

How to get published: seven easy steps

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ABSTRACT

As a professional group, nurses, whether as academics or practitioners, are increasingly expected to contribute to the development of quality nursing care and service provision by disseminating the findings of research, sharing innovations in clinical practice or examples of best practice. Yet, many individuals find it difficult to write informatively about their practice or to translate the outputs of academic studies into accessible publications. However, in most instances, a lack of confidence remains a key obstacle as is the lack of familiarity with processes required in preparing a paper for publication.

The aim of this paper is to discuss a series of progressive steps that must be followed when preparing a paper for publication in a peer-reviewed journal. The main body of the paper provides a detailed analysis on the importance of deciding what to write about, selecting a suitable journal, organizing the content and structure of a paper and using appropriate language to make the article more accessible to the audience. The discussion also explores the concepts of authorship order, peer-review process and how to respond to written reviewer's comments once the paper has been returned by the publishers. The paper concludes by stressing that success requires undertaking the necessary preparatory work, time, commitment and enthusiasm.

Key words: Authorship order • Guidelines for authors • Peer-reviewed journal • Publication process • Published articles • Writing for publication

INTRODUCTION

Within higher education, there has been a traditional culture that to be a rounded academic, an individual must have a profile that demonstrates active involvement in research and publishing. The pressure to publish is also related to building and establishing a unique body of knowledge and reducing the theory–practice gap. This requirement has also extended beyond the walls of academia, and many practitioners are expected, as part of their post, to contribute to the development of practice and theory by disseminating their work in journals and in other media.

In the past two decades, there has been a phenomenal rise in the number of peer-reviewed nursing publications, either as paper-print or as online journals, and this has been in response to the growing demand for information, research activity and the necessity to apply empirical findings in the delivery of patient care. According to Cook (2000) and Murray (2005) the reasons why individuals publish are varied and include:

- career progression
- personal objectives
- employer or other expectations
- fame and financial rewards

It is recognized that writing for publication is difficult, and for the outcome to be successful, knowledge of certain techniques, considerable time, effort and commitment are essential (Birchenall, 1997; Cook, 2000; Murray, 2005). However, there is also agreement that writing for publication can be learned, and it is usually a lack of confidence and subjecting oneself to peer scrutiny that act as barriers or deterrents for many (Hicks, 1995). This preamble is not intended to disarm or unsettle the reader, but to emphasize that when writing for publication, there are certain principles, which if followed can assist budding authors getting an encouraging response from the editors.

The aim of this article is to consider the essential steps in preparing a paper ready for publication, and how to avoid mistakes which, from the outset, might lead to outright rejection. There are many approaches to developing a writing style and getting published; typically, these will involve a series of steps. While this paper is aimed at guiding critical care nurses to write for *Nursing in Critical Care*, the principles can be transferred to a broad spectrum of other journals within healthcare.

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WHAT SHOULD I WRITE ABOUT?

Write about something you know. It is always easier to write about an area where you have expertise or have taken an active role; this might include reporting the results of an audit you instigated, the implementation of practice guidelines, or even a case study about an unusual clinical condition and the nursing care delivered. In addition, most journals encourage contributions in a range of formats, such as book reviews, letters, opinion pieces, editorials, reflections, research, literature reviews and discussion papers. Published articles can either be sole-authored or multiauthored, peer reviewed or non-peer reviewed, based on conference proceedings or reports of ongoing research.

Once the broad topic has been identified, time should be spent reflecting on the following points:

- What am I writing about?
- Who am I writing for?
- Why am I telling them this? (Cook, 2000)

Before you start, it is important that you scan a range of journals and choose the most recent issues in order to assess the extent to which the topic has been covered in the press. This also helps to determine whether the perspective that you intend to discuss is unusual and offers new insights. Next, consideration must be given to the potential reading audience – are they likely to be practitioners, researchers or managers? Whoever the group is, the content and the main messages of the paper need to appeal and be relevant. Knowing your potential audience allows you to make some assumptions about how much background to cover and determine the use of specialist terminology. However, it is important to locate the issue in current policy and practice development to help justify or provide a rationale for your paper. Finally, you must also consider the reasons of why you are writing. In some cases, the purpose might be to disseminate information, but it may also be about challenging established views, to stimulate controversy and debate or about reviewing the state of the art on some aspect of practice; all these reasons are appropriate and valid. By reflecting on the above questions, you will have a clearer idea about the scope and boundaries of your intended paper. In particular, this will apply to the angle you are taking, the type of article, the style you might adopt and an idea of the journals to which you may wish to submit.



