THE RESPONSIBILITY OF REVIEW: GUIDELINES TO PROMOTE PROFESSIONAL COURTESY AND COMMITMENT THROUGH THE PEER REVIEW PROCESS

By

Brenda Happell, Professor of Contemporary Nursing, Department of Health Innovation, Coordinator, Mental and Psychosocial Health, CQU Healthy Communities, Centre for Social Science Research, Faculty of Science, Engineering and Health, Central Queensland University, Bruce Highway, Rockhampton, 4702, Queensland, Australia, Phone: 61 7 49306971, Fax: 61 7 49309871, Email: b.happell@cqu.edu.au

Abstract:

The nursing literature increasingly provides some encouragement for nurses to consider writing for publication in refereed journals. Despite the fact that the publication process depends upon the availability of nurses with the interest, skills and knowledge to undertake the review process, there is a paucity of literature addressing this topic. The aim of this paper is to articulate the role of the reviewer and the importance of the reviewing role, and to describe the skills and attributes required to fulfill the expectations effectively.

Introduction

The nursing literature increasingly refers to the importance of writing for publication as a means to disseminate important nursing knowledge and hence lead to the enhancement of professional status (Edwards & Valley, 2003; Happell, 2005; Meadows, 2004; Mee 2003; Worrall-Carter & Snell, 2003). These publications range from espousing the importance of writing to providing hints and tips to increase the likelihood of success.

Such encouragement is important and necessary, however the more that nurses write the publication, the greater will be the need of editors for reviewers with the interest and skill to critically appraise the manuscripts submitted. A review of the literature in relation to the review process demonstrates a significant paucity. Where the subject of manuscript review has been addressed, it generally pertains to the review process by taking potential authors through the steps a manuscript proceeds through during the review process (Castle-White, 1993; Sullivan, 2001; Sullivan, 2002).
Sullivan (2002) describes the process of selecting reviewers will the knowledge and skills to critique the specific topic and methodological approach. She describes how she responds to reviewers recommendations in terms of her communication with the author(s) and the ultimate decision regarding publication or rejection.

An overview of the outcomes and process of review was articulated by O’Connell (2000). O’Connell distributed a questionnaire to the Editors of nursing journals requesting information about the journal readership and the manuscript review process. The description of the review process referred to the identification and selection of reviewers and the acceptance/rejection rate for journal articles.

Given the importance the limited literature ascribes to people who undertake reviewing roles, it is surprising that there is not more attention directed to this important role and the characteristics required in order for a person to become a constructive and effective reviewer. The aim of this paper is to describe the important role of manuscript review, and provide a guide to nurses interested in undertaking this important role. The potential benefits to reviewers will also be described.

**How to Become a Reviewer**

Generally a person becomes a reviewer either through an invitation from the journal editorial team, or in response to a call for reviewers from the specific journal.

In the case of the latter, the Editor will generally place an advertisement inviting interest from potential reviewers in the journal itself or in an Editorial. Advertisements may also be placed on the website, particularly when the journal is the official publication of a professional journal such as the Australian College of Critical Care Nurses. Interested nurses are usually required to submit a curriculum vitae, and possibly to provide an explanation regarding their interest in the role and the specific skills and experiences they bring to it.

In the other case the reviewer will be contacted directly by the Editor or a member of the Editorial team and be asked to review a specific article, or to become one of a bank of reviewers, available when required in the future. In this situation the Editorial team has become aware of the specific person either because they have submitted a manuscript to this specific journal, or because the team is aware of the work they have done in a particular area. In order to find the right reviewer, a member of the Editorial team might undertake a literature review to identify authors, who would be highly suitable as reviewers, or they may identify potential reviewers in the same manner but through reading the reference list provided. Editors may then contact authors with a request to become a reviewer.
Why Have Reviewers?

