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# Selecting Keywords for your Manuscript

## Selecting Keywords for your Manuscript

Marilyn H. Oermann and Beverly Murphy

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Most journals ask authors to include keywords with their manuscript submissions. Keywords are the terms and phrases that represent the main topics in the paper. They are important because keywords are used by potential readers when searching for information in bibliographic databases such as MEDLINE, the U.S. National Library of Medicine® (NLM) database; the Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL); and others. In addition to helping readers find your article when searching for a topic, they help to ensure accurate indexing of the publication in the database. Both of these are important components of discoverability both short- and long-term.

### WHAT ARE KEYWORDS?

Articles, books, and other materials that are indexed in bibliographic databases are accompanied by specific information about the publication including keywords. These keywords are the terms used for indexing the document, and by general definition, can include anything from formalized indexing structures to words or phrases included in the title and/or abstract. Each of the bibliographic databases has its own vocabulary for this indexing.

MEDLINE uses **Medical Subject Headings** or MeSH® terms, a controlled vocabulary developed by the NLM. Though author-generated keywords are not necessarily used to index articles, they are searchable in MEDLINE when supplied by the publisher (Torres, 2013). These keywords are searchable in addition to the words and phrases in the titles and abstracts of the articles, minus the stop words (e.g., a, and, the), which are not searchable. To assist in retrieval, authors can supply keywords with their manuscript submissions using the MeSH vocabulary.

In the MEDLINE database, more specific terms are grouped under broader terms (NLM, 2017a). Authors should use the most specific MeSH terms as keywords rather than the broad and more general headings. For example, problem-based learning is included under teaching, which is under education. For a manuscript on how faculty used problem-based learning in their course in a baccalaureate nursing program, the terms “problem-based learning” and “baccalaureate nursing program” or the specific MeSH terms (problem-based learning and education, nursing, baccalaureate) would be better to use than “teaching and education” or “teaching and nursing education,” which are too broad.

The CINAHL database indexes its publications using CINAHL subject headings, some of which are based on MeSH terminology, but additional terms are included that focus on nursing and allied health literature. CINAHL headings also are organized from general to more specific. “Problem-based learning” is a subject heading in CINAHL under the broader term “learning methods.” For the manuscript

on how faculty used problem-based learning in their baccalaureate nursing program, the terms “problem-based learning” and “education, nursing, baccalaureate” would be effective keywords to bring readers to the article if they searched for the topic in CINAHL.

## TIPS FOR IDENTIFYING KEYWORDS

To improve the chances of others finding your article in a search, authors should give some thought to the keywords they provide with their manuscript submissions. Here are some strategies for identifying possible keywords:

- Relevant keywords should be included the title and abstract of your manuscript, which are searchable in these bibliographic databases. Selecting MeSH terms that represent the main topics in your manuscript and might be searched by readers supplements the terms used in the title and abstract. By using additional keywords, authors can extend the representation of their content beyond the words in the title and abstract (Grant, 2010).
- Along the same lines, try to provide unique keywords for searching that complement that title and abstract, but do not necessarily duplicate them.
- Many databases do not search the full text by default so it is important that keywords include words and phrases used frequently in the text. To confirm your selection, you can do a search of these terms in your text.
- Because many nursing journals are in multiple bibliographic databases, consider choosing keywords that are MeSH terms, as they might be relevant when searching for the topic in both MEDLINE and CINAHL. Check CINAHL for additional subject headings, words, and phrases you might include with the manuscript submission, recognizing that some terms might not be used for indexing the article in MEDLINE. If the journal to which you are submitting is indexed in other bibliographic databases, such as PsycINFO, you should check

their thesaurus of index terms and decide whether to add other words to your list of keywords.

- Be selective about the keywords because most nursing journals restrict the number allowed with the manuscript submission. A study of nursing journals indicated that the median number of keywords to be provided by authors was 6, with a range of 3 to 20 (Oermann, Nicoll, Chinn, et al., 2018)
- Sometimes searching for similar articles on your topic and examining the terms used in the database for indexing them provides ideas for keywords for your manuscript. Think about the terms you would use in a search and test to see if these will locate similar articles for the topic of your manuscript.
- Identify similar terms and variations that readers might use in a search. These might be included as some of your keywords with your manuscript submission.
- As indicated earlier, keywords should not be too broad and instead should be more specific in representing the main topics in the manuscript.
- Be cautious about using acronyms. Some nurses and others who are searching for information may not be familiar with a particular acronym. A good example is QSEN (Quality and Safety Education for Nurses). While this is a familiar topic to most nurse educators in the US who might search for information using QSEN, others might not be familiar with it.
- Test your keywords! Enter them in MEDLINE and CINAHL to confirm these words identify similar articles to your manuscript.
- The NLM (2017b) provides two tools that authors can use for deciding on MeSH terms as keywords for their manuscripts. One is [MeSH on Demand](#). With this tool authors can paste their abstract or manuscript into a text box, and the software searches for related MeSH terms. A second tool is the [MeSH Browser](#), which authors can use to search for relevant terms for their manuscript.

## CONCLUSION

Effective keywords should convey the main topics in your manuscript and include words and phrases readers would use to search for this information in a bibliographic database. These keywords increase the discoverability of your article and will provide a better chance of others finding it in a search. Carefully selected keywords will also help to ensure accurate indexing of the publication.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Marilyn H. Oermann, PhD, RN, ANEF, FAAN, is Thelma M. Ingles Professor of Nursing, Duke University School of Nursing, Durham, North Carolina, USA. She is Editor of *Nurse Educator* and the *Journal of Nursing Care Quality*.  
[marilyn.oermann@duke.edu](mailto:marilyn.oermann@duke.edu)

Beverly Murphy, BS, MLS, AHIP, FMLA, is Director for Communications and Web Content Management at the Duke University Medical Center Library and Archives and the Hospital Nursing Liaison for the Duke Health System and Watts School of Nursing, Durham, North Carolina, USA. She is a former Editor of the *Medical Library Association News* and is currently co-editing a book, *Diversity & Inclusion in Libraries: A Changing Facet of Librarianship*, which is due for publication in early 2019. [beverly.murphy@duke.edu](mailto:beverly.murphy@duke.edu)

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