WHICH JOURNAL?

The next step to be undertaken prior to writing is the selection of a suitable journal. Morse (1996) like many other editors observes that commonly outright

rejections are often because the paper has a poor fit with the journal's aims. To avoid this mistake, you must identify a number of potential journals and familiarize yourself with their individual philosophies. Each journal will have a series of statements, which may vary in emphasis, around the scope of the journal, its aspirations, the kind of contributions that are welcome, originality of manuscripts and their intended readership, either national or international. Typically, this information will be found in the opening pages of most peer-reviewed journals; occasionally, this might be placed at the back.

Once you have examined the philosophies and chosen one whose aims and objectives you feel most comfortable with, examine the membership of the editorial board. Are these people all academics or is there a mixture of specialist, researchers, managers and practitioners? Are you familiar with the work of the members of the editorial board? Next look at who writes for the journal? Would you feel intellectually at ease being in such company, or is it purely academics and researchers' writing? Undertaking this background work is vital, as it will shape many decisions including where to publish. If you are an academic, there will be an expectation that you submit work to peer-reviewed journals with a heavy citation index.

Another decision to be made early on is whether to publish in a popular, specialist/professional, academic, multiprofessional or electronic journal. In nursing, mainstream or weekly journals tend to have an average readership of 60000 or more, whereas the peer-reviewed academic journals will have a far smaller reading audience. Specialist journals such as those that apply to critical care issues have a dedicated following that is based on personal subscriptions. As indicated earlier, the decision on where to publish may be dictated by a number of factors including whether you wish to access a wider professional audience. However, the most important factor will be the nature of the paper and the argument or angle from your work you have chosen to place in the public domain.

If you are part of a research team, the members may have identified that there is scope to publish at least two papers, one that might address the methodological issues and the other could be directed towards clinicians with an emphasis on the implications for practice. This is a legitimate activity, so long as each paper has a unique and distinctive slant. The other advantage of being part of a research team or in a writing syndicate is that the workload can be divided, and less-experienced colleagues can work alongside experts (McVeigh *et al.*, 2002). On the question of multiple authors, it is advisable that the order should be mutually agreed at the outset, based on the level of

contributions made by each co-author, as this helps to minimize conflicts later on (Smith, 1997). Journals are becoming more scrupulous about gift authorship, particularly with respect to scientific papers, and are insisting that only those involved in conceiving the idea for the paper/study, designing the project, analysing of data and writing of the paper should be listed as authors. The disclosure of each author's contribution to the development and drafting of a paper is becoming mandatory, particularly in medical journals. Those who have collected specimens or other forms of data may be acknowledged. Finally, regarding whose name should appear first, current codes of practice indicate that this right should be accorded to the person who has contributed most to the project and drafted the initial paper and not on the basis of alphabetical order nor on the seniority of staff within a department (Chambers *et al.*, 2001; Abbasi, 2004).



OBTAINING GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORS

Each journal has its own housestyle and idiosyncrasies about layout and presentation; sadly, many papers get returned unread because author guidelines have been ignored. People who are invited to review the standard of a paper are typically nurse practitioners, academics, researchers and managers, who have busy workloads and yet give their time freely to further develop or enhance the quality of manuscripts sent to them. However, if an author has prepared a paper that is clearly not in accordance with specific journal guidelines, it is likely to be returned unread. Few editors are willing to forward manuscripts to reviewers, which fail to conform to guidelines. Fortunately, most journals are very prescriptive and generally provide extensive details on how to prepare a manuscript. Instructions tend to cover the following points; however, these tend to be revised periodically, so always check the most recent issue:

- Manuscripts must be typed, word processed with a size 12 font
- Use double spacing, and type on one side only
- Number all pages
- Wide margins (this will be detailed)
- Abstract (follow key headings and adhere to word count)
- Word count will be determined according to type of contribution (qualitative studies tend to be given greater wordage)
- If your contribution is a piece of research, all relevant conventions and associated traditions should be followed

