It is worth noting that some journals have moved to an open access only model, where if accepted, the authors will need to pay the relevant fee.

Some considerations

- For Quality Improvement Reports submitted to BMJ Open Quality, the health foundation currently offers free open access publishing for its Q Community Members. Q Community is free to sign up to.

- Future Healthcare Journal is currently offering free open access publishing for all articles accepted and published until Dec 2032.

- Some journals offer Green open access publishing. This means that you can share the pre-print copy (the draft version you had accepted) on institutional repositories without any restrictions. It won't be the nice, polished version you'd see after the journal has formatted it but will enable you to share the work.

Once your paper has been accepted and published:

- Let your colleagues, line manager and directorate leadership team know
- Share this with the QI team and colleagues in comms so we can help you shout about it.

9. <u>**Some Top Tips**</u>

- **Think about if you think you want to publish your work early on** – Think ahead of time will help you make sure you have a robust design for the work. For example, is the testing strategy you are using going to give you robust results?

- **Embed it into the journey of your project** – Create a place that is accessible to everyone to help you draft your publication as you go along. For example, when you've created the driver diagram add it to the document and describe how you did it. Make sure you record your learning as you go by using life QI.

- **Do a quick literature search early on** – Publications, even for QI, will often require you to briefly provide a summary of what is known about the topic already. Doing a quick literature search at the beginning of your project might help you with not only understanding the problem and potential change ideas, but also as a summary for your write up

- **Think about who might have the skills and experience in writing work in this way** – Writing for publication isn't always easy but many staff have done this as part of their training or need to do so to complete aspects of core competencies. Have you got a willing trainee that can help you in preparing the work?

- **Learn from Other-** Look at other articles or publications to help you think about how to structure the work.

- **References** - Keep a record of the references that you use as you go along. It's important not to plagiarise and so rephrase and reference. Make sure you know which referencing convention the journal uses.

Please get in touch with us if you want help thinking about how to get your improvement work published by contacting us on elft.qi@nhs.net

Examples of work that has been published and what made it successful

Paper	Journal	Some strengths	Link
Using league tables to reduce missed dose medication errors on mental healthcare of older people wards	BMJ Open Quality	This paper has very well documented PDSA's which make it useful for other organisations to learn from	https://qi.elft.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/alan-cottney-using-league-tables-to-reduce-missed-dose-medication.pdf
Reducing physical violence and creating a safety culture across wards in East London	British Journal of Mental Health Nursing	This paper had a well-designed and robust testing strategy, which made it appealing to publishers.	https://qi.elft.nhs.uk/resource/reducing-physical-violence-and-developing-a-safety-culture-across-wards-in-east-london
Demand and Capacity in and ADHD team: reducing the wait times for an ADHD assessment to 12 weeks	BMJ Open Quality	This paper tackled a problem that is important across healthcare and so had some generalisability	https://qi.elft.nhs.uk/resource/demand-capacity-adhd
Improving access to genetic testing for adults with intellectual disability: A literature review and lessons from a quality improvement project in East London	American Journal of Medical Genetics	This paper tackled an issue that was important in a specific field	https://www.elft.nhs.uk/sites/default/files/import-news/FinalArticle-pdf.pdf