

## **Disseminating Nursing Knowledge – A Guide to Writing for Publication**

by

**Associate Professor Brenda Happell B.A. (Hons), Ph.D, Dip Ed., RN. Director Centre for Psychiatric Nursing Research and Practice, School of Nursing, University of Melbourne, Level 1, 723 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3010. Australia.**

**Phone (03) 8344 0769 Fax (03) 9347 4172**

**Email: [b.happell@nursing.unimelb.edu.au](mailto:b.happell@nursing.unimelb.edu.au)**

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### **Abstract:**

The dissemination of research findings and other forms of nursing knowledge is generally accepted as an element of accountability for professional practice. While an increase in nursing research has been apparent in recent times, there seemingly remains a reluctance for nurses to publish the findings of their work. The identified barriers to writing for publication primarily focus on a lack of confidence in the ability to write in this arena, and uncertainty, apprehension and confusion regarding how exactly to go about writing and submitting a manuscript. The primary aim of this paper is to demystify the process of writing for publication by presenting a guide ranging from selecting the journal, to dealing with the reviewers' comments. Although the available literature includes a number of helpful hints, coverage of all of the relevant aspects in one article could not be located. It is intended that this paper will provide a valuable contribution by encouraging nurses to develop their research findings or other scholarly ideas into a manuscript to be submitted for publication.

**(Keywords) Nurses - Writing – Barriers - Publication – Attitudes - Profession Practice)**

### **Introduction:**

A review of the literature clearly emphasises the importance of nursing knowledge being documented through journal publications (Edwards & Valley, 2003; Mee, 2003; Sedhom, Gerardi, King, Kelleher, Cesta, Conahue, Bove & Oboyski, 2000; Wills, 2000). The importance of the dissemination of nursing knowledge has received particular emphasis through the increase in nursing research activity. Nursing research is regarded as a vital ingredient in the development of a strong evidence-base for nursing practice (Edwards & Valley, 2003). For the full value of this research to be achieved, the findings must be disseminated (Edwards & Valley, 2003; Meadows, 2004). Indeed it has been argued that nurse researchers have a professional obligation to publish the results of research projects. "Research is not a personal quest for knowledge or enrichment, it is a quest for profession and, through its practitioners, for the ultimate beneficiaries of health care – patients" (Mulhall, 1996, p.50).

However, the reluctance of nurses to submit articles for publication is evident (Mee, 2003; Mulhall, 1996; Stepnaski, 2002). This is particularly apparent amongst nurses engaged in clinical practice, who tend to view the publication of nursing knowledge as the domain of academics (Mee, 2003). In order to address this problem and encourage publication, the barriers must be identified and strategies put in place to overcome them.

Insufficient time is frequently identified as a major deterrent to the publication endeavours of nurses (Oermann, 2003). There is no easy solution to finding the time to write and edit an article for publication. There is, however, a tendency for nurses not to identify the material at their disposal, which could, with sufficient endeavour and support, become transformed into publishable manuscripts. One of the most striking examples is publication derived from dissertations. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a large proportion of nurses who complete higher degree qualifications, particularly at master's level, do not publish from this work. Not only does this suggest that masters prepared nurses working in academia do not sufficiently exploit the intellectual property they have produced, but with a considerable increase in clinicians completing a master's qualification, it suggests there is important clinical information, which cannot be accessed by other nurses.

The increased activity around quality assurance and improvement projects within the health care sector has resulted in the collection of important information and data that addresses significant problems identified in the clinical domain (Cleary & Walter, 2004). This provides a ready source of material for publication, but more importantly it represents sources of knowledge which are likely to have implications and relevance well beyond the specific clinical environment in which the work is conducted. Indeed without the dissemination of this work, health care organisations will continue to grapple with the same or similar issues, frequently investing significant resources to address a problem that has already been addressed by a similar service (Oermann, 2003). Writing for publication therefore becomes an imperative for nursing on a professional level, economic level, and most importantly, as a significant contribution to providing the highest possible standard of care to consumers of health care services.