The role of Journal Editor is complex and time consuming. The number of manuscripts received per year will vary considerably. However, given that the average amount of time spent on the review of a manuscript is estimated at three hours, an Editor will not have sufficient time to review all articles along with the other editorial responsibilities. It is important to note (a fact often not well known by journal readers) that Editors generally undertake this role in a honorary capacity. They undertake the role, without pay, in addition to their paid employment.

Time factors, while significant, are not likely to represent the primary reason. No matter the level of qualifications, expertise and experience, an Editor will not be in a position to provide considered critique to all of the manuscripts she or he receives, and all of the methodologies used in research studies. Reviewers provide a broad range of expertise from both clinical and methodological perspectives. Furthermore, reviewers reflect divergent views and opinions. Although the Editorial team would not consciously be influenced by his or her specific preferences, there may be an unconscious tendency to choose a certain type of paper over others. Ultimately this might lead to an overall sense of “more of the same” throughout editions of the journal.

Reviewers therefore bring their clinical nursing backgrounds and skills of scholarship and critique together to appraise and often improve a piece of work, written and conceived by a fellow nurse author. Fitzgerald and Yau (2004) describe the role of manuscript reviewers in occupational therapy as:

… important to the development of sound research projects and analyses and interpretations of data. People who engage in this role responsibly enhance the quality of research and the research literature … They enhance validity and personal and professional development (p. 176).

Such a statement is equally true for nursing. The quality and relevance of nursing scholarship as demonstrated through journal publications is largely dependent on the work of reviewers. It is therefore surprising that this important role receives such scant attention in the literature, in acknowledgement of this Fitzgerald and Yau (2004) state:

It is proposed that greater attention should be given to this occupational role [manuscript review] as a way to develop further the quality of occupational therapy research and the related literature in order to situate them better in the corpus of contemporary health science research (p. 176).

Again substitute nursing for occupational therapy and the relevance is equally evident. The perception of nursing research and scholarship both within the nursing profession itself and within the broader health care professions depends on the publication of high quality research. The publication of high quality research depends on the expertise and availability of suitable manuscript reviewers.
Characteristics of a Good Reviewer

At this stage of my career I estimate that I have reviewed manuscripts for approximately 20 journals spanning nursing, allied health, psychiatry and policy journals. In the vast majority of cases I have been sent the manuscript and a review form. The review form generally has specific headings that refer to elements including: relevance, structure of manuscript, relevance and recency of literature, rigour of research approach, sophistication of discussion, and the degree to which the work is relevant to, and important for, nursing knowledge. The aim of this form is to ensure some level of consistency of approach and provide some guidance to the reviewer to assist in systematically reading and critiquing the manuscript.

Some requests to review have been accompanied by the guidelines to authors for the journal, outlining specific expectations such as the word limit, structure and referencing style. Other information might include an expectation of confidentiality and a request that the Editor be notified if the reviewer considers a conflict of interest to be evident. However, I have never received any guidelines regarding the review process itself, the type of comments that are within the reasonable scope of reviewers, or how to provide feedback that is sufficiently constructive and positive to encourage the author to persevere with required revisions, rather then deter them from further involvement in the publication process.

The Role of the Reviewer

My involvement with manuscript reviewing relates to my experiences as an author, a reviewer, and more recently as an Editor and senior member of Editorial teams. In the absence of any written instructions I have, over time, developed my own principles to guide the review process. Broadly these fall into two main areas:

1. the domain of the review process
2. a professional approach to manuscript review.

These two areas will no be briefly discussed.

