

SURJ: Developing science students' writing skills through UREs

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SURJ@UQ is the Science Undergraduate Research Journal written by and for UQ students. The journal has been running since 2011. The first edition was published in 2012, the website was created in 2013, and the second edition will be published in 2014.

The writing and production of SURJ is a collaborative process. The presenter (who is Editor in Chief), academic mentors, student mentors, and student authors work together to produce the journal and its contents. We use the journal as a forum for publishing student work, and also as the subject of student research projects in and of itself. The twin processes of producing SURJ and studying its production have taught us a lot about how to run an undergraduate journal. They have also led to a deeper understanding of how and why students write, and the types of support that they need to successfully produce an article of publication quality.

Perhaps the most interesting results of our work are the insights about students' ability to communicate outside of familiar genres. Many students have excellent ideas for potential contributions, but they find the actual writing of an article difficult and time-consuming. Although some students are naturally articulate and concise writers, most struggle to develop a claim, give reasons why this claim is of interest, and provide evidence to support their arguments. Rather than telling stories that appeal to a general audience, most students fall back on the standard laboratory report format to present their ideas. If they stray from this genre they regularly fail to develop an article that has a key message. Almost all of our writers are unable to articulate why components of their writing are good, and they have no language around how to improve their writing. Interestingly, our best, most confident, and most flexible writers are Arts and Education dual degree students who have actively participated in review and revision processes before they wrote for SURJ. These issues are eerily reminiscent of the typical complaints that academics and employers have about science graduates. Although SURJ is a specialist writing forum, the journal has many messages for educators, as well as for its student writers and audience.