

Using CONSORT for peer review

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Have you been asked to peer review a report of the results of a randomised controlled trial?

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CONSORT can help make your job easier.

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In this video we'll tell you what CONSORT is,

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why peer reviewers find CONSORT helpful, and how to use CONSORT when peer reviewing randomised trial results.

What CONSORT is

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CONSORT is a reporting guideline.

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Reporting guidelines are a list of minimum items that a person needs to fully understand a report of research.

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There are lots of reporting guidelines, each for a specific study type.

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CONSORT is the reporting guideline for reporting the results of a randomised controlled trial.

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For other study designs that your journal publishes, visit the EQUATOR Network for help in finding appropriate reporting guidelines.

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The CONSORT statement is a checklist of 30 items.

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In the actual checklist, each item is given a line or two of description.

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For example, item two, trial registration, is the “name of trial registry, identifying number with URL, and date of registration.”

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These thirty items follow the structure of an article, covering 4: items on open science declarations;

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two items for the introduction;

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14 items for the methods;

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seven items for the results;

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and two items for the discussion.

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So CONSORT focuses much more on methods and results - the things the researchers did, and found - than anything else.

Why peer reviewers use CONSORT

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You might be thinking, if CONSORT is guidance for *reporting* trials, why would I use it when *reviewing* a trial?

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As a peer reviewer, a big part of your job is to assess whether the results of the trial are likely to be valid (or “true”), and whether they are clinically important.

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But reports of trials are often missing some of the information you need to completely judge their validity and importance.

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Authors have to keep in mind a lot of different information when they report their trial.

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Very often they forget to mention at least one or two things.

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When you review a trial report, you might find you focus on evaluating the information that is *there*.

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It is easy to overlook that something important is *missing*.

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CONSORT reminds you of all the details you need to check so that you can provide a complete review.

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It's a bit like when you go shopping: you might remember the 10 things you need...

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...but why not make your life easier by seeing them all written down?

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That way you spend less time trying to spot what the authors have forgotten to tell you,

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and more time reviewing what they did and what they found.

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CONSORT was created by groups of people who work with clinical trials and their results, like trialists, statisticians, systematic reviewers, healthcare professionals, patients, and funders.

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Because trialists, statisticians, and systematic reviewers helped shape CONSORT,

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the checklist items cover the critical details you'll need to be able to judge whether the results of the trial are likely to be valid, or whether there is potential for bias.

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Because patients and healthcare professionals were involved,

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CONSORT asks for the information you'll need in order to judge whether the results matter clinically.

How to use CONSORT for peer review

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How exactly can you use CONSORT to help with your peer review?

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You could use CONSORT to do an initial check for any information that is obviously missing.

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If there is information that CONSORT asks for that the author has not provided, contact the journal to ask for the additional details.

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Some journals ask authors to submit a completed CONSORT checklist along with their randomised trial report.

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Authors can write which page of the manuscript they have reported each item on.

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Check whether there is a completed checklist among the files you've been asked to review.

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This can help you to find the relevant information quickly,

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but make sure the authors have really included the information that they say they have.

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And watch out for authors writing "Not Applicable" or "N/A".

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Authors sometimes say an item is not applicable and don't mention it in their report when they actually mean that they didn't do or consider something.

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For example, if nobody in their trial was blinded, they might note on the checklist that the items on blinding are not applicable.

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But actually, the fact that nobody was blinded is important information.

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It doesn't automatically mean that the trial is bad or that the journal should reject the manuscript - blinding is not always feasible.

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But you need to know that nobody in their trial was blinded so that you can think about how that might affect the results of the trial.

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So if the authors don't mention a CONSORT item, explicitly, ask them to confirm in the manuscript what they did or didn't do.

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You - and people who read the trial report in the future - shouldn't have to assume or guess.

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You could use CONSORT to remind you of important things to check when reviewing the paper.

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For each checklist item, look at what the author's reports that they did.

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If there are weaknesses or problems in the methods they used, mention this in your review.

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Remember that CONSORT is guidance for reporting, not methods.

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For example, item 21 includes "how missing data were handled in the analysis."

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There are different ways of dealing with missing data.

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Which methods are appropriate will depend on the specific trial and the type of data that are missing.

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CONSORT doesn't specify particular methods that are acceptable or not acceptable. It just reminds you to check what the authors did.

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Then it's up to you to decide whether the methods they used were appropriate for their trial.

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Finally, you could use CONSORT before you submit your review to the journal.

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Do a final check to make sure you've considered all of the most important aspects of the study design, conduct, and results.

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You might come across an item where you're not sure what CONSORT means or why the item matters.

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The CONSORT "Explanation and Elaboration" paper explains why each item is important and describes any nuance or challenges that you might like to think about.

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It also gives examples for each checklist item.

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This “E&E” document is really helpful as a reference to dip into when you need it. You can download it on our website.

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This is the end of this training video on what CONSORT is,

8:18

why peer reviewers find CONSORT helpful, and how to use CONSORT when peer reviewing randomised trial results.

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The 2025 update of SPIRIT and CONSORT was funded by the MRC and NIHR.

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Thank you for using CONSORT when you peer review randomised trials.

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By building a better evidence base today, we're ensuring better quality research in the future.