

# Nurse Author & Editor

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## Becoming a Ruthless Editor

### **Becoming a Ruthless Editor**

Leslie H. Nicoll

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*Dear Dr. Nicoll,*

*Attached please find my final draft of my manuscript. I think it is in excellent shape and I look forward to your review. The journal I am submitting to requests that it be 4000 words long but I am at 5236 and cannot see anything to cut. Do you think I can just submit it this way? I appreciate your feedback.*

*Thanks,*

*Desperate Author*

*Dear Desperate Author,*

*4000 means 4000 and there is always plenty to cut. I'll give you a hand.*

*Your friend, Dr. Nicoll, The Ruthless Editor*

I receive emails like this weekly—they are a mainstay of my business. I am happy to do the editing but I also think there are a few hints that authors can take to heart to make my job easier—or even avoid needing my services at all. I'll be honest—I see the same problems repeatedly and the editing I do on the vast majority of manuscripts I receive is not innovative. Here a few tips to help you become a Ruthless Editor and do the necessary paring before you submit to a journal.

Number one: your guiding words should be **vague**, **redundant**, and **tangential**. These three words cover a whole lot of territory in the types of writing problems I deal with. They are not hard to spot:

- Vague—a string of words that may be very well written but really don't convey any interesting, new, or pertinent information.
- Redundant—repeating yourself. Yes, repeating yourself. It's that simple.
- Tangential—an interesting fact that may be mentioned but doesn't really have anything to do with the topic at hand. Tangential sentences or paragraphs are hard to delete because they tend to be interesting but when you really drill down and analyze them, they are not relevant.

With those thoughts in mind, begin the editing process. First off, get a handle on what needs to be accomplished. Using the example above, the author needs to cut 1236 words—about 25% of the manuscript. I write this number down and keep a running tally. If we estimate approximately 400 words on a page, then we'll be looking at eliminating 3 pages.

Keeping “vague, redundant, and tangential” in mind, start looking at paragraphs. Paragraphs are the big real estate in a manuscript and can be any length from 90 words to 300. If you can get rid of two or three paragraphs right off the bat, you may be halfway to your editing goal. People don't believe that paragraphs can be deleted, but if you read carefully, the vague and redundant information will start jumping out at you. I often find that the first paragraph in a section can be jettisoned. The author may be trying to set the stage for what comes next, and writes a few vague sentences that don't say much of anything—the real information comes in the next paragraph which can stand on its own.

Redundant paragraphs are also very common. Just yesterday I was editing an article about how using fitness activity monitor can lead to improved patient outcomes and decrease costs of healthcare. There were two paragraphs—one after the other—that said the exact same thing with just a few words rearranged. Slash! It was gone.

While vague and redundant paragraphs are common, tangential ones are a little rarer. You may not notice them on the first pass but keep this concept in mind because they do pop up and are good candidates for editing. Writing should be concise and stay on topic. Many authors lose sight of the main message and start to “wander in the words.” This is where you want to look

for tangential paragraphs.

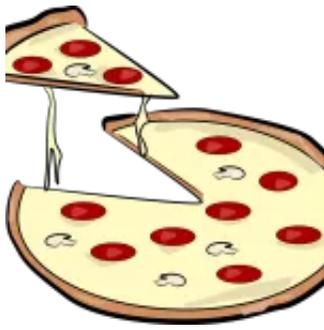
Once you have gone through the whole paper and removed a few paragraphs, the next step is to move to the sentence level, again looking for vague or redundant phrases. Sometimes the sentences will be right next to each other but they may be several paragraphs (or pages) apart. For example, the fact that participants signed an informed consent may be stated three or four times. Certainly this is important information, but it only needs to be said once. Authors often ramble on about research instruments, getting into a level of detail that is confusing and not relevant to the overall article—remember tangential!

Look also for sentences that can be combined. This type of phrasing is very common:

*The study was guided by four major concepts. The four major concepts were: 1)...*

Instead of two sentences, edit them into one: *The study was guided by four major concepts, which were:*. Or, even better, get rid of the “which were,” put a colon after concepts and then just list them. Five words gone! Combining sentences this way makes them more complex and thus more interesting for the reader, which is an added bonus.

Once you have gone through the entire manuscript at the paragraph and sentence level, stop and do a word count. Have you gotten to the halfway point yet?



Next up: edit out the pizza pies. What are pizza pies, you ask? Someone once told me that “pizza” in Italian means pie, so saying “pizza pie” is like saying “pie pie.” I have no idea if this is true but it has become a guiding principle in my editing process.

The most common pizza pie in a research report is “survey tool” or “survey instrument.” If I had a nickel for every time I’ve seen this pizza pie, I’d be rich! Think about it. Everyone knows that a survey is a series of questions or statements that the participant needs to answer or rate. There is no reason to modify it with tool or instrument. “Survey” can stand alone, as can the terms “instrument” or “tool” (although personally, I don’t like the word “tool” to be used when talking about a data collection instrument used in research, so that is another edit I will make).

