

Finding your voice: key elements to consider when writing for publication

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Abstract

The dissemination of nursing knowledge rests on optimizing the accessibility of such knowledge among nurses and all other healthcare professionals. Nursing publications of all types, including research, case studies, reports, literature reviews, clinical audits, reflections on practice and letters to the editor, are important mechanisms for sharing knowledge and experience. Nurses need to publish their knowledge and experiences to inform and reflect on nursing practice. Barriers to writing for publication include inexperience and lack of know how. This article provides guidance for the novice writer.

Key words: Disseminating research ■ Evidence-based practice ■ Professional development ■ Publication ■ Writing

The contemporary emphasis on evidence-based practice in nursing has given further impetus to the profession's desire to move from its oral traditions of knowledge and skill transferral to engaging nurses from all practice arenas in publishing practice developments.

Clinical insights and developments in one area can have a ripple effect across a number of nursing practices, such as the acute and community setting. Collaborative research between nurse researchers and nurse clinicians can provide a sound foundation for ongoing professional development. Practice developments, clinical case studies and audits need to be disseminated widely, but commonly nurses have a reticence to publish. This article provides assistance for novice writers with the aim of promoting the dissemination of nursing knowledge as widely as possible.

Overcoming the barriers to publishing Nurses being quiet. It that how we are?

Is the reticence of nurses to publish a reflection on our position in the workplace? DeMarco et al (2005) implemented a programme of meditation and reflective writing for nurses to address characteristics of the oppressed found among nurses: poor self-esteem and feelings of powerlessness, a lack of solidarity and poor communication skills. While nurses may not be responsible for their oppression they are the only people who can change it. Unless nurses publish about nursing and nursing issues, no one else will and they will remain unacknowledged 'voiceless' members of the health care sector, contributing through their silence to the oppression of nursing's unique role in desired patient outcomes.

What to write about

Nursing activities provide a myriad of possibilities for publishing. Professional journals publish letters to the editor, commentary on a topical issue, literature reviews, case studies, research reports and meta-analyses. A novice writer may find that writing a case study with an experienced co-author is a good way to start publishing (Wink, 2002). Writing a case study provides an opportunity to complete a literature review and report the issues surrounding one person rather than undertaking a research project. A sample of one, clinical audits or reflection on practice are legitimate topics for publication.

Alternatively, a novice writer may choose to publish an assignment completed as part of nursing studies. The idea is to look for a journal that has a student publications section, or write to the editor requesting editorial assistance to reformat the paper so that it is suitable for publication. Editors are looking to publish on current issues. A student's work addressing a contemporary issue may need very little editing to be published. Some journals have editorial support for clinicians knowing that many will publish with help.

Cannot get started

To overcome a lack of confidence, write about something that you are passionate about. (See *Table 1* for reasons why nurses don't write.) Read widely, know your audience and stick with it. A mind map or concept map can help early on when brainstorming what should be covered in the article you want to write (Kneale and Santy, 2000). Finding a supportive 'buddy' is a great way to start (Kneale and Santy, 2000). Buddies can be sourced in a number of places, particularly as many workplaces now have experienced researchers. If there is not one, be bold, ring your local university's school of nursing and ask to speak to a published nurse academic. Remember, academics need publications for promotion and may be happy to co-author a paper with you. Publications strengthen clinicians' CVs too. If you are claiming expertise in a clinical field, having a publication will add solid evidence to your claim.

Creating a working title is a good way to get your ideas down and to get started (Kneale and Santy, 2000). Make sure it includes the key terms you are going to address. The title may need reviewing as the article develops. The final title will need to capture the essence of the study and attract readers (Oermann, 2006). The introduction should present key and interesting insights into the issue being addressed. The aim is to capture the reader's interest. One strategy is to present a fact that draws attention to the research or issue. For example, when discussing the continence issues confronted by people with

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Table 1. Why nurses don't write

- Lack of confidence
- Inexperience in writing for publication
- Lack of support

Table 2. What to write about

- Your experiences
- Your expertise
- Your passion

multiple sclerosis the author may start with a statement such as 'both urinary and faecal incontinence are persistent problems commonly reported by people with multiple sclerosis' (Wollin et al, 2005). Using this technique draws the reader's attention to the key issues about to be addressed.

