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Getting Started on Writing for Publication

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How do I get started?

You have decided that you want to publish an article because you want to get your ideas across to as many people as possible. The first step is to work out your strategy for the article, and to do this you will need to ask yourself a number of questions and write down your answers on a sheet of paper. Some of the most important of these questions are set out below to help you to draw up your strategy.

At this point you might also consider finding a writing mentor. This is someone who has published before, whose opinion you respect and whom you can trust to provide honest feedback and guidance during the various stages of writing your article. It may be a higher degree supervisor or a work colleague. Talk with the person to ensure that they are willing and able to fulfil a writing mentor role.

Why should I write an article for publication?

Nursing practice should as far as possible be evidence-based, and many nurses are involved in generating evidence about their practice – in practice development projects, doing literature reviews to find the best evidence for their particular specialty, or carrying out research themselves.

We need to share the knowledge that is built up in this way so that others can benefit from our efforts and we can learn from each other on a worldwide basis. In addition, publications may be required for career advancement.

Who do I want to read my article?

The answer to this question is crucial because it will help you to decide which journal is most appropriate so that you aim the paper accurately and it reaches the right readers.

If you want to reach clinical staff who give direct care, then you need to choose a journal that is attractive to and read regularly by these readers. Articles published in this kind of journal will be written in the kind of style that appeals to practitioners and contains the right amount of detail. They are likely to be shorter, use straightforward language, and include easy-to-read features such as boxes and lists of bullet points. The implications of the article for clinical practice will be clearly stated. The article by Professor Jacqueline Fawcett in this issue of Nurse Author & Editor gives more advice about this. Journals aimed at clinical practitioners may also include commentaries on articles to help readers to understand and critique them.

If your intended readers are researchers, then a more specialised 'academic' journal may be appropriate. Some of these journals accept longer articles of up to 5000 words and use a conventional format for research reports. However, more 'popular' journals also publish research reports, perhaps in a simpler format designed to be reader-friendly for clinical staff and less experienced researchers.

It is important to be clear about your target readers at the outset. Many people make the mistake of writing their article and then looking around to see which journal to send it to. This can mean that time is wasted having to 'readjust' the article to fit the journal's requirements.

How will you write and submit the paper?

Before starting to write, check the aims and scope of a range of journals to see which would fit your article best. You can do this by browsing in a healthcare or university library, or on the internet.

The author guidelines section of individual journal websites will show you how each editor wants their articles to be presented and submitted. For example:

- Short reports Can you submit the article online, or do you need to send a disk and paper copies (how many?).
- Which referencing system does the journal use – Harvard, Vancouver, etc?
- How long should the article be?
- How should the article be structured – which headings should be used?

How will you put your message across?

There are several different types of article, and each journal will have its preferred types and may not accept other types. The most common types are:

- Literature reviews
- Research reports
- Clinical articles
- Discussion papers
- Short reports
- Letters
- Opinion pieces

Are you ready now to plan your article?

Having worked out your answers to these questions and drawn up your strategy, you need to turn this into a plan for the article. This will be very similar to the plans you have written for student assignments for courses you have taken. Having a plan before you start writing helps to make sure that:

- You include everything that you need
- You work efficiently
- You don't have to spend time later making cuts, adding things, and making major changes

What should your plan look like?

Write down:

- The main headings of the article
- The subheadings in each of these sections, if needed
- The number of words you will use for each section

Then check your chosen journal's guidelines again to make sure that you have got it right.

Now you are ready to start writing!

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