

# Nurse Author & Editor

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### Referencing Styles and Research

Ramon Camaño-Puig, Carmen Piqué-Noguera

Many articles have recently been written on how our papers in nursing should be published, namely in terms of space, structure and especially referencing style. It is thus no wonder that Hawkins (2009) is "amazed and mystified by authors' seemingly egregious disregard for the very basics of text and reference list citations" when faced with the confusion created by so many options for style. In our area of research, however, two are the most popular referencing styles: the so-called Vancouver style, advocated by the American Medical Association (AMA, 2007) and the APA style, proposed by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2001). Most biomedical-oriented journals favor Vancouver norms, as described by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE 2008), while in many other disciplines the APA norms are advocated. In this paper we want to call the attention of the readers as prospective nursing authors to possible drawbacks and advantages of one system over the other with the hope of reaching some sort of unification of a nursing style in academic writing.

The Vancouver model draws its name from a group of biomedical editors' 1978 meeting in Canada, a group that evolved into the ICMJE; there the participants reached an agreement on minimal standards for manuscripts submitted for publication to their journals. The initial group was gradually joined by many other journal editors around the world and, by the late 1980s, over 300 journals had agreed on those standards. However, among nursing journals, only *Nursing* had joined the group (ICMJE 1988, p. 265).

Basically, Vancouver is a numerical system based on the order of appearance of each specific bibliographical reference. It is, according to many, a user-friendly method which has even been provided with adequate software to facilitate its use. In addition, there are strict instructions on manuscript structure, although a major drawback is the insistence on the limitations to be placed on the review of the literature: "Give only strictly pertinent references, and do not review the subject extensively," as the first edition of instructions reads (ICMJE 1988, p. 260). In its latest revised edition, little has changed: "Provide only directly pertinent references, and do not include data or conclusions from the work being reported" (ICMJE 2008). This indication to include only "pertinent references," together with the typical editorial restriction on size, seems to have led to minimal commentary of the material on which the new research is supposed to be based, while at the same time contradicting the widespread opinion that a minimal critical evaluation is necessary to provide and support the research gap the author is intending to bridge (Swales, 1986). This drawback, however, can be observed in both referencing styles, although while one favors author-prominent citations in its review of the literature, such as the APA style sheet, Vancouver tends to do otherwise, that is, it states the fact, often regardless of its authorship or simply through a tangential reference via superscripted numbers. Thus, it becomes a frequent practice to include a

series of superscripted numbers after the stated fact, representing a list of authors in the reference list, with practically no individualized assessment.

In the review of the literature, we would favor what Swales (1986, p. 41) calls a "cross-fertilization of ideas, insights, and techniques" which would actually benefit both the reviewed work and the new publication. Actually, as Campanario (2003) has pointed out, "if a document cites another document, they bear a conceptual relationship." Swales further adds that the evaluation of proposed references should answer questions such as whether the citation contains evaluative or critical elements, or if an author is quoted directly or indirectly, or if a theory or simply a concept is made reference to. In turn, the simple accumulation of references that may "speak about something" related to the new research, as it often occurs in some Vancouver style publications, is not a sufficient reason to include those references, unless doing so responds to Swales' queries. We must indeed give credit to whom it belongs.

The question, however, is about where does nursing stand in regard to referencing styles. It is obvious that some journals that took their initial steps using Vancouver style, whether due to their connection with a medical group of researchers or to some biomedical laboratory, would maintain that style. We feel that other consideration should be taken into account before opting for one model or the other. It has often been debated whether nursing is, in Etzioni's (1969, p. xii) words, "a full-fledged profession," and not simply an appendix of medicine. Nursing professionals often tend to occupy ample space in their research paper introductions to cover an area still little known to the readership. Medical professionals, on the contrary, with a long history of research, find their field of specialization well-discussed and debated, ready for new information on concrete instances of research, with less need to trace and discuss its background. In addition, as pointed out by Piqué and Andreu-Besó (1998, p. 186), medical research papers are more concerned with quantitative data, while nursing authors will focus more on the qualitative features of their research. In other words, we believe that nursing writers feel the need to use more self-explanation and, consequently, justification of their research. And this can be better accomplished with a style sheet that caters to commentary, qualification, and even debate.

One further argument in favor of the use of APA style sheet, or something similar, would be to look at the 2002-2004 Journal Citation Reports (JCR). The influence of the old 'publish or perish' is an ever-present aphorism in academia and therefore we are concerned about the impact factor of the journal in which we intend to publish. Of the 46 nursing journals listed according to their impact factor in the JCR, 27 of them (56.5%) publish their papers in the APA model, one (2.2%) uses the Harvard model, which is similar to APA, and 19 of them (41.3%) favor the Vancouver model. It may be considered understandable in journals with a clear biomedical approach, such as *Heart & Lung* or *Cancer Nursing*, but not so much in journals with a socio-ethical approach to nursing, such as *Nursing Ethics* or *Journal of Nursing Administration*, all of which favor the system proposed by the ICMJE.

Nursing professionals need to find their own place in the research world and be evaluated by their own professionals, but they first need to set and abide by their own research criteria. Our work has often found itself being watered down simply because the assessment parameters used are not adequate, are not nursing-oriented, or because they simply belong to another discipline. We must

give our work a nursing touch, quite often more oriented towards sociology than to biomedicine, and thus it deserves its own research methodology and its own publishing style. To accomplish this, we must first adequately assess research papers and other bibliographical materials used for our research and secondly give their authors the credit and acknowledgement they deserve. In addition, we should not only use an appropriate and user-friendly referencing style, through which the writing process and the incorporation of data in the body of the article is simplified, but also be true to a style that caters to the research needs of nursing professionals.

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**Ramon Camaño-Puig** holds a European doctorate and is senior lecturer of nursing at the University of Valencia, Spain. He is author of *Professionalisation of Nursing in England and Spain: a comparative study* (2005) (available online at <http://markkinointi.laurea.fi/julkaisut/a/a56.pdf>).

**Carmen Piqué-Noguera** is a graduate student doing research towards her doctoral dissertation in language and linguistics, and she is also teaching assistant in the Department of Theory of Languages.

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