

Writing for publication: It doesn't have to be daunting



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Why do so few nurses consider getting published in journals? I have spent 20 years asking this question and can list the answers in order of the number of times I've heard them:

- I haven't got time
- I can't write
- I've got nothing to say
- I'm not important enough
- I might get rejected.

These reasons may trip nicely off the tongue but so too do most of the excuses we create for avoiding other chores we class as undesirable, such as exercise, dieting and phoning our relations.

Time restrictions represent a barrier for many things in life; how useful then to have it as an ready-made excuse for avoiding those tasks we'd rather ignore. How many of us really need to get published anyway? Why supplement the to-do list with something that is not only time-consuming but also, if we care to admit it, a little scary? Try telling that to the research nurse whose job prospects may depend on gaining publications in academic journals. Only when something becomes a priority are we likely to confront a strategy for achieving it.

What many people don't realise is that once you peel away the layers of mystery that surround the publication process, what is left is a straightforward, step-by-step system that is accessible to anyone. And you don't even have to be a very good writer; in fact, most editors would be surprised if you were. You'd be amazed how much work sub-editors do on most articles before they are published; what you read in the journal is usually far from what was originally submitted (although I hope the text you are reading now is the exception).

In addition to the list of barriers above, there is an unspoken, sometimes unrealised, fear that many people have when it comes to putting pen to paper. Many nurses who have been published for the first time will describe the moment they hear

from the editor that their article has been accepted. Rather than jumping for joy, their mind envisaging the inevitable resultant lecture tour to the States heralded by their newfound author status, what they actually think is: "Oh no! Now people are going to read it." Sudden realisation hits them that they may get criticised.

Communicating with colleagues

Take the scenario in which someone writes to you having read your freshly published article. They impertinently question the merit of the four-stage hospital discharge model you have described and suggest that the three-stage version they currently use 200 miles away may be a better option. Shock, horror! Where will this endless journey of criticism and loathing end? In fact, given that getting published is all about the ability to communicate with your colleagues, the fact that you got any feedback at all is success factor number one. People have read it. However, rather than perceive such comment as criticism, you should wallow in the wonder that your article has thrown up a debate that might never have been aired without your having provided the initial platform. It may even be that you are so impressed by the new model being suggested that you change your current working practice. Alternatively, you may write back expressing fears that such a system might not take into consideration certain factors pertinent to your particular locality. Either way, this represents debate, not criticism. No profession worth its salt can progress without discussion amongst its members; however, while we are often prepared to partake of it verbally in the corridor or in the cafeteria, the thought of doing so via the pages of a journal still fills many with fear.

Never believe that what you write needs to be mind-blowing or life-changing. How often do you read an article and think to yourself that you've

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been doing that for years? This doesn't negate the usefulness of the publication, as others may learn from it; however, it does show that tasks or protocols you may take for granted will have relevance and usefulness to others who are unfamiliar with them. All you have to do is pinpoint the journal whose audience includes this category of individual. But here's the rub.

Choosing the right publication

Many people write manuscripts without having worked out exactly who their audience actually is. How can this be? They simply never bothered to identify the publication before compiling the article. Rather, they chose to write the article first and then looked around for where to send it. However interesting the topic, it is unlikely that such a manuscript will match the presentation and content needs of any one particular journal. Your first step should be to identify the publication that gives you the best chance to get published; this may be because it has a readership that represents those nurses most interested in your subject matter, or perhaps that it tends to publish your “style” of article.

Once you know the journal, simply download its authors' guidelines, which will explain in detail what they expect from your article, for example, length and style; the possible need for an abstract, introduction or key points; format and number of references; where and to whom to send the manuscript; and what to expect from the review process. What you are trying to do is reduce your chances of rejection right from the word go; the more familiar you are with the publication in question, the better your chance of producing an article stylised for its needs.

A further shortcut is to first submit a 300-word

synopsis, rather than bothering to write the whole article straight away. This way, if the editor writes back to say they already have an article on that topic, or would rather you focus on a different aspect, you have the perfect foundation on which to decide whether to submit to that publication on a slightly adapted theme, or to take your original idea to a different journal. Remember that copyright rules dictate that while you cannot get the same article published twice, the same topic can be redesigned for the needs of different audiences and different journals as many times as you wish. This is why you will often see the same study, model or viewpoint written differently in several journals. This is not simply self-indulgence on the part of authors (most of the time); on the contrary, it can open up the topic to a whole new audience each time. The more journals you are aware of – most of us only know the ones we read regularly – the more chances you give yourself of identifying the one that provides the best opportunity of publishing success.

Some journals appear intimidating, particularly the more academic ones that can be thicker than a doorstep and contain language unintelligible to a Countdown winner. You should view your publications simply as vehicles for communication, some academic, some newsy, some review-based, but all with the common objective of sharing information with their audience. If you have anything interesting or relevant to say to this audience then you can get published in that journal.

So why not give it a go? While for some, writing often seems like a dry, dull, academic task, it can, I promise, be exciting, educational and even fun. You can communicate with thousands of people and some may even talk back to you. And, by the way, the concept of writer's block is simply something invented by people without a plan! ■

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The *Journal of Diabetes Nursing* welcomes a range of articles relating to the clinical, professional and educational aspects of diabetes nursing.

If you are interested in writing for us and would like to discuss it further, please email: jdn@sbcommunicationsgroup.com.

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