

Nurse Author & Editor

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Publishing Secrets

40 Things Editors Won't Tell You (But You Need to Know)

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A recurring department in *Reader's Digest* has the format of “[Insert number] Things [Insert Role] Won't Tell You.” These handy lists provide succinct, practical advice from those in roles ranging from nurses to chefs.

I reached out to my editorial colleagues to solicit their “secrets”—both good and bad—related to nursing publishing. These nurse editors have also walked in the shoes of writers, peer reviewers, and editorial advisory board members. You can use their advice to enhance your own publishing

experience.

On getting published...

1. Following the author guidelines helps increase your chance of getting published. The guidelines contain all you need to know: the types of articles we want, length, writing style, what style guide to use, how to submit tables and figures, and other important information. The most common complaint among editors is that authors don't follow the guidelines. For example, American Psychological Association (APA) style for citations means APA style and not American Medical Association (AMA) style. When you don't follow the guidelines, we're already put off by your manuscript.

2. We know when you try to bypass the author guidelines. Editors can easily tell when the margins and fonts are slightly changed to make the manuscript fit manuscript page limits and might consider that to be a form of dishonesty.

3. We sometimes desperately need articles for a particular article, especially if it's a special issue. If your manuscript arrives during one of those times, you're more likely to be published quickly, and we'll be more willing to work extensively with you, even if your article is not of the highest quality. Check the journal's website for notices of upcoming focus or themed issues.

4. Regular journal departments are sometimes the hardest for us fill. That means we'll be more receptive to a topic that could be used there.

5. The publication process takes time. Sometimes articles are published quickly (within a 1 to 3 months), but it also can take nearly 2 years from initial submission to final publication. If you need publications for your scholarly portfolio, plan accordingly.

6. Keep track of documents and be organized. File your acceptance letter in your tenure file. We may not be able to produce a copy for you 2 to 5 years later. Similarly, add the publication citation to your resume, and make sure it's accurate, with the correct date, journal name, year, volume, issue, page numbers, and DOI.

On cover letters...

7. Your cover letter praising the journal is lovely but it won't influence the decision to accept or decline your manuscript. Keep it brief and stick with the facts of your submission: title, author names, and author affiliations.

8. If you send us a cover letter addressed to another editor or with the name of another journal or editor, we'll be concerned about your attention to detail. All editors know we get manuscripts that have been submitted to other journals because sometimes it takes a couple of tries to find the right home for a manuscript. But please do us the courtesy of getting the name of the journal and editor correct.

On writing...

9. More words doesn't mean you've said anything more important or more clearly. It's rare that a manuscript warrants more words than the stated

limit. If you feel it does, you likely need to narrow the topic. The editor can help you with this.

10. We appreciate authors who write in a simple and direct manner.

Poor grammar, misplaced phrases, and multi-syllabic words when a simpler one would do drive us nuts. Keep your sentences short and strip them of jargon. Remember that a paragraph typically consists of four to five sentences related to a single idea.

11. When you ask whether you should update your references before submitting the manuscript, our answer will always be “Yes.” So, just go ahead and update them. If time has passed since you first drafted the manuscript—or perhaps since you submitted somewhere else and received a rejection letter—your references might not be current. Reviewers and editors notice the years on your reference list. Make sure your citations are up-to-date.

12. Make it easy for the reader to read your article. Use headings and subheadings to organize your thoughts and develop ideas in a logical manner. Write so that the reader should not have to ask a single question, and write with an image of your target audience in mind. The goal is to communicate the information quickly—readers have many other tasks on their radar.

13. Think about citations and use them wisely. When you write, “Studies have shown...” then you need to include citations to the studies that document your statement. On the other hand, when citing a statistic, such as “One in nine women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in her lifetime,”

then you only need one citation—not four or five. And some statements, such as “Pain in patients with cancer is a nearly universal experience,” probably don’t need a citation at all.

14. Make sure your manuscript is formatted correctly, using the features of your word processor. Don’t use the space bar to indent paragraphs—use the tab key. Don’t press enter at the end of every line. If you are not a whiz with your word processor (and are unwilling to learn its features) consider having someone else do the final editing and polishing on your manuscript.

On civility...

15. The publishing process will be smoother and more positive if you’re professional when communicating with the editor. For example, “Seriously?!” or “You’ve got to be kidding!” are not the best responses to requests from the editor to revise your manuscript. When you first contact the editor about interest in your topic, use a formal address such as “Dear Ms. Smith,” as opposed to “Hi, Mary!”

16. We’ll be pleasant as we work with you when you try to rewrite our professional edit, but you’ll go on our list of “difficult authors” and are less likely to have another manuscript accepted. Authors are expert on content, and editors are expert on editing. Both deserve equal respect for what they do. Keep in mind that the rules you learned in your high school English class may have changed—English is a living language. Editors know best what their readers expect.

On peer review...

17. Please don't ask me to bypass the peer review process because your research is "exceptional" and needs to be published "immediately." If this is true, the reviewers will notice and say so. Bypassing peer review won't help ensure your manuscript is of high quality, and asking an editor to do so reflects poorly on you.

18. Our peer reviewers are chosen based on their expertise and aren't paid. We appreciate the contributions of our hardworking reviewers, who are rarely paid for their time. If you're arrogant about the revisions they request, I'll talk with you on the phone to make sure you are clear that if you don't address their suggestions, I will have to reject your paper. Of course I will be very nice, but very clear. This usually works like a charm.