- Tables and charts should be placed in separate sheets and not in the body of the text (avoid using vertical lines)
- Photographs, reproductions or scanned images must be accompanied by copyright permission from original source
- Anonymity (disguise or avoid naming any institutions or individuals)
- References: it is essential to observe the journal's housestyle and sources should be listed at the end on a separate page. Please note that inaccurate referencing will result in requests being sent back by the editor and may result in rejection
- Abbreviations: follow universal formats (e.g. ICU, intensive care unit; CPR, cardiopulmonary resuscitation)
- Submission (increasingly this is electronic, always state the word-processing package used and the version)
- Number of hard copies to be submitted, or where electronic copies are invited, please send the document in the requested package
- Author(s), post, qualifications and address (only those involved in the design, analysis and writing of the paper) should be included
- Copyright form (this will be sent to lead author)
- Include two boxes (i) what is known about the topic; (ii) what does this paper contribute to our understanding

In some journals, authors are invited to submit a 'letter of enquiry', detailing in brief, a short summary of the proposed article. If the editor is interested in the idea, you will be sent the author guidelines and asked to submit a more substantive outline. Editors are generally very approachable; if you are unsure whether your ideas fit with your chosen publication, write to them directly. They can advise whether your paper is suitable or if they already have something similar in their schedule.



WRITING THE PAPER

In our experience, there is no formula about when to write; individuals tend to identify their own best time. Scheduling time in your diary, if this is possible, can be helpful in getting into a habit of writing. Making deadlines for completing sections or drafts can also be very motivating. Most successful authors find a regular place where they can concentrate; to minimize interruptions, they put notices on doors, remove telephones and anything that may interfere with the creative flow of ideas. However, as Murray (2005) concludes, in the end every author has to find his/her own strategies.

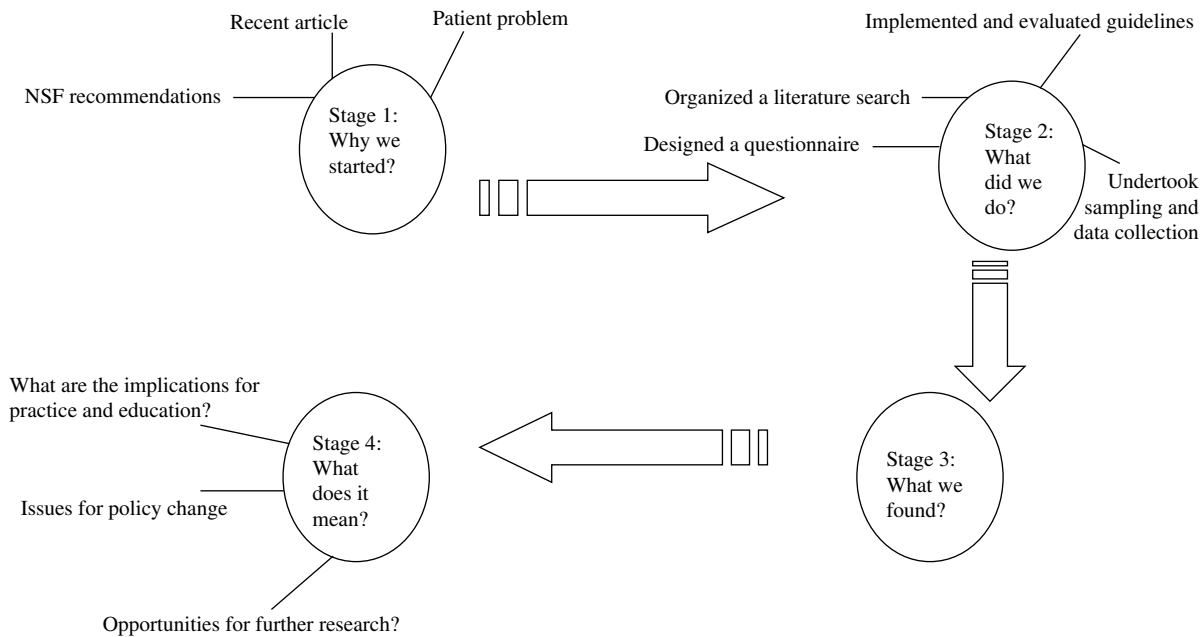


Figure 1 Developing the idea and framing the paper

There are simple rules to be mindful when preparing an article, such as spending time on the layout, structure, style and use of language. Four of the most common mistakes made include papers that are submitted without a clear and logical structure, failure to state the aims/purpose of the article, lack of in-depth review of the literature or conclusions that are disproportionate to the results from data analysis. Other reasons for papers not meeting the required standards are to do with literary style, which can be obscure, convoluted, clumsy and inaccessible. Therefore, devote time to organizing the content and devise a simple structure for your paper. Please note that an article cannot be generated by simply editing an original essay or thesis. Where this is the case, it is immediately apparent and will probably lead to the paper being rejected. In a larger piece of research, it is critical to extract a focus or angle and build the article plan around that.

