The alignment audit

A one-page check to run **before** you start writing. A study can be well designed and well conducted and still produce a confusing manuscript, because the objective emphasises one thing, the results emphasise another, and the conclusion emphasises a third. Editors and reviewers detect this indirectly — the paper simply feels muddled. Fill the right-hand column, then read it from top to bottom.

ELEMENT	YOUR STUDY
Research question What exactly do you want to know?	
Primary objective What will the study determine?	
Study design	
Population Who, selected how, over what period?	
Exposure or intervention	
Comparator Compared with what? Write "none" if none.	
Primary outcome Measured how, with what, and when?	
Secondary outcomes Pre-specified, or exploratory?	
Main analysis	
Primary finding	
Main interpretation	
Principal conclusion	

Now read it downwards. Four links have to hold.

- **Question before design.** The question decides the design, not the reverse. “We have access to a database, so what can we answer?” is how a study ends up with no defensible reason to exist.
- **Objective to outcome.** If the objective says quality of life, the Methods must name the instrument and the timing, and the Results must report it. If the Results report only laboratory values, the two are misaligned.
- **Objective to analysis.** The statistical method must answer the question asked. Choose it because it suits the question, design and data — not because it is familiar.
- **Objective to conclusion.** If the objective was to determine whether X is *associated* with Y, the conclusion cannot be that X causes Y and should be used to prevent it.

Four signs of misalignment

- The Discussion dwells on a variable the objective never mentioned — usually the one that reached significance.
- A method is described but its result never appears anywhere in the paper.
- The abstract's conclusion is stronger than the Discussion's, which is stronger than the Results support.
- The title names something the primary outcome does not measure.

If any row cannot be stated clearly in one line, the problem is not in the writing. Find the mismatch before you draft, not after a reviewer does.

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