19. You don't have to take every suggestion from peer reviewers. Peer reviewers are experts, but sometimes there is a legitimate disagreement between what is requested and what you feel is correct. When you return the manuscript, note why you did not make a revision so that we know you didn't overlook it and can understand your rationale for not changing.

20. A letter saying "revise and resubmit" means we are interested in your article. Please don't withdraw your manuscript and submit to another journal. Our peer reviewers are not here for your developmental editing.

On editing...

21. We respect that your name is on the article. We take our responsibility

to you seriously and will do everything in our power to ensure you publish a high-quality article.

22. Don't send me your rough draft for me to review before you submit (unless I've agreed to it in advance). You are responsible for your manuscript. That's not to say, however, that in some cases where the topic is complex, we won't take a quick look. Ask ahead of time, and understand that although I might like the manuscript, that doesn't mean it will be accepted—that depends on peer review.

23. We wonder about the accuracy of your content when it's clear you didn't make a final check of the manuscript before submitting. When we can see that you didn't run spell check, or we find that your percentages don't add up to 100, it makes us wonder about the amount of care you took in presenting the information.

24. Multiple editors and reviewers will evaluate your article. Some editors are looking at the big picture, such as organization, while others are more focused on the details such as grammar. All of us are part of your publishing team.

On student papers...

25. We can spot a manuscript written for a school assignment a mile away. School assignments can be a great starting point for a manuscript, but they must be revised to fit the journal's audience, aims, and format.

26. We don't care that your teacher thought your manuscript was great.

Please don't tell us that when you ask to submit it. In fact, it's best not to mention that it started out as a school paper. Some of us immediately expect the worse when we read those words.

On reporting research...

27. The correct name of the popular statistical software program is IBM SPSS Statistics. Way back when (1975), the program was first called "Statistical Package for the Social Sciences," and the company was SPSS, Inc. It was acquired by IBM in 2009 and the official name (since 2014), is IBM SPSS Statistics. When referring to the software used for your analysis, use the correct name and make sure to include the version number.

28. Your study must have been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB). All published research must include a statement about ethical review and approval. In the US, this is done by an IRB. If you are from another country, include the name of the reviewing committee and make it clear what is in their scope of review. Without a statement of review by an IRB (or equivalent) your study won't be published.

29. Please don't try to "cut and paste" a dissertation or capstone paper into a manuscript for a journal. You'll never be successful and the resulting manuscript will be unorganized and probably too long. Do not try to write a manuscript "from" your dissertation. Instead, go back to the study and write a report of the findings in a format that is appropriate for your selected journal (see hint #1).

30. Statistical reporting is picky and detailed, and we are too. Look at

articles in the journal to see if p (probability) should be in capitals or italics or both. Same for N (for population) and n (for sample). Note if there are spaces around equal (=) and less than (<) signs and format your manuscript accordingly.

On ethics...

31. Please don't tell me that there are no copyrighted items in your article and then include four figures with attributions to previously published works, all without written permission. The rule of thumb is that if you found it in a publication (in print or online), it's copyrighted, and you have to ask permission to use it. Most publications will willingly grant permission. If there is a fee, note in your submission that you will obtain permission and pay the fee if the article is accepted for publication.

32. It's disturbing that you, a native English speaking author, takes co-authorship credit on a collaborative manuscript with nonnative English speaking colleagues, when it's evident from the syntax that you didn't read and correct the article. Our colleagues for whom English is a second language deserve better, and you have breached publishing ethics.

33. Just because someone participated in a project doesn't mean he or she deserves authorship credit. Authorship represents a significant contribution to the manuscript. Listing 15 authors for a 1,200-word manuscript simply because they were involved in the project isn't appropriate. Only those who wrote (not reviewed) the article should be listed.

On rejection...

34. We are always polite in our review or rejection letter, so it may not reflect what we really feel. For instance, my review letter will tell you nicely that your paper does not present new knowledge and does not contribute to the literature, but I should be writing to your faculty advisor and asking him or her to provide better guidance to students.

35. Often it's hard for us to reject your article. Many of us are writers ourselves, so we feel bad about having to disappoint you. However, our first duty is to our readers, who expect high-quality articles.

36. If you receive a rejection notice, don't write the editor incredulous that this happened because you had two people with PhDs and a physician on your research committee. We rely on our peer reviewers. Consider that sometimes people are too close to the manuscript to give it a useful review.

On us...

37. We suffer from short staffing just like you do. The number of people who make up the editorial staff for a journal has shrunk over the years. That's why we might send your manuscript back for you to fix the reference list instead of doing it ourselves. Many editors of nursing journals have additional full-time jobs.

38. We're happy to answer questions. Part of our job is to support authors. Don't be afraid to ask us a question.

39. We know resources that can help you. Many nurses aren't familiar with

resources such as the *Nurse Author & Editor* publication you are reading now.

40. We love what we do! We are committed to publishing great articles with information that nurses can use in their practice. Give publishing a whirl!

Thank you to the following editors who contributed their secrets: Maureen Anthony, Lucy Bradley-Springer, Marion Broome, Jan Fulton, Elizabeth Heavey, Anne Katz, Francie Likis, Tina Marrelli, Leslie Nicoll, Marilyn Oermann, Carol Patton, Geri Pearson, Susan Shropshire, Kathleen Simpson, and Sally Thorne.

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Cynthia Saver, MS, RN is president of CLS Development, Inc., which provides writing and editorial management services to leading nursing publishers. She frequently works with novice authors and is the editor of *Anatomy of Writing for Publication for Nurses, 2nd ed.* and a member of the *Nurse Author & Editor* Authors-in-Residence.

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