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## An Editor's Top Ten

# An Editor's Top Ten

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As an editor, I have read hundreds of manuscripts and papers that have ranged from “early first draft” to “ready for submission.” I like to think that my editing has helped authors on two levels: specific revision of the manuscript I reviewed as well as learning a few things about good writing in the process. While I have seen and read just a little bit of everything, there are certain errors that crop up repeatedly. As they say, “If I had a nickel...I’d be rich!” With that in mind, let me share my personal list of Top Ten Errors. Memorize these and have a goal to not make these mistakes in your writing—editors and peer reviewers will thank you!

### **#1: TOOLS BELONG IN THE TOOLBOX**

I learned this in my doctoral program. The document that people fill out for you as part of a research study is a questionnaire, a survey, or an instrument, but never a “tool.” For me, seeing an instrument described as a tool is like fingernails on a blackboard. In fact, just typing it here is giving me the heebie-jeebies! Use of the word “tool” is widespread and pervasive, and I feel like I am on a one-woman campaign to eliminate its use, but I am stubborn. Your writing will be more elegant and sophisticated when you refer to research instruments using proper language.

## **#2: PROPER USE OF THE WORD “INCLUDE”**

The definition of include is “to comprise or contain as part of a whole.” It is non-restrictive, which means that when you describe components of something that are included in something else, you are only listing some, not all, of the components. For example, if you write, “Leading causes of death in the United States are heart disease, diabetes, and accidents,” it is clear that you are only listing three causes, although there are many more on the total list. If you are listing everything, then don’t write the word “include.”

A very common example of using include incorrectly this is when someone is writing about a theoretical framework. Consider this:

*The Technology Acceptance Model has four factors. They include: 1) behavioral intention to use, 2) system use, 3) perceived usefulness, and 4) perceived ease of use.*

As all four factors of the model are listed, the word “include” is not needed. Delete “they include,” put a colon after factors, and make this one sentence. Parsimony and proper usage, all in one!

## **#3: LEARN A FEW LATIN WORDS**

Which is correct?

- A. et. al.
- B. et al
- C. et al.

If you learn a few Latin words, you'll never make this mistake again!

The correct choice is C, et al.—which means et alia, “and others” and refers to people. In scholarly writing, et al. is used most commonly when abbreviating a list of authors. There is a period after al. because it is an abbreviation of “alia,” but et is a word, not an abbreviation, so no period is needed (and is, in fact, wrong).

A few other Latin words to learn:

- eg (e.g.) *exempli gratia*, “for example”
  - Because e.g. implies that other examples are being omitted, do not use etc. in the same list.
- ie (i.e.) *id est*, that is; it can also mean specifically or namely.
- et cetera, “and the rest” – refers to a list of things.

While we are on the subject of Latin words, remember that the word “data” is plural (*datum* is the singular word). Thus you should write “Data are” or “Data were” not “Data is” or “Data was.”

#### **#4: BE CONSISTENT**

Once you decide how to refer to something, then be consistent and use that term throughout. Consider: healthcare—or is it health care? This is a good question and

leads to another very common mistake.

- Health care, two words, is a noun and refers to the health care a person receives.
- Healthcare, one word, is an adjective or noun, so you can write healthcare professional, healthcare system, etc. The Agency for Healthcare Policy and Research (AHRQ) uses healthcare as a modifier for policy.

According to Google trends, “healthcare” is becoming more common and can be used in all instances. My advice is to pick one term and use it consistently; my preference is healthcare as one word. And remember—never hyphenate it!

Another area of inconsistency is the use of acronyms and initialisms (Nicoll, 2016). As a refresher, an acronym is an abbreviation that is pronounced as a word, such as NATO, while an initialism is an abbreviation that is pronounced one letter at a time, such as FBI. It is perfectly fine to use these in your writing, but when you make the commitment to do so, then you need to be consistent. For example, if you decide to use APRN in place of “advanced practice registered nurse” then use that term from then on. Don’t use APRN, nurse practitioner, and NP interchangeably. The first time the phrase appears, put the acronym or initialism in parentheses, then use this term throughout the rest of your manuscript.

My rule of thumb for acronyms and initialisms: only use if the abbreviation appears five or more times in the manuscript. Also, you should not start a sentence with an acronym, although the rules on this are changing. My best advice is to re-word the sentence so the acronym is not first, rather than spelling it out. Remember, your goal is consistency.

## **#5: PAY ATTENTION TO SPACING**

The style manuals of APA and AMA have very specific guidance on statistical notation and spacing. While I could go on at length, the simple rule is: put spaces around the equal (=), greater than (>), and lesser than (<) signs. Also, *p* (for probability) is italicized; in APA the *p* is lowercase and in AMA, it is uppercase, i.e., *P*.

## **#6: ELIMINATE “PIZZA PIES”**

Pizza pies are redundant words that can easily be edited out, making your writing clearer and more concise (Nicoll, 2015). Someone once told me that “pizza” in Italian means pie, so saying “pizza pie” is equivalent to saying “pie pie.” Pizza pies show up all the time in manuscripts I edit. Once you learn to spot them, you will find that they stick out like sore thumbs in your writing!

“Survey instrument,” “survey questionnaire,” or (shudder!) “survey tool”—in all three cases there is no need for the extra word. Survey, questionnaire, or instrument is sufficient. “Nursing students” or “nursing staff” also become redundant after the first mention. Once you have established what type of student or staff member you are writing about, then just use the single word. Your readers will understand what you are saying.