The domain of the review process

The role of the reviewer is to assess the rigour of piece of work and its relevance to nursing knowledge, either in a broad sense, or in relation to the specific area of speciality considered by the journal. In simple terms therefore, the reviewer must determine whether the manuscript is likely to be of interest to the journal readership, and that is of sufficient quality to make a credible contribution to scholarship in the area.
It is not the responsibility or right of the reviewer to agree or disagree with the substantive argument or content of the manuscript. The author and reviewer may hold disparate opinions on the specific topic. Indeed the reviewer may feel confronted, or even affronted by the content. Such strong reactions can make it very difficult for the reviewer to continue to critique the manuscript in an objective and balanced fashion. However, it is crucial that personal opinion does not override the scholarship. The reviewer needs to hold his or her opinions in check, acknowledge and set aside differences of opinion and ask questions such as:

- Is the argument/point of view clearly articulated?
- Is a balanced point of view advanced?
- Has the author adequately substantiated or backed up his or her claims

Disregarding an article on the basis of differences of opinion is not acceptable, besides being an unfair abuse of power, it potentially stifles intellectual debate. If it is a good article, get it out there and hopefully others will be similarly effected (one way or the other) as you. Likewise manuscripts should not be unfairly dealt with if they use a methodological approach that differs from that preferred from the reviewer. Provided the rationale has been clearly articulated, and the method followed appropriately, the article should be judged on its merit. The work belongs to the author, not the reviewer.

A professional approach to manuscript review

When reviewing a manuscript it is important to constantly remind your self that your comments will be read by the author, a person, and one who has a much greater investment in the work than you do, therefore what you consider to be constructive criticism might be interpreted as an attack on his or her work, opinions or intellectual ability. Many reviewers are experienced authors and therefore may be sufficiently confident to take negative comments from reviewers with a grain of salt. In the absence of a strong track record in acceptance, scathing or insensitive comments can be devastating to a novice author, and in some instances can lead to the author abandoning the piece of work and his or her writing aspirations permanently.

Look for something positive. Even if the argument is not strong, not well substantiated and there are problems with the writing style, if the idea itself is important, novel or innovative then this should be clearly stated, preferably before the criticisms are presented and should be reinforced again at the end of the review, in order to leave the author with some hope that the work can be improved and further developed.
View the review process as a learning exercise rather than a test. Of course you need to alert the author to problems with the manuscript, but the aim should be to encourage improvement rather than merely judge performance. Where you think that changes are required, it is important to be as clear and specific as you can be. For example, if the author has not provided enough information about data analysis, instead of merely stating: “more information about data analysis is required”, it is much more helpful to the author if the reviewer makes clear suggestions such as: “please provide information about the statistical tests used including a justification for their choice.

Similarly, if you are aware of some literature that is important to, and missing from, the authors’ work, then it is extremely helpful to point the person in the right direction. This does not mean that you should do the work and find the references from them, but information readily at hand, such as the surname of some key authors or a web-site where the information could be readily located can be very useful. However, an unsubstantiated suggestion that additional literature or relevant resources exist without assisting the author to find them is not acceptable.

Reviewers are required to assess the value of the manuscript’s content and its relevance to nursing knowledge. This can present some difficulties as reviewers are human and therefore have their own particular areas of interest and it is not always easy to minimise the influence of personal preferences when making judgments about the value of some-one’s work. Ideally the Editorial team will allocate work to reviewers of similar interests but this is not always possible. The available of reviewers can be limited, and often the same people act as reviewers for a number of journals, therefore the frequency of sending manuscripts to a particular person must be limited to ensure people do not become overloaded. When a reviewer finds him/herself reviewing work that might not fit within the usual sphere of interest, she or he must make all possible efforts to think broadly about how the topic might be relevant or important. However, if this is not possible, the reviewer should alert the Editor to this fact. For example, a reviewer might make a statement such as:

This manuscript is well written and clearly argued. The literature appears to be up to date and relevant. The methodology is comprehensively described … etc. However, I do not have any specific expertise in this area and therefore I am not confidently able to attest to the relevance or importance of this work to nursing knowledge.

Reviewers can not be experts on every-thing, and it is far preferable to state one’s own limitations, than to suggest a particular manuscript is not suitable for publication because its importance is not immediately relevant.

Why Be a Reviewer?

