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Best Review Practices: Support Nurse Authors with Compassionate Critique

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When Tim, a first time nurse-author, read the three review editors' comments on the manuscript he'd submitted to a specialty journal, he was amazed at the differences. One reviewer's only comment was "Yuck;" another reviewer rewrote entire sentences and paragraphs. The third reviewer listed what she appreciated most about his manuscript and asked that he consider several questions. Buoyed by this reviewer's list of appreciations, Tim used her questions to guide his revisions. He was thrilled when his manuscript was accepted for publication.

With nurses being encouraged to share their stories and with how-to articles proliferating, why is it so many never write for publication? When asked, nurses say they lack the time, the credentials or the know-how (Steeffel, 2007). They often add that they don't want to subject themselves to reviewers' critiques.

If this is so, how can reviewers, those unpaid experts who agree to read manuscripts in detail and advise editors on whether or not to publish them, frame their feedback in ways that encourage nurses to publish? By walking the line between constructive and critical. Just as best practices inform nurses' clinical practice, best review practices can help reviewers formulate feedback that empowers nurses to publish. This article shows how best practices enable reviewers to guide authors in the revision process, save time, and enhance the quality of manuscript submissions.

Revisiting the Role of Review Editor

As a consultant who helps nursing groups translate their everyday practice into publications, I've learned that nurses often feel like impostors when it comes to writing (Heinrich, 2008). When they don't believe they have something of value to share, turning nurses into authors requires more than giving them the know-how. It takes shifting their perspective, boosting their self-confidence and encouraging them to ask colleagues for help. What did this mean for a reviewer whose communication with authors was limited to a written commentary? These insights led my rethinking the role of a reviewer.

Finding myself grumbling once too often about the disappointing manuscripts submitted by novice and experienced nurse-authors alike, I began asking what I could do to improve the quality of the manuscripts I review. The answer that emerged over time can be summed up in one sentence. Stop judging and start educating. Expanding my role beyond evaluator allowed me to develop a set of best review practices that combine compassion with critique: 1. Set a Still-point; 2. Shift Your Perspective; 3. Self-Reflect; 4. Strategize; and, 5. Surround Yourself with Supporters (Heinrich, 2008).

Best Review Practices

In the opening vignette, the way the third reviewer framed her feedback resulted in Tim's feeling energized and educated enough to persevere with the revision process. Each of the best practices

she followed will be named, defined and applied by way of example below:

1. Set a Still Point. Have you ever written a negative review only to find when you re-read the manuscript the next day that it was your mood, not the piece, that was foul? To give authors your full attention and their manuscripts balanced feedback, it's important to shift gears before beginning your review. One way to make this shift is to set a still point.

A pause in the action for dancers, a still point can be the pause that refreshes for reviewers. Setting a still point allows you to transition from your everyday action mode into a reflective frame of mind that's conducive to a creative activity like review editing. There are three rules for setting a still point ~ keep it simple, make it quick and do it before each review. Setting a still point can be as easy as changing from work clothes into jeans, clearing your work space, taking the dog for a walk, closing your eyes and taking three deep cleansing breaths, playing music that inspires you or lighting a candle.

2. Shift your perspective from expert to novice. After spending his professional life studying dreams, the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung said that he listened to each dream as if it was the first one he'd ever heard. This open, empty and ready mind is what Buddhists call "beginner's mind" (Suzuki, 1984, p. 21). How does beginner's mind apply when reviewers are chosen for their expertise? Cultivating the compassionate mind of a beginner can move you beyond an expert reviewer's certainty to ask questions.

3. Self-Reflect. Have you ever considered the effect of your review comments on the nurse authors who receive them? My answer is a best case scenario that goes like this. As a reviewer, I want nurse authors to be so intrigued by my questions that they look at their manuscripts with new eyes and make revisions that showcase the insights that inspired them to write in the first place. Sometimes this happens, sometimes it doesn't. For every nurse inspired by my feedback to persevere with the publishing process, there have been those who gave up on revising their manuscripts as well as those who swore off publishing altogether. Even though admitting this hurts, it keeps me striving to frame my feedback in ways that entice nurses to write for publication.

Ask yourself how you'd like nurse authors to respond to your reviews. If there's a gap between their real-life response and the response you'd hoped for, the strategies that follow may help you bridge the gap.

4. Strategize. Learning the how and the what of compassionate critiquing offers reviewers a consistent feedback format that saves time. Christina Purpora, a colleague-friend and peer editor, showed me how to keep my critiques compassionate with a three-step method in which reviewers stand-in for readers as they: 1. Mirror; 2. Appreciate; and 3. Question. To mirror is to reflect back the manuscript's message as you understand it; to appreciate is to highlight the strengths of the piece as written; and, to ask questions is to amplify what is unclear to you as a reader. Here's an excerpt from Christina's review of a manuscript of mine that illustrates each step (Heinrich, 2008):

Mirror

I've reviewed your joy-stealing manuscript...as a reader this is what I learned

...The ten steps to becoming my own ally are all do-able and I can imagine engaging in every step...

Appreciate

Thank you, I will use these strategies with my nurses.

Question

This is what I wonder about...I am a bit confused about how I can stop joy stealing games by becoming my own ally.

To guide your question-asking, I've adapted the what of compassionate critiquing from Suzanne Hall Johnson's (1979) four characteristics of strong manuscripts: a single idea, a specific group of readers, an intriguing slant, and a publication read by this group. When turned into questions, these characteristics keep reviewers' feedback compassionate and critiques focused:

1. What is the single idea in this manuscript?
2. Who are the readers for whom you are writing?
3. What is a slant unique enough to intrigue these readers?
4. Is this a publication read by your intended audience?

Here's how the second question about readership structured one of my reviews:

Who are the readers for whom you are writing?

Sometimes it seemed to me that this manuscript addressed nurse educators and at other times it addressed nursing students. As your reader, I found this confusing. It will strengthen your manuscript to choose one group of readers and write to them.

Taken together, mirroring, appreciating and asking questions are respectful review strategies that leave the responsibility for revising in the hands of the author.

5. Surround Yourself With Supporters. Nurses are givers who often need practice with asking for help. Instead of going it alone, publishing is much easier when nurses reach out and ask for help from colleague-friends who may serve as rooters, peer editors, and/or co-authors (Heinrich, 2008). That's why it's so helpful for reviewers to remind nurses to reach out to colleagues by making suggestions like, "As your reader, I am not an expert in your field. This manuscript will be strengthened by your asking a specialist colleague to review this manuscript before you revise it."

Don't forget to take your own advice. Remember to reach out to the editor or to reviewer-colleagues whenever you're at a loss for how to respond to a manuscript you're reviewing.

Summary and Conclusion

The way that reviewers frame their feedback can influence a nurse-author's decision to persevere in the publishing process. This article suggests that reviewers expand their evaluative role to include an educative aspect. Best review practices that balance compassion and critique are defined and described: 1. Set a Still-point; 2. Shift Your Perspective; 3. Self-Reflect; 4. Strategize; and, 5. Surround Yourself with Supporters. Reviewers who incorporate these practices into their repertoire may find the review process as creative as it is inspiring to the nurse authors who receive their comments.

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