Other barriers most commonly identified in the literature include lack of confidence, inadequate writing skills, lack of motivation and insufficient resources such as support and mentorship (Stepanski, 2002; Wills, 2000). The apparent complexity of the writing for publication process itself might also act as a significant deterrent (King & Price, 2003; Miracle, 2003). The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the important factors involved in having an article published. A number of relevant topics will be addressed, these will include selecting the journal, preparing the manuscript (and identifying individual writing style in the process), submitting the manuscript, and dealing with reviewers' comments if the article is rejected or major changes are requested.

## Choosing the Journal:

This should be the first task you undertake, as doing so will save considerable time in the long run. Journals have individual requirements about such factors as the type of manuscripts accepted (i.e. research only, clinical papers, etc.), word limit for manuscripts and the referencing style used. In the first instance the task of choosing the journal can appear extremely daunting. There are literally hundreds of nursing journals covering an array of specific topics, including specialty practice areas, general issues, education and administration to mention but a few (Mee, 2003). While the task may appear overwhelming it can be readily simplified. Firstly you need to decide whether to submit to a refereed or non-refereed journal. While this terminology may appear confusing it is actually quite simple.

A refereed publication is also commonly referred to as peer reviewed. The manuscript is sent to a minimum of two reviewers whom the editor regards as expert in the subject matter and/or methodology of your manuscript. It is known as a double-blind process. This means that no information identifying you is sent to the reviewers and you are not provided with any information regarding the people who have reviewed your manuscript. This process ensures the rigour of the review as it enables your work to be judged on its individual merit, rather than being influenced, either intentionally or unintentionally by the reviewers' opinion of you at either a professional or personal level. It also enables the reviewers to make comments freely, without fear that you may identify them and be influenced in current or future professional relationships by the comments they have made on your manuscript.

Non-refereed articles do not undergo the same degree of rigour in review. The exact process may vary but they are generally reviewed and accepted or rejected by the journal editor. Manuscripts published in refereed or peer reviewed journals are therefore considered to be of a higher quality. Nurses engaged in academic occupations are strongly recommended to publish in refereed journals only. However, the decision is not so straightforward for nurses engaged in clinical practice. Non-refereed journals frequently have a high circulation level and are particularly well read by other clinicians. Ultimately the decision for referred vs non-referred should be influenced by the audience the author seeks to target.

An important part of any journal article is the literature review. This is particularly so in the case of research, but opinion or specific practice focused papers also need to demonstrate that the author is well aware of what has been written on the topic and how this relates to the content of the article presented. In reviewing the relevant literature, the author is also beginning the process of identifying potential journals for submission. The journals that have published the literature you are sourcing in your research are likely to be interested in the work you are producing. This can assist considerably in narrowing the search.

At the end of the short-listing process, a level of confusion may still remain. How do I pick one journal from the five or six possibilities? It is important to be clear about the fact that you can only submit to one journal at a time. It is therefore in your best interests as an author to select a journal that is likely to conduct the review of your article in a timely manner. There is no precise process to finding out how long the editorial process will take, but there are some strategies that may help.

Firstly this may be articulated in the information to *author's section* (found in the hard copy of the journal or on the journal website). If not, there are usually contact details for the editor or editorial assistant. A quick email will usually secure this information.

A review of published articles in journals of interest may provide valuable information. Most journals publish the date on which each published article was accepted for publication. Some journals also publish the date on which the article was submitted for publication. By comparing the date of submission to the date of acceptance, you are able to have some idea as to how long the review process has taken. As a note of caution, however, ensure that you review a number of articles from different editions. Manuscripts are frequently subject to revision, some of which require considerable reworking. The time taken by the authors in addressing the revisions is beyond the control of the editorial process, so it is useful to keep this in mind and use the above as a guide only. If you have contacts with nurses who have published widely, their advice as to their own experiences would be particularly useful.

