Length Matters: References
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I recently instituted a policy for my journal, CIN: Computers, Informatics, Nursing, asking authors to limit references in a manuscript to a maximum of 50. The majority of manuscripts I receive came in under that number so this wasn’t a big change, but I would have the occasional paper with 75, 100, or even 150 references and would just shake my head. Truly, a total of 150 references for a 15-page paper seemed a bit excessive! I also often found that manuscripts with “monster” reference lists tended to suffer from what I call ”dissertation documenting”—the idea that if one citation is good, five must be better. I thought that having a limit might help the over-zealous documenters to rein it in a little.

In implementing this, I was taking a cue from Dr. Peggy Chinn, editor of Advances in Nursing Science (ANS). I knew ANS had a limit of 50; what I didn’t know (until recently) is that policy had been in place from when she founded the journal in 1978. Her rationale was to “reserve more space for article content.”

I assumed this guideline was standard in other journals but didn’t have the facts at hand. Rather than combing through a few dozen “Information for Authors” documents to establish the number, I did a quick, informal poll on the International Academy of Nursing Editors (INANE) mailing list (otherwise known as the INANE listserv) asking this question. To my surprise, of the 16 respondents, only two (Peggy Chinn and Dr. Lucy Bradley-Springer) indicated a limit.

Dr. Bradley-Springer, Editor of the Journal of the Association of Nurses in AIDS Care (JANAC), had several comments, and I found that her thinking mirrored my own. She instituted the policy about six months ago, partly out of frustration with a number of issues, including:

• Checking references on 50, 60, and even 80 citations and finding many that were redundant, unnecessary, and even inappropriate.
• Space.
• Lack of a critical process, i.e., using a critical process to select references rather than ”throwing everything” on the list.
• Authors referencing 10 or more of their own papers, which Lucy noted was “self-serving and usually redundant.”
• Not making the proper transition from student paper to journal article.

JANAC has established a limit of 30 references for research manuscripts and 10-15 for brief papers; review manuscripts can have more references but "with restraint."

While we are in the minority with having a limit, editors are still concerned about the number of references that are included in a paper. Poll respondents shared many useful comments on the topic, such as this from Dr. Patricia Yoder-Wise: "Neither The Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing nor Nursing Forum limits references. We might intervene if the list rolled on for pages. However, for some articles, that too is appropriate. Sometimes reviewers ask authors to trim their references and
that is primarily because they have cited so many for each point that it is difficult to follow the manuscript."

Ah, the dreaded dissertation documenting!

Similarly, Dr. Nancy Lowe, Editor of Journal of Obstetric, Gynecologic, & Neonatal Nursing commented, "We stipulate keeping the references current and often encourage authors to be selective about references in revisions." In the same vein, Dr. Karen Hill, Editor of the Journal of Nursing Administration, said, "I feel that this [the number of references] is variable based on the article, but I try to have enough to support the point but not too many to take up publishing space.”

Dr. Carolyn Yucha, Editor of Biological Research in Nursing, also addressed the issue of space, “I have asked authors to delete old and irrelevant references to shorten the page numbers.” I had to chuckle a bit because soon after receiving Carolyn’s message, I received this email from Jackie Owens from OJIN: The Online Journal of Issues in Nursing. "We don’t have any page limit so have not needed to do this. In reality, since we are not restricted by page, we simply use other criteria (e.g., suggested page length in our author guidelines and editor and/or peer reviewer suggestions) to manage both of these concerns—out of control references and manuscript length."

This was interesting to read; my journal is online (with a print counterpart). Even so, I have a total number of pages that are budgeted for each issue, so length still matters to me.

Dr. Judith Gedney Baggs of Research in Nursing and Health told me that her journal uses APA style for formatting and limits the number of citations within a set of parentheses to three. I thought this was an interesting and creative way to establish a limit without specifying a maximum number.

A few editors are dealing with the converse: too few references. Dr. Angela Borger, Editor of the Journal of the Dermatology Nurses’ Association, said, "We are not finding that a maximum number of references is the problem—sometimes just the opposite." Dr. Susan Ruppert, Editor of The Internet Journal of Advanced Nursing Practice, noted that manuscripts “with few references are scrutinized heavily by the reviewers and me.”

Dr. Suzanne Smith, Editor of Nurse Educator, shared her view thusly:

Depending on the content of a paper, it needs a certain number of references. A literature review might have lots, while authors of a short paper on a well known topic do not need to waste space inserting every reference on the topic ever written. In the latter case, if all the main ideas have two to six citations per idea and thus a very long reference list, I would assess them in light of text and support needed and then explain the situation to the author. I would suggest that the revision should only have 50% of the citations. But intelligent assessment should be the criterion, not arbitrary limitations.

I certainly respect her opinion but one might argue that having a set number of pages or words for a manuscript is also arbitrary decision, a guideline that most journals have established. Is a limit on references substantially different than a limit on the number of pages?

Dr. Ruth Malone, Editor of Tobacco Control, had a similar thought: "We do not specify a number of references. To do so would require an arbitrary limitation on the authors' ability to situate his/her work within the existing literature, and I know of no criteria for setting such a number that would make sense uniformly.” Perhaps this, then, is the crux of the issue.

As editors, we have the expertise in our specialty and a broad overview of the knowledge that exists. I think we also have a good “feel” for what is needed to support an argument or idea being put forth in a paper. This notion of "feel" is developed through working as an editor and reading both broadly and deeply in our respective specialties. Authors do not necessarily have this skill at the outset, and
this is a way we can support and mentor them in their professional growth. Pointing out that a manuscript has too many—or too few—references is a way to help foster this learning. Helping them to understand what needs to be supported with literature citations is also part of the process.

As for me, I stand by my limit of 50. I think that it gives authors a starting point to think about the whole manuscript and what I expect to receive. Not too long ago, I received a paper that had 76 references. I pointed out to the author that there were many places with two or three citations for a single point—those could be easily pared down. The revision came back in a few days and the list had been cut to 40. The author told me that doing this “was not a painful process.” That said, just last week a prospective author wrote and told me she is writing an integrative review and that the reference list might exceed 50. Would that be okay? Of course I said yes.

Synthesizing this, my take-away points particularly for authors are as follows:

- Be judicious in the number of references you include in a manuscript. They should be current and relevant.
- Consider carefully how many citations are needed to support a specific statement. One is often sufficient.
- Think about the page-to-reference ratio. As an editor, I would be concerned about a ten-page paper with a five-page reference list.
- Format your reference list properly according to journal style.
- Double check and make sure your references are accurate. Mistakes are common but are often missed because there is not a specific person in the review process to verify references. Accuracy is the author’s responsibility.

As a closing comment, I’d like to share this from Linda Ohler, Editor of Progress in Transplantation: “We prefer to limit the number of authors, rather than their references.”

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