In the vast majority of cases, people who review articles do so on a voluntary basis. It can be a time consuming process (estimated to take an average of three hours per manuscript). One might therefore reasonably ask, why would any-one want to be a reviewer?
My first response is one of professional responsibility. The publication of research findings and other forms of nursing knowledge are important for the professional development of nurses and for nursing (Happell, 2005). Without reviewers, the publication of high quality and contemporary literature will be in jeopardy. Any-one who has a vested interest in nursing publications therefore has an obligation to contribute to the process as a reviewer.

There are many benefits to be gained from the review process. The reviewer is often privy to information and research findings up to two years before the article is published in print. Although the reviewer is bound by professional ethics (and sometimes by a confidentiality agreement) not to publically disclose knowledge gained through unpublished materials, the information can nevertheless be relevant and can influence the reviewer’s own work.

Reviewing the work of others can be helpful in the development of one’s own writing style. For example, because authors have intimate knowledge of the work or issue they are writing about, it is quite easy to launch straight in, assuming some background knowledge that others don’t have, and therefore not providing the necessary context. By recognising this in the work of others, the reviewer may more easily recognise this practice in his or her own work. This is just one example of how the process of peer review can assist with the development and improvement of individual writing styles.

For nurses working in an academic environment, reviewing manuscripts is generally an expectation, possibly a requirement. In other senior nursing positions, particularly those with a focus on education, professional development and/or research, it is highly likely to be desirable. Stipulating that one is a reviewer for one or more nursing or health related journals is likely to be favourable in the development of one’s curriculum vitae.

The Responsibility of Reviewing

Despite its voluntary nature, the role of reviewer is accompanied by responsibilities. People depend on the reviewer; the author depends on a timely response to his or her manuscript. Not only to alleviate the anxiety of waiting for and wondering about the outcome, but more importantly to maintain the currency of the manuscript’s content. The author (and indeed the reading public) wants this work to be published as soon as possible. This problem becomes even more pronounced if the work is not accepted for publication. The author may wish to rework the paper and submit to another journal. Lengthy delays may decrease the currency of the work, and at the very least may require a major re-write of the literature review in order to ensure the currency of the background information.
The Editor relies heavily on his/her reviewers to ensure a timely and efficient publication process. As stated above, most Editors undertake this role on a voluntary basis and in addition to a full time job. Although it is understood that at times events happen in a person’s life that make it difficult to fulfill this obligation in a timely manner, Editors do not tend to be particularly sympathetic to reviewers who decline to undertake a review, or do not complete the review in a timely manner because they are “too busy”. Admittedly, the review process is sporadic and unpredictable and this may be the cause of disruption, particularly when a person is a reviewer for more than one journal. There may be a period of several months during which the reviewer does not receive any manuscripts, followed by a rush when they receive one from each journal. It may also be that the reviewer receives a manuscript at a particularly busy time of the year.

It is understandable that there will be times a reviewer wishes to decline an invitation. However, before doing so the reviewer should keep two things in mind, firstly declining a review places additional and time consuming responsibility of finding an alternative, and secondly, that any delays in locating reviewers who are willing and able to undertake the review, will result in a delay in the review and subsequent publication of the manuscript (if accepted). As many reviewers are also authors, they may well have experienced the frustration associated with delays in the review process. Therefore reviews should treat authors with the respect they seek when submitting their own manuscripts for consideration.

In order to minimise delays in the review process, the reviewer should contact the Editor as soon as possible if she or he is going to be unavailable for a period of time and if a reviewer feels there is no option but to decline a review, this should be done as soon as possible to enable the Editor to find an replacement reviewer.

Conclusions

The importance of nurses writing for publication in refereed journals has been documented in the literature. Limited literature acknowledges the importance of the peer review process to ensure a high standard of relevant literature is published. Reviewers with the ability and interest to critique and evaluate manuscripts are therefore crucial to this process. In recognition of the limited literature addressing the issue of peer review, this paper provided an overview of: the importance of, and characteristics of reviewers and potential benefits for the reviewers themselves. An overview of the role and responsibilities of reviewers is also provided.
References