An email to the editor might present the means for making the final decision. Many journals actively encourage this form of contact, but even where there is no explicit invitation it is highly recommended. A brief summary of your intended manuscript, including subject matter, methodology (if relevant) and the significance of this work should be forwarded. It is important that the information is brief as editors are busy people and less likely to review a lengthy summary. No more than 200 words is recommended, and the draft abstract of your paper is probably ideal. Make sure it is clearly written, and edited for typographical and spelling errors. The editor is likely to be influenced by presentation as well as content.

The level of interest and enthusiasm of the responses you receive will hopefully clarify the most suitable journal. Not only in terms of the level of encouragement you receive, but also in terms of the length of time taken for a response. A delay in response may indicate a lesser degree of enthusiasm, and perhaps more importantly, a high workload on the part of the editor. Again, this need not necessarily be the case but is worth keeping in mind in making that final decision.

Once you have made your decision it is important that you carefully read the *Instructions to authors* section and adhere to the requirements of the journal including referencing style, word limit and the presentation of the article (i.e. page margins, line spacing, number of copies to be submitted) (Cleary & Walter, 2004). If the information section is not adequate, you should refer to hard or electronic versions of published manuscripts. This is particularly useful for familiarising yourself with the referencing style.

There is currently a strong trend towards electronic submission and review of journal manuscripts. This is likely to considerably speed up the review process and may therefore be an influencing factor in the choice of journal. Now that you have selected the journal, it is time to begin the process of writing. The following suggestions may prove to be of assistance.

### **Writing the Manuscript:**

It is not within the scope of this paper to include a detailed outline of the structure of a manuscript and how to complete each section. The aim is to provide useful tips on how to manage the writing process. The most important aspect of this is developing and/or identifying your natural writing style. Having attended a number of writing for publication workshops, it is not uncommon for the facilitator to advocate a systematic approach to writing. There are many supporters of the "start at the beginning approach," generally recommending that the author starts by completing the abstract. As a summary of the information and approach to be reflected in the manuscript, writing the abstract first is considered a strategy to keep the author on track. Other facilitators have recommended that authors start in the middle, that is, they work on the essence of what they want to say, the main argument or point they want to make, and build the remainder of the article, such as the literature review, methodology and findings (in the case of a research paper) around it.

Both approaches have their merits and advantage but it is important to avoid the one-size fits all approach. Some people prefer a highly ordered approach to writing, with a need to tightly plan the content and structure of the manuscript before putting pen to paper. For these authors, writing an abstract would clearly represent an important part of that planning process. Other people prefer to write now and organise later. For authors of this type, the need to write an abstract first may well mean that a potential paper doesn't get written. The term "writer's block" is frequently attributed to authors who do not respond effectively to starting at the beginning. Trying to force themselves into this approach inhibits their natural writing style.

Prospective authors should recognise that what you end up with is far more important than how you got there. Developing an understanding of one's own writing style may come easily to some but for others, particularly those who have tried to conform to a non-preferred approach, this may be more difficult to achieve. However, it is only through practice, in as relaxed a state of mind as possible that this understanding will develop.

Whatever your writing style, there is one important tip that applies to all authors. Write a rough draft as quickly as possible and take time to carefully edit and structure the manuscript (Burnard, 2001). It is important in this context to be clear about what a rough draft is. Many authors believe that whatever they write the first time is a rough draft. In reality however, many people write as though this is the final version. They frequently become obsessed with the structure, expression and presentation of the draft. Time is often taken making sure a sentence sounds right, that references have been included to support an argument and that clear links are made between paragraphs or sections.

Such an approach will certainly make the editing process more straightforward, it can be extremely inhibiting on the ability of the author to write freely in order that the main points are put down on the paper. The rough draft stage should be described and viewed as the ideas on paper stage. Unless you choose to do otherwise, no one needs to read your work at this stage. There is plenty of time to select the right words and to structure the argument to flow coherently. If you are fully familiar with the literature, there is no need to look up relevant references each time you make a point that needs

to be substantiated. It is sufficient to put the word references in brackets, or underline the relevant section as a way to prompt yourself that this needs to be addressed. This way you can continue on writing the article and complete the all-important task of getting the ideas down on paper.

