Spotting Reference Errors

Marla J. De Jong

While authors are ultimately responsible for ensuring that reference citations are correct, nurse editors and reviewers can use practical strategies to detect errors before publication.

When conducting research, I have become increasingly frustrated by citation and quotation errors. For example, in a recently published book chapter, the author summarized a research study but cited a paper from a completely different study. This same author made citation errors within the reference list, and obviously gleaned data from a secondary source without reading the original paper. As a result, I questioned the accuracy of the entire chapter.

Reference and quotation errors are not minor matters. They prolong the time needed to find a reference, damage an author’s reputation, weaken a journal’s credibility, disrespect the primary paper’s author(s), and undermine clinical and research nursing literature. Furthermore, authors repeat errors when they copy an inaccurate citation without verifying its content with the primary source.

Regrettably, investigators have confirmed my observations that reference errors are prevalent in nursing literature. Foreman and Kirchhoff (1987) were the first nurses to study the accuracy of reference citations. Using the lead article from the final 1983 issue of 65 clinical journals and 47 non-clinical journals, they evaluated randomly selected references for accuracy. Reference errors occurred in 38.4% of the clinical journals and in 21.3% of the non-clinical journals.

Other investigators have found similar problems. Schulmeister (1998) evaluated 60 published papers from three nursing journals and reported that that 32% of 180 references contained citation errors. In a similar study of 262 references that were cited in three nursing research journals, Taylor (1998) reported an overall citation error rate of 45.8%.

More recently, Lok et al. (2001) reported that 43% of 550 references from 11 nursing journals contained citation errors. Results from the same study also indicated that single authorship, lengthy reference lists, and the journal’s impact factor and immediacy index (speed for published articles to be cited) predicted the occurrence of minor citation errors.

When evaluating individual components of citations, McLellan et al. (1992) found that the article title was most often an inaccurate element, followed by the author name, page numbers, journal title, volume number, and year.

Become Suspicious of Citations

No wonder manuscript reviewers need to have a suspicious nature when reviewing citations in manuscripts. If these numbers stand up today, we can expect about one in every three references to have an error.

As a manuscript reviewer, I now use a database such as CINAHL® or MEDLINE® to spot check references. I have yet to review a paper that did not contain multiple and major reference errors.
However, a disadvantage of this approach is that it is tedious and time-consuming for editors and reviewers to check the accuracy of every reference. However, there are some strategies that can help.

**Strategies**

Over years of reviewing thousands of references, I have identified several elements that tip me off that there may be an error. The following strategies can help you to identify which references to check when you review manuscripts:

- Evaluate the citation’s title to ensure that it is complete. Ideally, reviewers will be familiar with the paper’s topic and will recognize the article and book titles of many of its references.
- Look for irregularities within the list of authors. At the minimum, there should be a last name and first initial for each author listed.
- Study authors’ names that you recognize and ones that can be misspelled easily, such as “Kirchoff” instead of the correct “Kirchhoff” (Kirchhoff, 1995).
- Compare the spelling of the authors’ names in the text with those in the corresponding citation.
- Examine the page numbers for obvious errors or omissions.
- Review the journal’s title for accuracy. Most reviewers are familiar with commonly referenced journals.
- Note the journal’s volume number and, if applicable, the issue number. Based on your knowledge of the journal, assess whether the numbers are logical.
- When page numbers are low (under or near 100), check to see if an issue number is needed. Although in some publication styles an issue number is not required when the journal’s page numbers are continuous from issue to issue, they are essential when every issue restarts with page number one.
- Ensure that the year is included and agrees with the text reference to the source.
- Double check the issue number against the year. Interestingly, for both AJN and Nursing2004 the final digit in the year and the issue number should be the same. For example, an AJN article printed in 2004 would be in issue 104 and a Nursing2004 article would be in issue number 34)
- Check for stray marks such as “xx,” “***” or similar characters that appear misplaced.
- Use a database to check references that you suspect are incorrect.

**Try It!**

Apply these strategies as you review the fictitious citations in the list below. Mark the errors that you find and compare your work with corrected citations at the end of the article. (Tip: there may be more than one error in each citation)


When you find citation errors in a manuscript, make comments to the author about the corrections needed; consider the number and severity of errors in your acceptance, revision, or rejection decision; and alert the editor to the problem.
Authors beware! Comment by NA&E Editor

Dr. De Jong offers in this article a 'counsel of perfection' for reviewers. Most of us review many articles for a number of different journals, and we do this without payment and outside our normal office hours. Only the most conscientious reviewers will be able to take the trouble to check citations in the way Dr. De Jong describes.

It is the author's responsibility to ensure that all details of references are correct, and a large number of errors may lead to rejection of the article. After all, if you cannot get these details correct, what confidence can the editor, reviewers and potential readers have in the quality of the work you are reporting in the article!

Even if referencing errors escape detection at the review stage, they may be identified at the production stage. Many production systems incorporate software to detect referencing inconsistencies, and you will receive a long list of queries to be dealt with when you receive the proofs of your article. However, this kind of software will not detect systematic errors. For example, if you spell an author's name incorrectly in both the text and reference list the software will 'think' that this is the correct spelling. In addition, proofs must be returned very quickly – often within 48 hours – and so you will not have time to hunt through the library or databases at this late hour to make your corrections.

Obviously, the message is to take extreme care with recording your references from the start of working on a project so that you do not run into these frustrating and unnecessary problems further down the line!

Corrected citations and comments

Corrections for the sample citations are in bold and each citation is followed with a note regarding the type of correction that was needed.

• McGee, D. (2002). New antimicrobial drug associated with serious side effects. American Journal of Infection Control, 30, 402-406. (Note: On a quick glance, this citation may appear correct; however, note the obvious date error and misplaced word in the title.)

• Harrison, A. L., Webb, M. A., & White, D. L. (2003). Controversies abound with the release of new hypertension guidelines. JAMA, 289, 600-611. (Note: Although it is easy to notice the missing author initials, the volume number is a subtle error. Experienced editors and reviewers would know that JAMA is a long-standing journal and conclude that the volume number of 28 must be incorrect.)

• Knight, D. L., & Hodges, T. S. (2001). Surviving the merger of two intensive care units. Clinical Nurse Specialist, 15, 122-129. (Note: Be suspicious of "X"s; some authors type them to remind themselves to add the appropriate content. While a spell checker would have prompted the author to correct "Clincal Nusre", it would not have identified "car" as an error for "care". An astute editor or reviewer would note the reversed page order and missing date.)

• Robbins, P. J. (2001). Chronic fatigue syndrome. American Journal of Nursing, 101(11), 99-104. (Note: Experienced editors and reviewers will know that American Nursing Journal does not exist. Take time to ensure that the author(s) included all page numbers.)

• Klein, L. (2003). Logical empiricist theories of nursing. Advances in Nursing Science, 33(3), 35-49. (Note: Editors and reviewers should suspect an author’s name error because Lisa is a more common first name than last name. The journal title error is difficult to detect; however, most editors and reviewers will suspect that this type of topic is not typically published in Nursing 2003. Also, the page numbers “35-49” alert you to check that the issue number is included along with the volume number.)
References

Author Background
Marla J. De Jong, RN, PhD, CCNS, is a Lt Col in the United States Air Force* and the Director of Nursing Research at Wilford Hall Medical Center, Lackland AFB, TX. She is co-editor for *AACN Advanced Critical Care*, a reviewer, and editorial board member of several publications including *Nurse Author & Editor*. You may e-mail her at mdejong@aol.com.

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