Complete a thorough literature review of the topic you are going to address. This enables you to demonstrate a thorough grasp of key issues associated with your topic. You must be able to establish the contribution your article makes to the topic you are addressing. When presenting contemporary findings about a given topic older articles should be avoided. When presenting an overview or a description about how an issue has changed or developed over time, include the classic or gold standard articles (Wink, 2002), which may be many years old. This section needs to be brief, precise and should include a synthesis of theory and empirical evidence in the area, a critique of past work, identify gaps in the knowledge and how your work contributes to this knowledge (Paul, 1990).

A few questions you might like to consider are, 'is it a well researched topic but with very little written from your country's perspective, or from the public or private sector?' 'What does your paper add to the understanding of the topic?' The literature review will help you identify journals that might be suitable for your manuscript.

Just make a list of a few topics you want to cover in the article and use these as headings (Kneale and Santy, 2000). Use anchor statements to give your work direction – 'the purpose of the paper is to...'; 'the purpose of this section is to...'; 'the purpose of this paragraph is to...'. These structural sentences will help give your writing direction and can be removed or embedded in the work once it is nearing completion.

To beat procrastination set time lines and goals, no matter how small, and stick to them. Approximately half of all poster presentations at academic meetings are not published as full articles. The most common reasons cited are lack of time, low priority given to publishing by authors, and lack of co-author participation in drafts. Only a minority of authors cited a methodological issue preventing completion and publication of the research (Sanossian et al, 2006).

Uncertain about contribution to nursing

Nursing is an applied profession; therefore, as a writer you are expected to address the 'so what?' question. What are the implications for nursing practice and or knowledge? If it is not clear to you what the contribution of your work is

making to nursing, it is unlikely that the reader will know either (Paul, 1990).

Lack of detail

Lack of detail can result in a manuscript being rejected. Inadequate detail relating to the sample, data collection, method or inadequate reporting of the research (Purcell et al, 1998) can result in a paper not making the contribution it could to nursing knowledge. A manuscript based on a research study should contain the aims and objectives of the study, research method, sample size, sample selection, research instruments, ethical issues, results and limitations of the study (Tanner, 2000). When publishing the findings of research care should be taken not to overstate the findings by moving beyond what was actually established (Paul, 1990).

Failing to make a convincing argument

When you send a postcard to friends saying, 'The weather is fine, having a great time', you usually assume they believe you and that there is no need to provide any evidence as you are writing to a friendly audience. This is not the case in academic writing.

Writing for publication is always writing to a hostile audience. Rather than wondering, 'what if the reader does not believe me?', think rather, 'how can I convince the reader that what I am saying is reasonable?' The hostile audience expects the author to convince the reader that what they are saying is logical, reasonable, well justified and addresses the topic or question. The examiner/reader/editor does not believe you. In fact, they are highly suspicious about the logic and reasoning of your work. You are, therefore, expected to provide evidence and a sound argument establishing that what you are saying is reasonable and well substantiated.

There is a well used formula for most articles. They should have three clear sections: an introduction where you establish what you are going to address; a body where you present your work; and a conclusion, which should include the key findings or points and discuss the implications for nursing and or practice (Miracle, 2003). The order you write them in will reflect your own style. Use free flowing natural language and do not use long words where short will do (Paul, 1990). Aim for your work to be easily understood by readers.

Inexperience in writing for publication

As noted with the previous example of writing a postcard to your friends, writing for publication is different from other forms of writing. Authors are required to write concisely, persuasively, precisely, clearly and logically. Journals are often very prescriptive about headings, content order and style. Non adherence to instructions for authors can result in a rejection even in the face of a sound article addressing an interesting issue. The use of headings and or link sentences to sign post the direction of the article will help convey meaning.

