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2 DAYS AGO EDIT

Selecting a Topic

Tips for Selecting a Topic for a Journal Article

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As the former editor of a clinical nursing journal and current editor of a nursing education journal, I have had many opportunities to present workshops about writing and publishing for professional nurses. When I ask clinical nurses or nursing faculty why they have not published, common responses include:

- I can't think of a topic. What could I write about that others don't already know?
- I can't come up with anything new that would be of interest to readers.
- The only ideas I can envision have already been written.
- I don't know where to start, but I would like to write for a journal.

Selecting a topic for publication in a journal is a critical first step in the publishing process. All authors need to give careful thought to choosing and focusing a topic for publication. The purpose of this article is to describe criteria that you should consider when selecting a topic. I also offer suggestions for topics that are appropriate for clinical and education focused journals as well as ideas that are always of interest to all editors.

CRITERIA FOR A TOPIC

OFFERS NEW INFORMATION OR A NEW SLANT

The topic you select needs to offer the reader either new information or provide a unique slant on an issue that is well known to the reader. A topic that offers nothing new will be at risk of rejection no matter how well the manuscript is written. For example, not long ago I received a manuscript whose purpose was to convince the reader that simulation is an effective teaching strategy to use in nursing education. Although the paper was very well written, the author provided no new insights about simulation but merely summarized information that is well known to the readers of my journal, and in nursing education in general. Not surprisingly, the manuscript was rejected.

NARROWED FOR A JOURNAL

The selected topic must be narrow enough that it can be addressed in one journal article. A common mistake of novice writers is to select a topic that is too broad and could only be addressed in a lengthy book chapter. For example, I once had a student who said she wanted to write about heart failure—a very broad topic! After discussion with me, she was able to hone her topic to address the use of the beta blocker medications in the treatment of patients with heart failure.

HAS ONE MAIN PURPOSE

When writing about the selected topic, you can have only one main purpose for the manuscript. When authors attempt to address multiple purposes in one manuscript, they risk failure because it is difficult to cover numerous goals in 15 to 18 manuscript pages (the average length of a journal manuscript). Trying to cover too much in too little space results in an article that is superficial and provides scant useful information. I once had a doctoral student come to me and asked my guidance on a recently rejected manuscript. When I read the paper, I identified four main goals for the manuscript, none of which were adequately addressed. It was very clear to me why the paper was rejected. When I met with her after reading the manuscript, I asked her “What was the purpose of your paper?” She quickly stated the four main goals, so she knew what she had written, but was less clear on the rule of “one main purpose.” I explained that a topic must be focused and suggested that she break her manuscript into four possible papers—or at least write just one on the goal that she believed was most important and relevant to readers.

ANSWERS THE “SO WHAT?” QUESTION

The topic you select for a journal article must answer the “so what?” question. By this I mean the readers of your targeted journal need to be interested in your topic. Readers want to learn something from what they read that is useful and applicable to their work—if it is not, they will quickly stop reading and move on to the next article! When I was the editor of a clinical journal, I received a paper that summarized the evaluations of a workshop that was held for clinical nurses. I informed the authors that readers of the journal are not terribly interested in the results of their conference evaluations. Instead, I suggested that the authors write a paper that described in detail the workshop they offered so that readers could benefit by replicating such a workshop in their setting. In the paper, I encouraged them to address barriers and facilitators for planning a successful workshop, ideas

for how to obtain funding to cover associated costs, and teaching methods that they deemed effective for the learners.

MATCHES THE TARGETED AUDIENCE OF THE JOURNAL

The selected topic must be a good match for the intended audience of the journal. I am amazed how often manuscripts are sent to a journal where the topic is not appropriate for the journal's audience. For example, as the current editor of the *Journal of Professional Nursing*, I receive many clinical papers. These papers are rejected outright without any peer review because a clinical topic is not appropriate for a nursing education focused journal such as *JPN*. If your topic is intended for nurse practitioners, you must send the manuscript to a journal whose readers are primarily nurse practitioners. When you want staff nurses to learn about your topic, you must send your manuscript to a journal intended for a staff nurse audience. Without a good match of the topic with the intended audience of a journal, you risk outright rejection no matter how well it is written. Go to the website of your targeted journal and determine the journal's intended audience—this is easy to do by reading the journal's mission statement and purpose, and scanning the table of contents of a few recent issues. If you have any questions about the journal's readers, contact the editor to ascertain if your topic is a good match. You can find a list of nursing journals with links to the journal website, editor name, and contact information in the journal directory found here on the *Nurse Author & Editor* website (<http://naepub.com/journals-directory/>).

LABELLED CORRECTLY

Your topic must be labeled appropriately when submitted to a journal. For example, if you are reporting on a quality improvement project, the topic should not be referred to as a research study. When a manuscript describes outcomes evaluation, it should be characterized as such rather than describing the work as original research. Also, keep in mind that there are only certain types of outcome

evaluations that are of interest to readers. For example, faculty often submit manuscripts to *JPN* that present the results of their course evaluations. Frankly, readers have no interest in knowing about another faculty member's course evaluations, no matter how stellar they may be! Instead, readers may be interested to learn about the development of a new and innovative course that could be adapted and offered in their school and for which, coincidentally, you as the instructor received good evaluations. But the latter should not be the purpose or goal of the article.