I have seen some pretty extreme examples of pizza pies: “pre-licensure junior level baccalaureate nursing students” or “children/adolescents with a terminal illness, such as cancer”—long phrases that are repeated endlessly throughout the text. I have had authors tell me that this level of specificity has come from their dissertation/capstone writing as an expectation of their committee. While that might have been required for that paper, I can assure you that journal editors want to see nice, tight writing with the elimination of unnecessary words.

## **#7: LEVELS OF HEADINGS**

Headings are important in a manuscript—they provide direction to the reader (signposting), make the article look better (aesthetics), and provide guidance on what goes where (positioning) (Watson, 2017). The APA manual provides formatting information for up to five levels of heads, but in my experience, you should strive for a maximum of three. Block out your manuscript with your major headings first, i.e., **Introduction**, **Methods**, **Results**, and **Discussion**, then begin to add your level 2 and 3 subheadings. I think it is helpful to format your headings correctly from the start when you are writing. This provides a visual and helps you to easily see if you are listing them correctly. Remember that **Abstract** and **References** are also level 1 heads, but the title of your manuscript is not: it is the title. Similarly, in a dissertation, the chapter titles (Chapter One, Chapter Two, etc.) are *titles*. The first level head would be the word(s) that follows, such as **Introduction**. You can decide how you want to style the title or there may be specific requirements from the journal or dissertation handbook. Generally, what I see most often is all caps, bold, and centered, i.e., **CHAPTER ONE**. I also prefer to see the numbers spelled out in chapter titles. See the table below for how to style headings in APA.

<b>Level of Heading</b>	<b>Format</b>
1	<b>Centered, Boldface, Uppercase and Lowercase<sup>1</sup></b>
2	<b>Flush Left, Boldface, Uppercase and Lowercase</b>
3	<b>Indented, boldface, lowercase paragraph heading ending with a period.<sup>2</sup></b>
4	<i>Indented, boldface, italicized, lowercase paragraph heading ending with a period.</i>
5	<i>Indented, italicized, lowercase paragraph heading ending with a period.</i>

<sup>1</sup>This type of capitalization is also referred to as *title case*.

<sup>2</sup>In a lowercase paragraph heading, the first letter of the first word is uppercase and the remaining words are lowercase.

## **#8: LEARN TO CREATE A HANGING INDENT**

One of the first things I do when I edit a manuscript is to go to the reference list and select the “Show/Hide” button (also called the Paragraph button) in Word. I don't want to see marks for tabs and paragraphs, but unfortunately, this is a very common mistake. When “Show/Hide” is turned off, the citation looks fine, but the minute you start to edit a reference, everything goes berserk. This is definitely a case where it is easier to do it right from the start, rather than trying to fix the formatting after the fact.

In Word, the paragraph dialog is the place to create a hanging indent; in Google Docs, you can find it under Format→Align & Indent→Indentation Options. If you set the style, then everything you type that follows will be formatted that way. You can also select the text (i.e., the reference list) and then apply the style to the selected text. If this is new to you, play with it until you learn it, then commit to always formatting your reference list using Hanging Indent tools that are built into your word processor. If you need more help, ask a colleague or search YouTube. There are several short videos that provide instructions.

## **#9: DO NOT CITE PREDATORY PUBLICATIONS**

No matter what you are writing, a simple rule is to not cite predatory publications. Poor quality articles in predatory publications are making inroads in the scholarly literature and having a detrimental effect on nursing science (Oermann et al., 2016). Quoting from these publications exacerbates the problem (Oermann et al., 2019). Editors are increasingly scrutinizing reference lists for predatory citations and asking authors to remove them when they are found, which may require extensive re-writing on your part to eliminate the citation in the text. Depending on the editor, citing predatory publications could even result in your manuscript being rejected. Save yourself some grief and just don't cite articles in predatory journals in the first place.

I have been asked: How do I know if an article or journal is predatory, or not? Excellent question. First, you should be familiar with the literature and should have read every article you cite—that's just good scholarship. If the article is in a journal that is new to you, then do your due diligence to find out more. Visit the journal website and do an evaluation of the journal, its purpose, editors and editorial board, and guidance to authors. See if the journal is listed on Beall's list (<https://beallslist.weebly.com/standalone-journals.html>, now being maintained by an anonymous website manager) (Oermann et al., 2019). If you have access to it, see if the journal is on Cabell's Blacklist (Anderson, 2019). Alternatively, see if the journal is listed in the [Directory of Nursing Journals](#), which is a vetted white list. If you can't figure out if a journal is predatory or not, based on your review, ask a colleague, [or even ask me!](#)

What happens if you think this is a “good” article in a predatory journal? My advice is the same: do not cite it. Legitimizing the journal or publisher by citing the article contributes to the problem of “predatory creep.” If the information is truly important or unique, then search on the author's name to see if they have published elsewhere in a non-predatory journal on the same topic. You can also write the author and ask about alternative publications. As a last resort, the author may share information with you, which you can then cite as “personal correspondence.”

## **#10: THE QUESTION IS NOT A SECRET**

Since I started this article with a lesson learned from my doctoral studies, I will end it the same way: your question or purpose is not a secret. Ideally, it should be front and center: in the first paragraph is best, but if you can't manage that, then make sure it is stated by the end of the first page. Readers do not want to plow through multiple pages before they know what you are up to! Write your question first and let everything flow from that.



## CONCLUSION

Writing is a skill that gets better with practice. As with any skill, there are rules and techniques that can help you to be more proficient and efficient in your writing work. The Top Ten errors I have listed here range from fairly simple and straightforward to more nuanced and complex. Take time to read and remember these mistakes and use this knowledge in your own critical assessment of your papers. Your writing will benefit from your efforts, I assure you!

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✎ WRITING BASICS



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