Poor writing skills may not accurately capture the problem for nurses. Inexperience in writing for publication is likely to be a more accurate descriptor. Henninger and Nolan (1998) implemented group skills development sessions in order to address the lack of writing skills. Group guidance

and encouragement sessions as well as monthly instruction resulted in improved writing skills. Two factors were found to be integral to the success of the skills development program: a clear topic for publication and holding a positive perception of the value of publishing with one's practice environment (Henninger and Nolan, 1998).

Practice in academic writing will help develop your skills. Particular care must be taken when paraphrasing other authors' work. A keen understanding of plagiarism and how to acknowledge others' work is integral to a rigorous paper (Paul, 1990). Referencing needs to reflect the guide to authors. Journals prescribe the system to be used – Harvard, APA or Vancouver as examples.

Lack of workplace valuing of publishing

A profession by definition has a distinct body of knowledge. Publishing our work brings recognition to nursing as a profession and improves the credibility of our work (Miracle, 2003). Carrion et al (2004) found strategies that were effective in increasing utilization of research among nurses included managerial support, education addressing research skills and increasing the time available for reading and research.

Journal clubs have been found to be viewed by nurses as highly relevant to practice (Dyckoff et al, 2004) and result in an improved ability to critique research (Burke et al, 2004; Goodfellow, 2004). Dyckoff et al (2004) found that a mini lecture on how to critique an article was required in the early phase of a journal club in order to develop analytical skills. The workplace researcher may be able to assist with this.

Lack of a clear topic

Only write about what you are passionate about. Writing is time consuming and hard work and attempting to write on a topic that is of very little interest is likely to be unsuccessful (see Table 2 for potential topics to write on). Your passion is likely to be reflected in what you are interested in, what you have read and what you want to write about. This will give you a topic. Once you have a topic, think about the audience and where you would like to publish. This will help focus the article too.

Lack of a clear audience

Think about your target audience; are you aiming at the novice nurse who may know very little about your area of expertise or are you writing for a special interest group who are well informed about the topic. Clinicians are interested in reading clear, easy to comprehend articles in plain English. Avoid the use of jargon as much as possible. The use of highlights and key findings in separate tables helps clinicians find the key message quickly.

Unsure where to publish

Once you have identified your target audience, think about the journals that they read. Is the audience likely to read a nursing specific journal or are they reading journals aimed at a multidisciplinary audience? It may also help to review the reference lists and bibliographies in the articles you have drawn on and where they were published? Once you have two or three journals you think may be appropriate read a number of articles published in them to gain some

insights into the expected writing style and topics commonly addressed in the journal.

Journals have different remits and articles can vary from 500-word letters through to 3000-word in-depth papers (Kneale and Santy, 2000). A specific journal may focus on one aspect of nursing such as nursing education and may therefore not consider articles outside their guidelines. The frequency with which the journal publishes may be another consideration. A small journal that publishes biannually will need fewer papers than a large journal that publishes every 2 weeks. Some journals guarantee turn around times for review, others take many months. You can email the editor with your topic or a title and abstract to establish if the journal is interested in the article you are writing.

Editors

Research papers submitted for publication are reviewed using two key criteria: contribution to knowledge and adequacy of research design. Papers are rejected for publication for a number of reasons: errors associated with statistics, over interpretation of results, poor quality or poor use of instruments, poor quality or sample size, wording that is difficult to follow, poorly planned and implemented research. Quality articles are those that address an important or timely issue, are well written and reflect a rigorous research design (Bordage, 2001). (See Table 3 for suggestions on getting your paper published.)