Similarly, only research should be reported as research. You may have implemented a program and collected data as part of the evaluation process, but that doesn't make it a research study. Conducting a focus group to determine the needs or interest of patients or others is not automatically a qualitative investigation. Editors and reviewers hold research reports to a gold standard and trying to present something as research—when it is not—puts you at risk for a speedy rejection.

OFFERS SUFFICIENT INFORMATION

If you select a topic that tells about a new or innovative project, you must supply enough detail so readers could implement your idea in their setting. For example, if you created a professional development program for experienced nurses, readers will want to know the details. Tell them how you determined the need for the program, strategies used for implementation, methods employed to overcome barriers in carrying out the program, and a brief synopsis of the evaluation and outcomes. Readers very much like new and innovative ideas, but only if the author provides adequate details for them to replicate the idea in their setting.

TOPICS OF INTEREST

CLINICAL JOURNALS

Considering these criteria for a topic, you may wonder what topics are of interest to editors of clinical and education focused journals. For clinical journals, editors are seeking manuscripts that describe the nursing care associated with new interventions, procedures, or techniques. For these papers, help the reader understand the new intervention, but be sure to describe the nursing care that is required.

Case studies can be a valuable learning tool for readers of clinical journals. However, a common mistake made by authors is to submit a case that is so rare that a reader is unlikely to ever care for a patient with such a disorder. Instead, focus on writing a case study that help readers understand key assessment findings, laboratory and diagnostic test results, and rationales for nursing interventions as well as interventions provided by other members of the healthcare team. The case study should be woven throughout the manuscript showing the link between the case and the information you provide. If a case is presented at either the beginning or the end of the paper and there is no link between case and the information in the paper, you risk rejection. It is also important to anonymize (or change) personal details so that a patient could not be recognized from the description provided.

Another topic of interest for readers of clinical journals is evidenced-based protocols. In these manuscripts, you can summarize for the reader the state of the science that supports or does not support each step of a procedure or protocol. For example, you could write about the nursing care for a patient after cardiac catheterization. You would provide the evidence for each aspect of care such as best technique to prevent bleeding, recommended positioning, and hours of rest.

Editors of clinical journals are interested in articles explaining the nursing care of patients who are started on a recently released drug. Perhaps you could partner

with a pharmacist and help the reader learn the indications, actions, side effects, and nursing care of a patient who is taking the new medication.

EDUCATION JOURNALS

Readers of education focused journals are interested in topics about teaching methods, inter-professional education, innovative course or curriculum ideas, faculty professional development, academic practice partnerships, and promotion of faculty scholarship. These topics should offer enough detailed information so that the reader could implement the ideas in their school. Topics that are not of great interest to readers of education focused journals are those focusing on student's perception, attitudes, or knowledge of an issue or topic. Other topics that are frequently rejected include manuscripts reporting evaluation data from courses, the overall program, alumni, and students. Those data may be of great value to the school, but not to a wider audience. The most commonly rejected manuscripts are ones that describe a pre-test of students' knowledge, followed by teaching a course or module, and then a post-test. Manuscripts of this type have minimal applicability to other faculty and very little generalizability.

MANY JOURNALS

Topics that are a fit for almost any journal include solution focused or "how to" articles. You may select a topic that describes how you solved a problem in your organization and include enough detail so that if the reader faces the same problem, they will have ideas for solving it.

A description of challenging experiences is another topic appropriate for most journals. When developing such a topic, clearly describe the problem or issue and tell how you solved the problem. For example, you may describe how you dealt with a culture of incivility in your organization or strategies you used to help a very distraught family of a patient.

Articles that challenge sacred cows are always welcomed by journal editors. You can write an opinion or a commentary that challenges current thinking or common ways of doing things and forces the reader to consider alternative solutions. For example, clinical shiftwork that begins at 7 am and ends at 7 pm is very common in hospitals. Why do hospitals use this time frame when obtaining childcare for working nurses is very difficult for a shift that begins at 7 am? What would happen if we created a shift from 9 am to 9 pm? An article that challenges such a sacred cow would be interesting to readers.

CONCLUSION

Writing for a professional nursing journal can be one of the most rewarding experiences of your career. To help ensure your success, it is critical that you spend time selecting a topic that meets the criteria for a journal article and is a good match for the targeted journal.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patricia Gonce Morton, PhD, RN, ACNP-BC, FAAN is Dean Emeritus, the University of Utah College of Nursing. Currently, she is the editor of the *Journal of Professional Nursing*, the official journal of the American Association of Colleges of Nursing. Previously, Dr. Morton served as the editor of *AACN Clinical Issues*, a journal sponsored by the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses. She is an author-in-residence for *Nurse Author & Editor*.

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