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Publishing in Professional Journals: A Guide for Getting Started

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Abstract

Publishing in professional journals can be a challenging yet very rewarding professional activity. Faculty are often expected to contribute to the nursing literature but may not have the knowledge or experience to publish their work.

This article describes the critical steps for getting started with writing a manuscript and addresses choosing the topic, deciding the intended audience, picking a journal, and determining authorship.

By following a step-by-step process, faculty will have a better chance of achieving a successful publication.

INTRODUCTION

Publishing articles in nursing journals is an ideal way to disseminate new knowledge, communicate best practices, and share effective solutions to common problems. Faculty members in schools of nursing use information from journal articles to guide teaching, select students most likely to succeed, develop effective curricula, and promote faculty career success. Faculty not only apply the literature to their practice but often they are expected to contribute to the scholarship of the profession by publishing their work. In addition to the satisfaction of contributing to the knowledge base of nursing, authors glean career opportunities because of their publications. Viewed as experts on a topic, authors may be asked to complete manuscript reviews, speak at conferences, and consult on issues related to their topic. The purpose of this article is to help faculty begin the publishing process so they may contribute to the scholarship of nursing. Factors to consider when selecting a topic, determining the audience, choosing the journal, and deciding authorship are addressed. Strategies to get started with writing also are discussed.

CHOOSE A TOPIC

Deciding a topic for a manuscript is the first step in the publishing process. There are several criteria for authors to consider in the selection process. The topic must answer the "So what?" or "Who cares?" question [1]. This means the topic needs to spark the interest of the reader. Readers want to read journal articles that offer new information or a unique perspective on a familiar topic. They hope to learn facts or processes that are applicable in their role as an educator [2]. Enough detail must be described in the manuscript so that readers can replicate the authors' ideas in their setting. If the manuscript presents a research study, a sufficient description of the steps of the research process must be presented so that readers can reproduce the study. Even if a manuscript is very well written, if it does not provide new information or a new slant on a familiar topic or does not deliver adequate detail, the manuscript will not be published. Table 1 lists topics that are appropriate for a nursing education journal.

Table 1. Topics Appropriate for Nursing Education Journals

• Recruitment and retention of faculty
• Faculty burnout and turnover
• Dealing with difficult faculty situations
• Mentorship programs for faculty
• Leadership development
• Faculty professional development
• Strategies to promote the scholarship of faculty
• Faculty practice plans
• Solutions for challenging experience
• Dealing with incivility
• Teaching innovations
• Interprofessional education methods
• Effective teaching methods
• Predictors of student success
• Strategies for recruitment and retention of students
• Dealing with difficult student situations
• Strategies to promote student success
• Coping with budget cuts
• Strategic planning
• Academic practice partnerships
• Academic community partnerships
• Trends in higher education and their impact on nursing education
• Concept analysis if the concept is related to education
• Instrument development if the instrument is related to education
• Opinion/commentary/debate about an issue

When developing the topic, authors must first create one main purpose for the manuscript and avoid straying from this focus when writing. The single clear purpose of the manuscript should be stated the same way each time it is mentioned in the manuscript [3]. Novice authors often make the mistake of having too broad of a purpose or of having multiple purposes for the manuscript. These two mistakes usually result in a manuscript that does not adequately address the topic and is at risk of being rejected by the editor.

Authors need to tell the reader clearly if the manuscript is describing a research study, a quality improvement project, an outcomes evaluation project, or a solution-focused narrative. Reviewers and editors are seeking manuscripts describing findings from research and projects that are applicable and generalizable beyond one group or a single setting. As a result, research studies with large sample sizes and ones that are multi-site are more likely to receive positive responses from reviewers [4].

Some topics do not receive favorable comments from manuscript reviewers and editors. For example, authors should not claim a manuscript is a research report when in reality it is an account of a course, workshop, program, or alumni evaluation. These evaluation topics are of great value to the authors' institution, but of little interest to readers.

Other topics that do not receive a positive response from reviewers and editors are studies that involve a pre-test, teaching a module or course, followed by a post-test. One would expect students' scores to improve and readers find little applicable or generalizable information from such studies. Reviewers also have a negative impression of studies that examine students' perceptions of their learning or competencies rather than a true measure of them [4].

DECIDE THE INTENDED AUDIENCE

After deciding the topic for the manuscript, the next critical step in publishing for journals is to select the audience for the manuscript. Journal articles can only have one primary audience. For education-focused manuscripts, authors must determine for example, if the manuscript is intended for experienced faculty, novice faculty, research faculty, or education administrators. Other groups may benefit from reading the manuscript, but authors must focus on only one group when preparing the manuscript. Novice authors often make the mistake of trying to write for multiple audiences. When writing, authors must always keep in mind what the intended audience already understands about the topic and avoid repeating information they already know [3,5,6].