Other pizza pies may be a little more subtle, at first, but once you see them they stick out like sore thumbs. For example, I once edited a paper about a study of handicapped children who lived at home with their parents. The author repeatedly wrote, “the family home.” Of course, there are many kinds of homes: nursing, patient-centered medical, or group, to name just three. But in this paper, once it was made clear that the study was about children living at home, there was no need to say “the family home” every time home was mentioned. Zap! Get rid of those pies!

Another recent example was a paper I edited was about experiences of people who had quit smoking long-term. The phrase “smoking cessation” appeared 28 times in the paper. On my first edit I didn’t notice this, but as I went through a second time, after the paragraph and sentence slash, it was

obvious. We know the paper was about people who quit smoking—there was no reason to modify “cessation” every time it was stated. Zing—28 words gone! One hint: when you identify a pizza pie, use “Search and Replace” to quickly find and fix all instances of the phrase. You want to be sure to maximize your word deletion on pizza pie editing and “Search and Replace” makes this easy. But—be careful and don’t just select “Replace all.” Go through one-by-one. You don’t want to change a pizza pie that might be included in the article title on the reference list!

“Nurse” and “nursing” frequently create pizza pies. Nursing students, nurse managers, nursing profession, nursing faculty—once you have established the context for the study, ie, that it is about nurses working in the hospital or nursing students were the participants—there is no need use “nursing” or “nurse” endlessly as a modifier. I trust that most readers have enough short-term memory that they can get from page one to page five and remember who or what the study was about.

At this point, stop and do another word count. I find that deleting paragraphs and sentences and then eliminating the pizza pies will often be enough to pare the manuscript down to the proper length. If you are not there yet, but close, try going through one more time saying “vague, redundant, tangential, pizza pie” as your mantra. Believe me, you will find things you missed on the first pass.

If you are still a few hundred words away from your goal, then I have two last strategies that I use sparingly. In a qualitative study, this is the point where I will look at participant quotes. I don’t like to edit these quotes, generally, because they are the participants’ words and they bring the study to life.

However, when I look at them critically, there might be quite a bit of redundancy that can be edited. People tend to say things twice so instead of a two sentence quote, one might be sufficient. Look at the statement that leads into the quote—redundancy may exist here too. Can the quote stand on its own? Or, is it even needed? Statements such as, “*Going through chemo made me feel awful,*” are obvious and don’t add much. There may be a vague statement in the middle—connecting words that again, don’t add anything. Edit those out and add an ellipsis (...) instead.

My very last trick—and this is the one I use the least because I don’t like it—is to turn repetitive phrases into acronyms. “Principal investigator” can become PI. Health-related quality of life can turn into HRQOL. Research instruments are, of course, the prime example but there may be another expression that is mentioned regularly that can be converted. One rule of thumb—I don’t like to “acronymize” a phrase that is mentioned less than five times in a paper. If you are doing this, you want to make it worth your while to eliminate words, so creating an acronym for something that is mentioned only once or twice doesn’t really make much difference.

Count your words again—you should be at goal or very close. You may need to go through for one final picky edit to get the last few words out. If you are still way off, start again from the beginning and be a little more ruthless.

A few last comments about the process: if you reach your editing goal quickly, and you are still in the middle of the manuscript, don’t stop. The work you are doing will tighten up the paper overall and make it more concise and thus more readable. Keep on working through until the end. I don’t know of any editor who will complain about receiving a 3700 word

manuscript instead of 4000!

I edit using Track Changes in Word. There is a feature where you can “show markup” or not. I suggest getting familiar with this and use it. It is helpful to see the edits with the track changes on, but it can get confusing and so turning off the view of the edits (while everything is still be tracked) may make the process a little easier on your eyes and brain. If you use a different word processor, figure out where this feature is and how to use it correctly.

In my experience, it is pretty easy to edit out about 25% to 30% of a manuscript, as I have described in this article. If you are faced with cutting 50%—say, trimming down 8000 words to 4000, you have to ask yourself, when will the manuscript lose its fidelity and stop making sense? Would it be better to turn this into two different articles, rather than trying to edit it for length? I have certainly run into wordy authors and have successfully trimmed their manuscripts by half. But I have also received papers that have “too much” going on and the more satisfactory outcome was two manuscripts versus a radical edit.

Finally, realize that this type of editing is for a draft that is in very good shape and close to being finished. What I have described here is not substantive editing, which occurs earlier in the writing process—but it is also more comprehensive than copy editing. I do all three as part of my business. Interestingly, this “ruthless editing” usually takes the most time. Manuscripts that need significant substantive editing often go back to the author with lots of comments of what to re-write, re-organize, or focus to stay on topic but not a lot of actual editing. My job, as an editor, is not to write the paper and substantive editing usually entails significant re-writing.

Ruthless editing, on the other hand, is the area that I find that authors struggle with and have the least awareness of what needs to be done.

And that's it! Give it a try and see if you can learn the skills to become a Ruthless Editor!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leslie H. Nicoll, PhD, MBA, RN, FAAN is the Editor-in-Chief of *Nurse Author & Editor* and *CIN: Computers, Informatics, Nursing*. She is also the President & Owner of Maine Desk, LLC which provides editorial consulting and guidance to novice as well as experienced authors.

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