

Nurse Author & Editor

Volume 19 - June 2009, Issue 2

Avoid Rejection: Write for the Audience and the Journal

Charon Pierson

When surveyed either formally or informally, editors and reviewers routinely claim that the most common reason for rejection of an article is that it is poorly written. When we do not articulate exactly what constitutes "poorly written" in reviews or comments, the author is left with a vague letter of rejection that is not constructive. There are many elements in the construct of "poorly written"; for example, the writing style might be inappropriate for the readers, the flow of thoughts could be disjointed and difficult to follow, or poor grammar and syntax can detract from readability. The problem I want to discuss here is an overarching condition: the article that lacks focus. I see many unfocused manuscripts submitted to a journal I edit (*Journal of the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners [JAANP]*). These manuscripts fall into one of several categories based on the audience for the paper.

Who is the Audience?

First is the student assignment paper. Students may be required to write an article for publication as a school project. There are several problems with this type of assignment. First, faculty assigning the project may not be skilled at writing themselves, may never have published an article so they don't know the publishing process, or may not have the expertise to mentor the student in writing for publication. Even faculty who do possess the above skills may put constraints on the assignment that will make the final product unacceptable for publication. From the student's perspective, the audience for the paper is the faculty member who is grading the assignment. In order to get a good grade, the student is obviously going to write to demonstrate knowledge of the topic and not necessarily to engage a journal audience. A skilled mentor is necessary to guide students through this process.

Following closely behind the student assignment is the pre-term paper, which is the unborn article derived from a dissertation or a capstone project. I have had more than my share of theses, dissertations, and final projects submitted as they were to the university, complete with chapters, acknowledgements, and signature pages of faculty. The audience for the dissertation is the committee and not the journal editor, reviewer or practicing clinician. It's a mystery to me why someone who has obviously read hundreds of articles in professional journals to complete a graduate program would think that such articles begin their journal life in this unformed way. Somehow, students need to learn that it is their job to extract an article from the 350 pages of the dissertation and not the job of reviewers or editors. I would also advise that it is usually better to submit one substantial article from a dissertation rather than 3 or 4; creating multiple articles from a single project is referred to as "salami slicing" by editors and reviewers. Readers will feel cheated or even confused about the purpose of the manuscript as they attempt to understand and appreciate small bits of material when there was obviously more to the project.

Leaving the classroom setting, another common problem is the second choice paper, clearly identifiable by several signs. First is the incorrect format and style for the journal; these papers have

been submitted to another journal (the first choice), were rejected, and submitted without revision to a “second choice” journal. Formats are easily fixed, citations can be corrected, but reviewers do not react favorably to articles that are clearly written for and about a different audience. In the case of *JAANP*, the readers are advanced practice nurses not medical doctors, so constant reference in a manuscript to the medical practice of physicians is not well received. A variation on this theme is the article written for a specialty or niche audience, which may not be appropriate for a journal whose primary audience is clinicians in primary care. There are two issues here – one is the readers will not be interested in the article, and the second is that the audience who might be interested in the article will probably never see it.

The opinion piece can easily present as a sermon paper. This manuscript comes from the author with a sincere message, but that message is written in a style that is more conducive to delivery by a preacher from a pulpit. The audience may be appropriate for the message but the delivery is offensive for most readers of a scholarly journal. Reviewers will comment that the author is “preachy” or that there are many unsubstantiated claims made and alternative viewpoints are not presented. Closely related to the sermon is the advertisement; both attempt to convince a reader by emotional reasoning and not by a balanced and scholarly presentation of the evidence.

Avoiding the problem

All of the above situations can be avoided by carefully considering, before you begin writing, who will most benefit from your work, what journals do most members of that audience read, and what types of articles have been recently published in those journal pages?

Every talk I give on writing for publication, every article I’ve read on good writing practice, and every editor I’ve talked with about these issues repeats the same message: there are three key steps to developing your manuscript and selecting the right journal for submission: 1) read several articles from the journal you target for your submission, 2) look at the table of contents for the issues from the past 2 years, and 3) read the journal mission statement. A fourth possibility is to contact the editor if you are still unsure if your article is appropriate for the journal. Some editors do not respond to queries, but most will, particularly if you have an interesting idea. Regardless of how widely publicized this advice is, it is the exception rather than the rule that authors follow one or more of the suggestions.

Ask some colleagues (not your best friend, partner, or spouse) who know and read your target journal for feedback on your manuscript. Be clear that you want constructive feedback and not a pat on the shoulder, but remember that constructive feedback takes time and effort on the part of your colleagues, so be reasonable with your request. If you are asked to provide such feedback, take the request seriously. A thoughtful critique is a great gift from one colleague to another and might preclude a rejection.

For students, there may be particular problems writing for a profession they have not yet entered. For example, nurse practitioner students writing about a common condition and hoping to submit to the *JAANP* may not have anything new and helpful to share with clinicians who have been in practice for many years; novice researchers may have little of interest to report to top-tier research journals. The most successful advanced practice student authors in my experience with *JAANP* are those that have specialty knowledge from their own nursing practices that they are able to translate to a primary care advanced practice audience. Novice researchers might be more successful submitting pilot study results to a journal that publishes “brief communications.”

Doctoral students present another problem. The requirement to publish a specific number of articles

prior to dissertation defense or graduation can create lengthy delays, particularly when the requirements include acceptance in "high impact" journals. Impact factors can be manipulated by publishing fewer citable articles (Citrome, 2007), which further reduces the chances of acceptance of a manuscript. If the goal is to publish a specific number of articles by a specific date, the appropriate audience might well be readers of a journal with a lower or no impact factor. Given the availability of on-line search in the professional literature, researchers will be able to locate any article that is indexed.

In addition to being well-written and interesting to read, a good manuscript is targeted to the appropriate audience, submitted to the journal in the correct format, and adds to the body of knowledge of the discipline. Although impact factors, faculty pressure, or promotion and tenure considerations may factor into the selection of the journal, if you have written to the most appropriate audience, your message will be read and appreciated.

Reference:

Citrome, L. (2007). Impact Factor? Shmimpact Factor! *Psychiatry* (May), 5-13.

Charon Pierson, PhD, GNP-BC, FAANP, is a Clinical Associate Professor and Director of the Center for Aging at the University of Texas El Paso School of Nursing and the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners*.

[Print this article](#) [Email it to a friend](#)

[Back to Table of contents](#) | [View all articles in this issue](#)