PICK A JOURNAL

Authors must find a match of their topic and intended audience with an appropriate journal before proceeding to write the manuscript. For example, some journals only publish clinically focused articles while others publish solely educational ones. Some journals are intended for staff nurse audiences whereas others aim for an audience of managers and administrators. Editors will immediately reject manuscripts that do not match the journal's purpose and intended audience.

The International Academy of Nursing Editors (INANE) offers a directory of journals on their website: https://nursingeditors.com/journals-directory/. The directory is an excellent resource to find nursing journals from around the world and includes links to author guidelines and editors. The directory is a great place to start the search for an appropriate journal.

When selecting a journal, it is essential that the targeted journal is peer-reviewed. This means the editor sends the manuscript to two or three volunteer experts in the field to review the manuscript and provide feedback to the editor and author. Nursing journals usually employ a double-blinded peer-review process which indicates reviewers' identity is not revealed to the authors and reviewers do not know the names of the authors at the time of review [3].

Authors also must determine if a topical journal or a journal with mixed topics is best for the manuscript. Editors of topical journals make decisions for the theme of the journal issue at least a year in advance. Authors who wish to publish in a topical journal need to contact the editor far in advance of the publishing date for the issue of the journal. Editors are on tight schedules and authors must fit with the editor's timeline.

Another important decision for authors is choosing to submit the manuscript to an open-access or a traditional journal. An open-access journal is one that provides readers unrestricted online access to the articles for free. Usually, costs are covered by a fee that is charged to the authors. For some journals, the authors' fee can be rather substantial. In comparison, traditional journals restrict their access and cover their costs through subscription fees or through a pay-per-article fee. Most often the authors of articles in traditional journals pay no fees to have their work published.

Some authors are concerned about a journal's impact factor when selecting a journal. The impact factor is an attempt to provide a measure of the journal's importance or rank. The impact factor is a measure of the frequency with which an article in a journal has been cited in a particular year. The impact factor is calculated based on a two-year period and involves dividing the number of times articles in the journal were cited by the number of articles that are citable in that journal. The impact factor as a measure of importance or rank has been open to criticism because it does not reflect the quality of

the peer-review process or the actual quality of the articles published in the journal [7,8].

When choosing a journal, it is imperative for authors to avoid what is called "predatory journals." A group of scientists convened in 2019 to define the term. "Predatory journals and publishers are entities that prioritize self-interest at the expense of scholarship and are characterized by false or misleading information, deviation from best editorial and publication practices, a lack of transparency, and or the use of aggressive and discriminant solicitation practices." p.211 [9]. Often editors of these journals solicit manuscripts through poorly written emails that promise acceptance with a very rapid time from submission to publication. Although some predatory journals claim to be peer-reviewed, the short time frame from submission to publication makes the peer review process suspect [10,11].

Once the journal is selected, all authors should review the journal's website to learn more about the journal and to make certain the journal is the right match for the proposed manuscript's topic and audience. Next, all authors must read the author guidelines found on the journal's website and follow them through every step of the writing and submission process. The author guidelines describe the maximal length and style of the manuscript and the required formatting of tables and figures [1,6]. The mandatory reference style used within the text of the manuscript and for the reference list also is explained in the author guidelines and must be followed. Authors should not expect the editor or publisher to convert their manuscript to the correct reference style.

Some authors wonder if a query letter to the editor is needed to ascertain the editor's interest in the topic and the appropriateness of the topic for the journal. The answer to that question varies based on the journal. Some editors welcome query letters and will inform authors if the topic is or is not of interest to the journal. Other editors are too busy and do not respond to query letters. If authors do not receive a response to their query letter, they still can send the manuscript. If authors do receive a positive response to a query letter, it in no way indicates a commitment to publish the manuscript, but merely suggests the editor is willing to consider the manuscript [3].

DETERMINE AUTHORSHIP

Deciding who should be included as an author for a manuscript is a very important decision in the publishing process. When a person is listed as an author on a manuscript, it means the person is responsible and accountable for the work [12]. Authorship on a manuscript implies credit for the work and has important implications for the authors' academic careers. For example, authorship of manuscripts is required for promotion and tenure in most universities. As mentioned previously, authorship also may lead to other career opportunities.

An important decision to make is if the manuscript will have a single author or be authored by a team. Each approach has advantages and disadvantages. Single authors control all decisions made about the manuscript. However, sole authorship can be lonely and possibly result in a long time to complete the manuscript. A sole author may not have all the expertise needed to write the manuscript. For example, it may be necessary to include a statistician for the study and as an author of the manuscript.