Once the rough draft is completed, it is quite likely that you will feel exhausted, and that in itself is a good reason to take a break. However, even if your motivation to complete the article is still strong, it is likely that you will feel very close to your work at this stage, to the extent that you may experience some difficulty in being objective. Sometimes authors read their drafts at this stage and feel overly confident, consider the article to be completed and want to send it to the journal editor as quickly as possible.

Other authors feel completely despondent, and can be very tempted to abandon the project as a bad idea. Both responses can be dangerous and it is highly likely that the readiness of the manuscript will fall somewhere in between the two extremes. Distance can be an enormous benefit at this stage. A complete break from the manuscript of one to two weeks can facilitate authors to develop a more critical eye, that will hopefully enable them to appreciate the strengths and merits of the manuscript, while also identifying the areas where refinement and/or improvement is required.

Once the author is satisfied that the manuscript has been thoroughly edited, the assistance of peers to review the content and presentation should be sought. People who have successfully published are particularly valuable in appraising the structure, flow and expression of the manuscript. Nurses with experience relevant to the content area can also make an important contribution in appraising the subject matter and identifying areas in which the argument or discussion is not clear.

It is now time to submit the paper for publication, even if you don't feel completely satisfied that it is as good as it could be. Authors are rarely totally satisfied with the quality of the finished product, but continuing to edit beyond a certain point can be counterproductive, and in extreme cases may cause the author to doubt the viability of the manuscript.

Before submission the author should again check the *information to authors* for the journal and ensure the manuscript conforms to requirements. It is then simply a matter of submitting and awaiting the outcome.

### **Dealing with Reviewer's Comments:**

If you are fortunate enough to have your manuscript accepted with only minor editorial and typographical changes, then congratulations! However, anecdotal evidence suggests that unconditional acceptance of one's first paper is extremely rare (and most certainly wasn't the case for this author). In the more likely event that this is not the case, it is difficult not to feel despondent, but remember don't give up! This is a learning process, a skill that can, and with perseverance, will be mastered.

Although there are some variations in the format, your manuscript will generally be returned as either:

- Accepted for publication with no changes required
- Accepted for publication subject to minor revisions
- Major revisions required
- Not acceptable for publication

The first scenario is straightforward and nothing further is required of the author. However, as stated above, this outcome is rare. It is more common for the manuscript to be accepted subject to minor changes. The extent of minor changes can vary from grammatical and typographical errors, amendment of inconsistency in referencing, clarification of certain points, to the inclusion of more detail or the strengthening of an argument. In this case the author is generally required to submit the amendment manuscript to the editor. The editor reviews the article and determines if the requested changes have been made.

Although it is rare that the manuscript would be rejected following resubmission with the minor changes as requested, anecdotal evidence suggests that a significant number of first time authors do not make the requested changes. Unfortunately there is no research examining the reasons for this. It has been hypothesised that authors often view the fact that the manuscript has not been accepted unconditionally as an indication of failure. Indeed this is not the case even the most experienced writer's are generally required to make some changes of a minor nature. If this happens to you, be encouraged not discouraged, it is truly a great outcome and it is now highly likely that your manuscript will be accepted for publication in the near future.

In the case of the third scenario, major changes are generally required. Again the extent of this will vary, but it is possible that you will be required to, for example, rewrite a substantial proportion of the paper, include discussion of specific literature, or refine and/or strengthen your argument. This is generally very disheartening, and is frequently viewed as rejection. If you are feeling angry or upset, and feel that this is proof positive that you don't have the skills to be a writer, then again, you are not the only one.