Rejection – fatal or a lifeline

Any manuscript can be rejected and the vast majority of authors have had rejected articles. Dust yourself off, respond to the feedback and submit it again. Try and avoid taking the reviewers' comments personally. Rejection, feedback, revisions and resubmissions are all part of publishing and make acceptance all the sweeter. Most journals have a double-blind system of review. This means a anonymous copy of the article is reviewed by two reviewers. The reviewers may have expertise in your area, be experienced researchers or authors. A good reviewer will provide detailed feedback that you can use to guide the revision of the article. Feedback is not always available, in which case you may have to call on a trusted colleague or friend for feedback.

Not all rejected papers are irredeemable. A rejection letter advising that revisions are required prior to either the article being reviewed again is one step away from being published. In revising an article two elements are required: you must address the issues/weakness identified by the reviewer and make it clear to the editor that you have addressed the issues as requested. The strongest acceptance is accepted without change (Kneale and Santy, 2000).

Some rejections are 'fatal'. A lack of importance of the study and inappropriate study design will result in absolute

Table 3. Getting that paper published

- Decide on a clear topic
- Identify a specific audience
- Use sound research
- Adhere to journal guidelines

rejection. There may be two issues here: the research topic may not be important to the journal's readers and/or the research design is too weak for the findings to be reliable and/or does not contribute to topic knowledge. Neither of these problems is easily fixed. Unfortunately poor research design cannot be fixed after the fact. Poor design relates to all types of articles. All articles regardless of whether they are short letters to editors, a literature review or clinical audit – they should all comply with the style guide. Be sure to adopt a reasonable and justifiable method in whatever style of article you are writing.

The contribution to knowledge may however be context driven. Your paper may be rejected because you submitted to a journal that does not publish in your topic area or the research method you used may be rejected because it is not valued by the particular audience. Again the instructions to authors are an invaluable guide to judging whether or not your article is suited to a particular journal. Using this information to make a better match between the paper and the journal's focus and audience may result in publication.

Be sure to keep an exact copy of any article you submit so that when you are asked to make changes in order to have your article published you are working on the same version as the editor. Electronic submission is very common in which case you need to keep an exact copy of the article and a record of the reference number so when you resubmit the article the editor knows that the article has been reviewed as requested.

What to look for in that strong paper

A strong paper is one that addresses an issue that is important and relevant to nursing practice, education, policy or procedure. It is well written, clear, straightforward, easy to follow and logical. A successful article is one that can be understood. Acknowledge the contribution of colleagues in the preparation of your article (Tanner, 2000).

Editing your work

Once you have written your article put it aside for a few days and then read it out aloud – this will help identify errors with logic, spelling and grammar. Check that your work reflects the journal's guidelines provided for authors (Paul 1990). Some journals will not even send the material out for review if it does not comply with formatting requirements. Have an editor or medical writer help you if necessary.

Check the spelling is in the required language, for example, British English or American English. It is important to identify and comply with specific language guidelines. For example, a nursing journal may not allow the use of the term 'patient' while a medical journal may not endorse the use of 'client' (Purcell et al, 1998).

When writing the abstract ensure it complies with the word length and presents the most important data. This may be the only section of the article a clinician reads. If their interest is not captured by the title and abstract they are unlikely to go on to read the whole article (Oermann, 2006).

Conclusion

It is clear that writing for publication takes time, specific skills and determination. For aspiring authors, start writing early, for

example, in the planning phase of a research project, case study, literature review, clinical audit and reports. Planning to publish at the beginning of nursing activities makes writing up the project much easier.

The journals researchers publish in should reflect the readership of clinicians. Researchers publishing with an eye to impact factor rather than accessing clinicians are defeating the efforts to disseminate nursing research widely.

The need for nurses to publish has never been stronger. Nurses are being encouraged to provide evidence-based care. We need sound evidence that is disseminated widely in a format that aids its adoption into practice. **BJN**

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KEY POINTS

- Nurses need to publish to promote knowledge and skill development and to provide evidence that can inform practice.
- Write about what you are passionate about: your work, your environment, your issues.
- Write with an experienced author or mentor and follow the journal's instructions and guidelines for contributors.
- Review your work based on editorial feedback.
- Persevere and resubmit if required.