Writing a Quality Editorial
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"Like the dessert after a good meal...a good editorial must also be careful to leave a good after taste. This is one in which the reader is held to the piece and retains his interest right till the end" (Singh & Singh 2006, p17).

Many nursing and healthcare journals have at least one editorial for each issue, and these pieces are generally authored by the Editor, Guest Editor, editorial board members, or an external invited expert. Occasionally, journals will publish editorials following a direct approach from an author, rather than on invitation. The practice will vary according to the journal and its Editor. As with any publishing activity, writing an editorial takes forethought, planning and time. In this paper, we provide some practical tips for writing an editorial to make the most of the opportunity and render the task a little less daunting.

The opportunity to write an editorial is a privilege. The author is granted considerably more scope to present his or her opinion to a potentially substantial audience. Editorials are generally not stringently peer reviewed (if at all) and a large degree of authorial freedom (which should apply) provides the chance to express one’s own opinion without the expectation that this will be modified extensively during a review process. With this privilege comes the responsibility to produce quality work. If you cannot meet the timelines you are given, then it is more appropriate to decline the invitation and wait for a future opportunity when you will have the time to do the task justice.

The first step is selecting a topic. In some cases, the broad focus will be chosen by the Editor, and will often relate to papers scheduled for publication in the issue in which the editorial is to appear. In other cases, where it is a matter of choice, editorials should address a contemporary topic of interest to the journal readership. Typically, the editorial is the leading article within the journal issue (or among the leading articles, if there is more than one editorial for that issue) and, as such, the topic should capture the reader’s attention. A catchy title, arguably more important for editorials than traditional peer reviewed articles, is always helpful. Clearly, if the journal issue is themed (e.g., addressing community health), then it would be necessary for the content of the editorial to be aligned to the theme.

All articles, even those in scholarly journals, should endeavor to instruct and inform but also entertain. Editorials should also be provocative compared to other article types. Editorials are intended to influence opinion, promote critical thinking on the topic at hand, and encourage others to reflect on, and possibly take action in relation to the issue (Weintraut not dated). The nature of editorial writing means that the author(s) can also introduce and explain newer concepts and issues, well ahead of the production of research or discursive papers on those topics. A good example of this can be seen in some of the editorials that have appeared in relation to nursing bibliometrics, for example, with the work of Hunt et al. 2011, 2012).
According to Singh and Singh (2006), a good editorial “is an opinion maker, it is reconciliatory between contrary viewpoints or standpoints, it is balanced in its analysis of evidence and events, and it is, manifest or otherwise, crusading in its thrust” (p 15). The writer thus has more poetic license regarding the content and style of writing, yet he or she must still adhere to sound principles of publishing ethics, which include not defaming others (Walter & Bloch 2001). The tone of the editorial should also be measured.

Importantly, editorials should not be regarded as lightweight contributors to the academic literature. Some editorials have either made valuable contributions to the knowledge base of the profession, helped readers to organize and synthesize their thinking around an issue, or presented a novel way of understanding a particular concept. Because editorials will often not be as rigorously peer reviewed as other articles, it is incumbent on the author to be especially mindful that the information in an editorial is accurate and that the piece is well written and appropriate to the target audience.

As for writing style, the editorial should be engaging, reader friendly, informative, and adhere to the formatting requirements of the intended journal. Like any article or presentation, an editorial must include a clear “take home” message. Although the author has the scope to direct the content, it must make sense to readers and ideally encourage them to think deeply, even critically about the topic in question.

In terms of length, editorials are usually around 1000 words, but again, length may be dictated by journal requirements. Key references may be included but are often not necessary; if they are the number should not be excessive. An editorial should never be a literature review—the reader is interested in the writer's perspective, not simply what others have to say. Although an editorial inevitably should reflect an opinion, all editorials should be supported by evidence of some sort and not based on emotion alone.

Following are a few rules of thumb that may be helpful if invited or considering writing an editorial:

- Prioritize the task: the time from date of invitation to expected submission is often short (and generally much shorter than regular articles) as the Editor has a particular journal issue in mind for the editorial’s publication. Publication times for journals are generally “tight”, with little room for unexpected delays. If you cannot meet the timelines comfortably, decline the invitation.
- View the task of writing an editorial as seriously as other writing assignments: although an editorial is invited, the Editor is not obligated to publish a substandard paper (which can be a highly embarrassing situation for all).
- Ask the Editor or journal office if they have specific guidelines for writing editorials. Sometimes journals have such guidelines, which may not readily available on the journal’s widely accessible Instructions for Authors page.
- Select a topic that will likely be of interest to the readership of the journal.
- Even though an editorial is an opinion piece, be sure to use appropriate evidence and round off arguments, and ensure that the editorial is not based on emotion alone.
- Though the author has more poetic license in editorials than usual peer reviewed papers, a scholarly style is still required. Avoid flowery, melodramatic, and over-stylized language.
- Encourage critical thinking.
- Present ideas clearly and concisely.
- Ensure that the reference format conforms to journal style, if references are included.
References

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