Depending on the quality of the reviewers' comments it may not be as difficult a task as first considered. However, when first receiving disappointing news it is difficult to view the reviewers' comments objectively. To avoid feeling overwhelmed, it is recommended that you put the manuscript away for a period of one to two weeks, or until your anger and despondency settles. Be careful not to leave it too long at the risk of becoming too removed from the paper and finding it difficult to pick up the threads.

When coming back to the manuscript, examine the reviewers' comments carefully, it can be useful to take notes, to clarify in your own mind what is being asked of you. It is quite possible that the feedback you receive will contain comments that you disagree with, sometimes strongly. This may be because you consider the reviewer to be wrong, or that you believe the comment reflects a difference of opinion. There is a tendency for authors to regard reviewers as omnipotent, and therefore believe they must either make the changes, or accept the fact that the manuscript will not be accepted for publication. This need not necessarily be the case. Editors and reviewers generally respond favourably to the author's clarification of fact, or defence of an argument.

Following completion of the examination of feedback the author should carefully evaluate what the reviewers are asking to be done. In referring to notes, the author should be readily able to classify the required changes into one of two categories: those the author agrees with or is prepared to go along with (sometimes the author might not agree, for example, that the title needs to be changed, but may decide that it is really not such a large issue and is worth the compromise in order that the manuscript be published), and those the author disagrees with.

The author is then faced with the decision of whether to revise or not. The last thing he or she wants to do at this stage is to extensively revise the manuscript in order to have it rejected outright. While there are never any guarantees that this will not happen, the author can minimise the possibility by corresponding with the editor. The author should prepare a letter outlining his or her responses to the reviewers' comments as depicted above. It is important to include a well-justified rationale for the areas where the author is not prepared to make the changes as suggested. The letter should be assertive but polite. Even where the author is convinced a reviewer is wrong or unjustified in his or her comments, there is nothing to be gained by being disparaging. The response from the editor should assist the author in determining whether or not it is worth revising and resubmitting the manuscript.

Undoubtedly the most difficult of all is dealing with the outright rejection of the manuscript. Hopefully you will take some comfort from the fact that this happens, and has happened to most authors at some stage in their career. It does not necessarily mean the end of your manuscript. As you have already become aware through choosing the journal to submit to, there are many other nursing journals that may well be interested in your work. Hopefully you have received comprehensive comments explaining why the manuscript has been rejected. These can be utilised to assist you in redeveloping and revising your manuscript for another journal. Of course this may not be a decision you come to immediately. The strategy suggested for major revisions is also crucial here. Put the manuscript away for a while, stamp your feet and debrief with colleagues before coming back and taking another look from a fresh perspective.

If you make the decision to submit to another journal (and I sincerely hope that you do), it is crucial that you check the *Information to Authors* section. The submission requirements of journals can vary considerably and failure to reformat the manuscript may alert the Editor to the fact that this manuscript has previously been rejected by another journal (Cleary & Walter, 2004). While there is nothing wrong with doing so, it is preferably not to highlight this from the outset.

### **Conclusions:**

The publication of the findings of nursing research is crucial to the nursing profession (Edwards & Valley, 2003; Mee, 2003; Meadows, 2004; Sedhom, et al, 2000; Wills, 2000). However, the paucity of published research, particularly that emanating from the clinical domain, demonstrates the reluctance of nurses to disseminate their findings through written publications (Mee, 2003; Mulhall, 1996; Stepnaski, 2002).

The complexity involved in preparing and submitting manuscripts for publication has been identified as a significant barrier to the writing endeavours of nurses (King & Price, 2003; Miracle, 2003). In light of these concerns, the aim of this paper was to contribute to demystifying the process of writing for publication. Information has been provided on a practical level to assist the potential author in relation to: selecting the journal, preparing the manuscript, and dealing with reviewers' comments.

While this paper is not presented in sufficient detail to serve as a step-by-step guide, it is hoped that it will provide some encouragement and motivation for nurses to dip their toe into the publication swimming pool. This is particularly pertinent for clinicians who have a wealth of knowledge and experience that could prove enormously valuable to peers throughout the world.

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