According to Cook (2000), planning the outline of paper can assist to:

- maintain the focus of the paper
- structure the content around subheadings
- develop/expand issues within subheadings
- identify the references that will be needed in each section
- optimize use of available time

In reality, there is a limit to the number of messages that you can get across in one article. Figure 1 provides a broad framework for organizing the structure and content of a paper. Typically, an article can be divided

into a series of major paragraphs, each with a message. For example, a couple of paragraphs may introduce the topic and set the professional, clinical or policy context, with the aims of the paper made explicit. In the case of a piece of research, the content should be a concise review of the literature justifying the rationale for the study. Next, there should be a detailed section on the actions or methodology undertaken. This might incorporate conducting either a review of the literature or a series of semistructured interviews with a sample of critically ill patients. The results should be confined to another paragraph; the final three or four paragraphs should focus on the implications and conclusion. In a 2000–3000-word article, six to seven headings should be sufficient. For further information on the use of subheadings, always refer to the guidelines for authors.

Webb (2002) advises that part of the success in getting a paper published is about ensuring that the content is clear and readable, this may be improved by use of the first person as appropriate. Other ways of improving the readability of a paper include using short words and sentences, avoiding jargon, using plurals to minimize repetition and inelegant phrases, applying gender-neutral language, reading aloud to help with punctuation and reducing unnecessary use of 'the'. In addition, it is essential to evade writing that is complex, inward looking, pedantic or adopts everyday conversation style (Cook, 2000). The purpose of writing is to communicate a set of ideas on paper, and for many readers, English will not be their first

language. It is therefore important that the content is presented in an accessible, yet stimulating, manner that provides sufficient context to make sense without overwhelming the reader with too much detail.

A warning about writing the abstract: experience suggests that many authors leave this section until last, at a time when most will feel a little jaded. Writing the abstract from the outset helps to focus on the specific aim of the paper and the intended objectives; if these change, they can be amended in line with the content. Spending time preparing an absorbing and interesting abstract is a worthwhile activity as it is at this point where many readers decide whether, or not, to continue reading the paper. If the abstract is neither well organized, clear, concise nor sufficiently stimulating, the reader is most likely to skip to the next article. Successful opening techniques may begin with statements that are either semicontentious, allude to problematic issues in practice or make reference to an unknown aspect of care, thus setting up a case for exploration, discussion or inquiry. The use of rhetorical devices can thus stimulate further intellectual curiosity (Murray, 2005). However, please remember that the abstract should summarize the paper and not the research or practice development it is based upon.

Time should be invested in making the title as accurate as possible and avoid catchphrases or trendy terms which may mislead prospective readers or researchers. Most journals will insist that you list four to six key terms or use MESH headings that typify the essence of your work, as this facilitates the rapid electronic searching of papers around a specific topic area. To reduce the potential for error, carefully select the key terms, which most accurately reflect the content of the paper.



THE PAPER HAS BEEN WRITTEN, WHAT NEXT?

This is an important landmark in the process of preparing a paper for publication; however, the final checks still need to be undertaken. The next stages are essential in improving the overall quality, originality and presentation of the paper. Three activities feature at this stage:

- Reading aloud. It is good practice to read your own work to yourself. This will give you a sense of punctuation and the rhythm of the text. It will also signal whether some of your sentences are excessively lengthy and need to be reduced.
- Use of 'critical friends'. Invite two or three colleagues whom you respect to objectively comment on your proposed paper. This may be difficult and perhaps embarrassing, but the payoffs are well worth the effort. When seeking

feedback, always give clear instructions about what is required. For example, if you have written a piece of research you may want comments on methodology or layout of methods used. You may use academic colleagues and coauthors, but also seek user 'consumer' viewpoints. If your paper is aimed at practising nurses in coronary care, it might be advisable to get their views about the relevance and accessibility of your manuscript.