When working as a member of a multi-author team, each author may only have a piece of the manuscript to write thus decreasing the workload burden and possibly the time to complete the manuscript. Writing teams have the benefit of being comprised of people with different types of expertise. For some, teamwork is more enjoyable because of the social interaction that occurs. However, members of a team may at times have to compromise on how to approach some aspects of the work. Compromise may be hard for some members of the team.

If a manuscript is going to be written by multiple authors, some essential steps must be taken before starting to write. First, when selecting members of the team, each author must have confidence in the expertise of the team members and in the integrity of the contributions of the co-authors [12]. Novice authors may ask an experienced author to join them as a co-author and guide them through the writing of a manuscript. Or, a novice author may request to join an established team and be mentored in the writing process. Novice nurse authors may consider inviting author colleagues from other disciplines

such as social sciences or education since members of other disciplines may bring a helpful unique view to the topic.

The second step in forming an author team is to determine the order of authorship, the workload assigned to each author, and due dates. When assigning workload, it is important to designate one person to read and edit the entire manuscript to ensure a consistent writing style and to remove redundancies. Also, the team must decide how late team members can be before they are eliminated from a team.

The third step in constructing an author team is to select the person who will fill the role of the corresponding author. The corresponding author does not have to be the first author of the manuscript. The corresponding author is the team member who takes primary responsibility for communicating with the journal editor during the manuscript submission, peer review, and publication process [12]. All the agreed-upon information from steps two and three should be placed in a written document before any writing begins.

If there are any questions about who can and should be listed as part of the author team for a manuscript, consult the author guidelines developed by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE). Their guidelines outline who has rights to authorship and who does not. According to the ICMJE, all those listed as authors should meet all four criteria for authorship, and all who meet the four criteria should be designated as authors [12]. The following are the four required criteria for authorship:

- Substantial contributions to conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data, AND
- Drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content, AND
- Final approval of the version to be published, AND
- Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work; ensure that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are investigated and resolved.

All members of the author team must approve the final manuscript, take public responsibility for the work, and have full confidence in the accuracy and integrity of the work of other author team members [12]. Neither the editor of the journal nor the publisher of the journal has the responsibility to determine who qualifies or does not qualify for authorship or to settle any authorship disputes. When consensus cannot be reached regarding authorship for a publication, the institution(s) where the work was performed should be asked to investigate. Likewise, if there are disagreements over the order of authorship for a publication, the editor and publisher do not get involved in arbitrating the decision [12]. That is why it is so important to determine who qualifies for authorship and order of authorship in advance of any writing.

When a person makes a valuable contribution to the work but does not meet all four criteria required for authorship, the person should be acknowledged using the acknowledgment format required by the journal [12]. Based on the ICMJE author guidelines, the following factors by themselves do not justify authorship [12]:

- Acquisition of funding
- Writing assistance, technical editing, language editing, and proofreading
- Supervision of the research group
- General administrative support.

The authors may also want to acknowledge people who made any of the above contributions to the work.

START WRITING

Once authors complete the steps of topic selection, audience determination, journal choice, and authorship, some suddenly have trouble starting to write. These authors may experience fears of failure that immobilize them. Authors need to identify their fears and perhaps seek the guidance of a mentor, experienced author, or other members of the writing team to help them overcome their fears. Faculty need to have confidence in their experience and expertise and realize they have an important message to share with their colleagues.

Once authors find techniques to overcome their fears of writing and are ready to get started, there are some strategies that help promote progress. Some authors first create a detailed outline for the manuscript, others just start writing, while some use dictation software and imagine themselves delivering the information to a class or at a conference. Authors can try various methods but need to implement the ones that work best for them.

Other strategies for effective writing include finding a quiet place to write that is free of distractions. Also, successful authors know the time of day they are most productive and schedule their writing during those times. An avoidance strategy that faculty frequently use is to delay any writing until their "to do" list is completed. Unfortunately, for most faculty, the list never ends. Productive authors place writing times on their calendars and always stick to those times. Some authors prefer to write for just 30 minutes every day whereas others prefer to write an hour or two a few times per week. Successful authors also have trained themselves to overcome delay tactics such as taking a nap, going for a long run, or cleaning the house when they really should be using the time to write. Implementing these strategies will help any faculty member become a productive author [13].

CONCLUSIONS

Contributing to the literature that guides nursing education and practice is a responsibility of most faculty. However, the process can seem daunting and few nurses learn the process during their education. By following the publication process, one step at a time, faculty can become productive authors who make a significant impact on the education of students and ultimately, the care of patients and their families.

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