

Nurse Author & Editor

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Transforming the Ultimate Paper

Transforming the Ultimate Paper: Hints for Authors

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You've done it. You finished your research study or scholarly project, written the dissertation/capstone/thesis, had it approved by your advisor/committee, graduated, and received your degree. Congratulations! Your "ultimate paper" is on file in the university repository where it will be seen by...basically no one. Your next step, then, is to take the results of your hard work and get it published in a scholarly journal where it will get the attention it deserves. But where to begin?

I have helped many "dissertation transformers" be successfully published. One challenge is figuring out a process that builds in success from the outset. Receiving a rejection letter is discouraging, especially when you thought you wrote a good manuscript that would be positively peer reviewed. People often contact

me for help at this point in the process—and I have seen firsthand the same mistakes that are made, over and over. If you are a “transformer” I hope you will take the following hints to heart, because they will help you avoid some of the common errors that are part of the publication journey.

(NB: For writing clarity, I am going to use the terms “research study” or “dissertation” throughout, but the advice applies to any type of ultimate scholarly project that is presented in a specified format, going by the name of capstone, thesis, or something else.)

YOU ARE NOT WRITING “FROM”

Mistake number one is when someone tells me, “I am writing an article from my dissertation.” No, you are not. You are writing a manuscript that reports the findings of the research study that you did. This might seem like a small point, but conceptually, it makes a world of difference. Your study, and its findings, is your starting point. That is the information you want to share with others.

Your first round of sharing was with your advisor and committee. Your dissertation was written according to university guidelines, with its structure clearly specified—typically five chapters—and the content that was to be included in each chapter. When it was finished, your dissertation was probably 100-500 pages in length, with a table of contents, several appendices, and a reference list of dozens, maybe even hundreds, of citations.

You may have read other dissertations, but I can guarantee that you have never read a dissertation in a nursing journal.

The problem with thinking you are writing “from” your dissertation is that puts you into “cut and paste” mode, and the outcome is, invariably, a manuscript that is too

long, unorganized, and not formatted according to the journal guidelines. My advice is to put your dissertation away and focus, instead, on selecting the right journal to report your findings and then writing your manuscript to conform to its guidelines.

JOURNAL DUE DILIGENCE

Journal selection is critical, and this is the second mistake that I commonly encounter. Instead of carefully choosing a publication outlet, all too often the author meticulously writes a first draft and then, when it is done, says, “Now I will figure out where to send this.” Think about that for a minute. Does that sound like a strategy for success? What if you decided you need to buy a blue suit and then walked into the first store you came to—would you be surprised if there weren’t any blue suits for sale at the drug store?

People challenge me on this—“I did a research study, so I am going to send it to a research journal.” Okay—which one? Or, “My study was about nursing students, so I am going to send it to an education journal.” Again, which one? Having a vague idea of a type of journal is not a strategic selection process. It’s like saying, “I am going to buy a blue suit, so I am going to the mall.” You could still end up in the drug store!

“Journal due diligence” is a term I coined several years ago (Nicoll, 2012). It comes from the banking and investment industries and refers to thoroughly vetting an entity before making a loan, buying stock, or whatever. For a journal, the process is the same—you begin with a macro assessment to find a list of potential journals, then delve more deeply to find the best fit for your topic. Just like you wouldn’t invest in a shady company, your manuscript, which represents an investment of hundreds of hours of work, deserves the most suitable publication outlet you can find.

You probably have a working knowledge of potential journals to consider. Write them down and then think bigger. For example, if your study was about nursing students then education journals would clearly be on your list. But is there another angle from which you could consider your study? In what context or situation did you study the students? Their knowledge about wound care? Their experiences caring for patients at the end-of-life? This could point you to other types of journals to explore.

Personally, I find the journal due diligence process to be fun. I like learning about journals that are new to me and I am constantly surprised at the variety of publications that exist in the scholarly literature. If you aren't sure where to begin, remember that Google is your friend. [The Directory of Nursing Journals](#), a collaborative effort between this publication and the International Academy of Nursing Editors is another good starting point. As every credible journal has an online presence, it is easy to do this research from your desk or kitchen table.

Once you have a list of possible journals, visit the journal website. The first document you want to study carefully is the "Information for Authors" (IFA) because that will answer many questions up front and will help you eliminate journals from your macro list. The IFA will tell you who reads the journal and the types of articles that are published. If you are writing a research report and the journal doesn't publish research (many don't), then obviously, that's not a good fit. Cross that journal off your list and move on.

For journals that survive the IFA test, then begin to delve a little more deeply. Look at the table of contents, the editorial board, the publisher—can you picture your article in this journal? If you find yourself nodding yes, then take the time to read several articles. The goal is to have an "Aha!" moment where it suddenly becomes clear that *this* journal could be a potential publication outlet.

I recommend that after this micro assessment, you have a shortlist of three potential journals: Number One, Solid Second, and Distant Third. In the unfortunate event that Number One doesn't work out, you can move on quickly to Solid Second for a new submission. I have created a worksheet you can use for your due diligence—it is attached to this article as a PDF that you can download. Take the time to fill it out for your shortlist of three journals. It's not busy work—I have had more than one person tell me that this is a very helpful exercise from which they learned a great deal.

BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF

Okay, this one is tough but it is important. Mistake number three comes in when people have stars in their eyes and think they have done groundbreaking research—and they haven't. You need to be honest with yourself about the quality of your work. I am sure you spent countless hours and shed more than a few tears getting to the point of finishing your dissertation. You believe in the work you did and your findings. Your committee approved it and you graduated, so that is another sign that it meets a quality standard. Right?

Not necessarily. There is a difference between your hard work and the quality of your study. There is also a difference between what the university will accept and peer review by a scholarly journal. Advisors and committees certainly want students to produce first-rate work that merits publication, but at the same time, they want students to graduate in a timely fashion. There are other factors at play, too. A dissertation is generally seen to be the starting point of a research career and as such, may meet a "very good" but not "excellent" standard. Likewise, your committee has experienced your research journey with you and has insight that may not be apparent to outsiders (peer reviewers) who read a manuscript devoid of this context.

Let's take an example. Your plan for your study was to have 100 participants with a certain condition complete your battery of questionnaires. The hospital you selected for participant recruitment assured you that 25 people per month were admitted who would meet your criteria. Knowing that, you planned on enrolling 100 participants in 4 months, but just to be safe, you allotted 6 months to data collection. Then, 9 months on, you have only recruited 26 people to be in your study, which works out to be 3 people per month, a far cry from 25! At this rate, it could take you the better part of 3 years to recruit enough participants. What do you do?

Your committee, knowing what you have gone through, agrees that you can end data collection with 26 participants. In the process, you have learned a valuable lesson about participant recruitment. This is all good. But, unfortunately, it has introduced a flaw into your study that cannot be overlooked. This is a fact: when a manuscript is submitted as a research report to a journal, then it will be reviewed at a gold standard. Research elements that are not up to par, such as a sample that is too small, are a basis for rejection. Once again, what to do? Let's consider all options, even those that are unethical and not recommended.

Falsify and Fabricate Your Data. Lie about the number of subjects—write that you recruited 100 people. Fudge the findings. This may seem like a tempting option. Unfortunately, chances are high that your lies will be uncovered, your manuscript rejected or retracted (if it makes it to publication), and your research career will end before it has even started. You may become a celebrity in [RetractionWatch](#). To be clear: *don't do this*.

Publish in a Predatory Journal. Keep searching for a journal that will publish your research as written. As Smith (2010) has noted, "Everything can be published somewhere." Unfortunately, "somewhere" may not be a quality publication outlet; nursing is not immune to the phenomenon of predatory journals (Oermann et al.,

2016). My colleagues and I read several hundred published papers in predatory journals for our study reviewing the quality of articles found therein (Oermann et al., 2017). More than three-quarters of the articles were presented as research reports in IMRAD (Introduction, Methods, Results, Analysis, Discussion) format. Further, 96.3% of the articles were rated as average or poor. Of the dozens of articles I read, I had the clear sense that many of these were “pendulum” publications (Nicoll & Chinn, 2015)—papers that had been rejected by quality journals with good peer review processes. With rejection and discouragement, the author turned to a predatory journal. It was easy to see what the problems were, and they ran the gamut, whether in sample size, design, instruments, data analysis, over-reaching conclusions, or just plain boring research questions that added nothing new to nursing knowledge. So—if your article has been rejected by one (or two or more) mainstream research journals and you are trying to figure out next steps, please do not fall into the trap of a predatory publication. Your article may be “published,” but it will not be indexed or discoverable; the citation on your CV will not be an asset and may even become a liability. Once again, to be clear: *don't do this.*

Reconceptualize Your Article. This is the hardest—but best—solution. Re-think your article to be something other than a classic research report, such as a case study, which uses your findings to inform the discussion. You need to “wrap your head around” a whole new way of thinking about what you did, and this takes mental energy and creativity. You may need to grieve a little, too. Publishing in a well-known research journal may have been a goal and giving up that dream may hurt. On the other hand, an article that provides evidence for practice and informs clinicians and their work may have much more utility in the long run. It is all a matter of perspective.

To begin this process, I suggest going back to your list of journals and looking at published articles, this time focusing on those that are not research reports. What types of articles are there? What might work for you? Love (2015) is a good example of a reconceptualized research report. While it is still presented as a study, the emphasis is much less on the design and instead focuses on the experiences of the participants before and after a college merger. The flaw—if you can't see it—is that she had two participants who were essentially outliers. She took their comments as a basis for discussion and compared/contrasted them to the other participants, rather than reporting themes, which is the more traditional approach in a qualitative study. This was a strategy to reframe the study successfully, remaining true to what was done but also presenting it in such a way as to re-focus the emphasis.

CONCLUSION

When you do the hard work of a scholarly project that merits a degree, you need to close the loop to disseminate your findings through presentations at conferences and publications in the scholarly literature. In the academic setting, you had an advisor and committee to help you move your project from initial idea to successful completion. The next step—writing a manuscript for publication based on your work—may be challenging. Without a committee for guidance, you may feel a bit adrift. Don't see this as a problem; instead, turn it into an opportunity. Look to resources that are available to you for help, be honest with yourself about your work, and be strategic about selecting a journal. When you consider these factors, you will greatly enhance your chances for publication success.

[Work Sheet Due Diligence 3 Journals](#)

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