- Reduce, refine and rewrite. Once you have received the comments, proceed to make the necessary revisions, correct spelling mistakes and respond to editorial suggestions.



SUBMITTING THE PAPER

Prior to submitting the final version of your paper, go thorough the guidelines for authors and ensure that you have followed these explicitly. Check that the front page has the title of the paper, the contact details of lead author, names of coauthors and their qualifications. The author with whom correspondence should be addressed, their telephone number, fax number and e-mail must also be included. At the same time, consider if there are any acknowledgements to be made. These should be added after the conclusion and should be brief.

Most publishers will expect an electronic version of your paper, and therefore, it is important that contact details are clearly marked. Do not use headers or footers with your personal details, as this may mean a delay in processing your manuscript. More importantly, never send your manuscript to more than one journal at a time. Only when your paper has been rejected, can you formally invite another journal to review the manuscript. Once your paper has been dispatched, confirmation of receipt will arrive within two or three days. This will be accompanied by a reference number, which you must quote in all correspondence. Most author guidelines will have a standard as to how long to wait before receiving reviewer's comments. If you have not heard from the editorial administrator within that timeframe, then write a short e-mail, asking for clarification on the progress of your paper.

Like most journals, all papers submitted to *Nursing in Critical Care* are double-blind peer reviewed; this means that your paper will be scrutinized by at least two experts involving an anonymous process. The reviewers will read, analyse and judge your paper according to specific objective criteria and provide written feedback (Ball, 2003). It is extremely rare for any author, whether novice or experienced, to receive a

paper without some suggestions on how to enhance the overall quality and presentation of the finished product. The reviewing process serves to ensure that the content of published papers is scientific, rigorous, accurate, unbiased, generalizable and informative, reflecting the aspirations of the journal (Dawson, 2004). Morse (1996) adds that the peer-review process aims to develop the excellence of writing and to promote the standing of the nursing profession.



WHAT SHOULD I DO WHEN I GET THE PAPER BACK?

There are four possibilities that could emerge from the review of your paper:

- acceptance (unconditional)
- acceptance with minor revisions
- acceptance with major revisions
- rejection

Quite often, final acceptance is subject to authors making revisions in accordance to the reviewers' comments and suggestions. Many authors will feel a sense of disappointment when reading the detailed notes provided by the reviewers and shelve their paper away. However, responding to the remarks of reviewers is often less onerous than one's first impressions might suggest. It is good practice to read the feedback carefully and list each point. Correct and amend the text as advised, then prepare a covering letter to the editor, indicating how each point has been addressed (Morse, 1996). The decision to make the necessary changes ultimately rests with the author, not the reviewers nor the editor, but it is important to note that the aim behind the feedback is to improve the standard and scholarship of the paper. As soon as it is convenient, revise the paper and return it. You should have a final decision within a much shorter time.

Once a paper has been accepted, you will receive a follow-up e-mail from a production editor who will seek confirmation of contact details, and unless already returned, a signed copyright form. In due course, an electronic proof of your paper will arrive and you will be required to:

- reply within two days, either by e-mail or fax
- make corrections on the text as identified by production editor
- respond to queries or editorial suggestions made by production editor
- check for errors that typesetter may have made when compiling your paper

You cannot make changes to the original text (unless there are mistakes made by the publishers); if you

plan to do so, this may be expensive. Most peer-review journals will give you 25 offprints of the published paper. If you are writing for mainstream weekly journal, you will be offered a sum of money made payable once the paper has appeared in print.

CONCLUSION

This paper has described the essential steps that need to be taken when preparing a paper for publication, and made suggestions on how to avoid many of the pitfalls which may be encountered by unsuspecting novice authors. To paraphrase Birchenall (1997), for a successful outcome, authors need to invest a great deal of time and develop a strategy that will ensure that their efforts are assessed on their intellectual merit, rather than suffer the embarrassment of blind rejection.

Nursing in Critical Care looks forward to receiving your articles. We also welcome potential authors contacting the editors to propose ideas for papers. The journal prides itself on working with new authors to develop an article for publication. However, this requires a great deal of investment on behalf of the editorial board and reviewers, and we therefore, encourage potential authors to follow these guidelines to increase the chances of publication and making a contribution to the ongoing development of the journal and the discipline.

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