Publication of essays and commentaries plays an important role in family medicine and family medicine education. As such, Family Medicine has long featured such articles in the journal. They provide a view into the human side of health care. Thoughtful essays touch us in ways that bring forth our feelings and desires, reminding us about why we chose to enter family medicine. Thoughtful commentary can give us insight into where the discipline might be going, where it ought to go, or perhaps even lead the discipline in change.

Not all essays that are submitted for publication are published, however, and indeed, not all of them should be. Although it is disappointing to authors when a manuscript is not accepted for publication, particularly when the author has used the manuscript to express a personal opinion or emotional experience, the journal’s primary responsibility is to its readers—a responsibility to publish material that will appeal to and enlighten them.

What makes for a good essay or commentary? Authors should consider several characteristics that are common to good essays and commentaries as they prepare manuscripts for submission. For essays, these features include a focused message, a thoughtful presentation, and self-reflection. Commentaries should do the same, but they also should be thought provoking and, importantly, scholarly in crafting a position.

**Have a Focused Message**

When crafting a manuscript as an essay or commentary, it is critically important to be focused in conveying its message. Staying focused will help the author transmit a feeling or an experience, or even a policy position, to the reader. However, just because an experience or an idea seemed important to the author doesn’t mean it will be important to readers. Indeed, no matter how heartfelt the sentiment of a manuscript’s content, if the message is unclear or unimportant to readers, the author has failed. In writing essays and commentaries, authors should test the focus of their message by stating it in one simple sentence. If that can’t be done, it is likely that readers will not grasp its key message.

**Be Thoughtful and Reflective**

Two other characteristics that are common in good essays and commentaries but tend to be lacking in many of the manuscripts submitted to the journal are thoughtfulness and self-reflectivity. A burst of emotion may be the impetus to an author to write an essay, but many times that emotion is not accompanied by thoughtfulness or self-reflection. Having a situation that makes you angry or sad or frustrated and putting those emotions on paper is simply not enough.

To be thoughtful and self-reflective, authors should ask themselves questions and discuss the answers to those questions in the manuscript. Examples of questions that make a manuscript thoughtful and self-reflective are: Why did this happen or happen to me? Is there something about me that makes me feel this way? Am I the only one who has experienced this? What lessons have I learned from which others might benefit? What is the meaning that I attach to this event or episode?

**Be Thought Provoking and Scholarly**

A key to a successful commentary is to be thought provoking. Being too restrained in presenting your opinion can be, for lack of a better word, boring. While a commentary should be scholarly and sophisticated, it should also say something and make a point that will grab the reader’s attention and perhaps make readers think about something they may not have previously considered.

To be persuasive in a commentary, it is also important to know your subject matter. Consequently, providing the reader of the manuscript, particularly readers who may be naïve or new to the subject of the manuscript, with some background or key information is critical. A few key citations are also essential to a scholarly presentation.
Not only does knowledge of the topic, providing background, and citing important references provide key information for the reader, it also shows that the author has a good command of the topic and the ability to transmit it effectively. This helps build the author’s credibility to offer opinions on a subject and will make people want to listen to what the author has to say.

**Conclusions**

In sum, *Family Medicine* features essays and commentaries because they are an important and creative way of sharing ideas. However, in an effort to make the journal the best it can be, and if authors want their essays and commentaries to be published, authors should prepare manuscripts with the characteristics of focused message, thoughtfulness, and self-reflection, and that are both scholarly and sufficiently provocative to challenge the reader to think about something new. We look for those features when we review essays and commentaries submitted to the journal, and we hope to see more of them with those features in the future.

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