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## Developing Ideas for Publication

# Developing Ideas for Publication: Strategies for Nurse Authors

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Dissemination involves the planned spread of information and knowledge and is accomplished mainly through publications and presentations. Since they reach a wider audience, publications are seen as more impactful than presentations and often include peer-reviewed journal articles. Numerous types of articles exist to spread nursing ideas. Examples include: quality improvement papers, clinical or review articles with up-to-date evidence, systematic or integrative literature reviews, research reports, analyses of professional issues or policies, opinion papers with well-reasoned arguments regarding topics of concern, and personal stories that provide insight into nursing and/or the patient experience.<sup>4</sup> There are many benefits to publishing in nursing, including: sharing research findings and other evidence for clinical, teaching, research, and/or administrative practice,

communicating knowledge and expertise, informing others of new initiatives, and advancing one's job or completing academic tenure and promotion requirements. Ultimately, publication helps advance the nursing profession.<sup>2,5</sup>

The publishing process involves many steps prior to writing a manuscript. Notably, before an author develops a paper for consideration, there are several preparatory activities needed. For example, authors must develop their idea or topic, determine authorship, and identify a target audience and journal. Importantly, first developing an idea that is new, important, and can address the “so what” factor is critical to later publication success.<sup>2</sup> Well-developed ideas lead to more cohesive, succinct, and meaningful articles that impact practice. On the other hand, unfocused and unimportant ideas that are not well thought out tend to become vague and general articles that do not impact practice. These manuscripts may even be rejected for publication altogether. Thus, this article provides strategies for nurse authors to develop ideas for publication. Several approaches in identifying and specifying ideas for publication will be offered, followed by methods for creating purpose statements and outlining manuscript content.

## **IDENTIFY YOUR IDEA**

It might be easy to identify an idea for publication if you have a particular topic your manuscript needs to cover.<sup>2,5</sup> For example, you could be reporting a research project you completed or you may be informing others of an evidence-based practice project you finished. Other times, it may be harder to identify your idea because you have only a general idea of what you want to write about or you may not have an idea at all.<sup>2,5</sup>

If you have only a general idea, begin by asking yourself questions to further narrow your topic. For example, ask:<sup>2</sup>

- What is the specific message I am trying to convey?
- What does my audience know about this topic already? What do they need to know about this topic?
- Why is this idea important?
- What difference will this idea make towards clinical, teaching, research, and/or administrative nursing practice? Or, what is the “so what” factor?

Don't worry if you don't have an idea ... yet. Ideas are all around you. Think about your life, your practice, the literature you read, general and specialty nursing organizations' websites or online communities, and the local and global media.<sup>5</sup> Clinical nursing journals, for example, frequently look for articles regarding medications, cardiac and respiratory care, prevalent disease states that nurses spend much time caring for, and safety and/or urgent situations.<sup>5</sup> A current idea could involve topics regarding the contemporary global pandemic of COVID-19. *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* are excellent sources of ideas as they publish about new developments in healthcare.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, nursing journals may provide calls for special issue papers which can alert you to potential topic areas.

While considering ideas from all around you, ask yourself some additional questions to further refine your idea. Example questions include:<sup>6</sup>

- What topics am I interested in?
- What topics would I like to read?
- What are my areas of expertise?
- What is the biggest challenge and/or what are common problems that I face at work?
- What does my job (organization, unit, university/college) do particularly well?

- What projects or initiatives have I been involved in recently?

## **SPECIFY YOUR IDEA**

Regardless of whether you started with a clear idea or not, you will need to develop a specific and focused idea or topic for your paper. A specific topic resembles the nervous system of your article, keeping your work balanced, steady, and ultimately more meaningful and useful. Take time to find and refine an idea that you have passion about; this will sustain you throughout the publication process.<sup>5</sup> Also, make sure it is an idea that is important to nursing. Although how specific your manuscript needs to be will depend on many factors, such as the target audience and journal, several strategies can help you refine your idea. Reviewing the literature, considering current trends, and talking to others can help you specify your idea to improve your work and its applicability.

To help you focus your idea for publication, first review current literature. This initial review aims to scan for articles to determine if others have published on the same topic and to ascertain where your idea fits in the literature.<sup>2,5</sup> Your paper may fill a void as it may be a new idea. Do not despair, however, if you see articles regarding your same topic. Your article may have a new perspective or you may be presenting information for a new audience or regarding a new population. When determining if your new or re-imagined idea is worth pursuing, ask yourself questions such as:<sup>2</sup>

- What is currently known about this topic?
- What are the gaps in the literature?
- Where has the topic been previously published?
- Is there new information that hasn't been published related to the topic?

When doing your initial literature review, set inclusion and exclusion criteria and keep a record of your searches.<sup>2,5</sup> The search criteria will be based on your initial understanding of the idea and may change as you progress in your search. Try to be as narrow as possible, but do not set too many restrictions when beginning to search. For example, consider searching for peer-reviewed, full-text, and current articles (within the past five years suffices for many topics). Examine multiple databases, both in- and outside of nursing, such as MEDLINE, PubMed, CINAHL, ERIC, and PsycINFO. Search using indexing terms (terms usually auto-fill as you type) and Boolean connectors (and, or, not) to help narrow your search and home in on your specific idea. Reference lists from the articles you retrieve can also help identify relevant publications. Moreover, articles may suggest topics for future works in their discussion sections; utilize these recommendations as well. As you search, criteria may change to better focus your topic.

Table 1 provides a sample record or literature search log. The general topic, search date, as well as search terms, Boolean connectors, filters, databases, and results and notes, are delineated. A summary of thoughts is also given to record the author's thoughts from this search. This sample log represents an initial search in one database. Though this sample is not a complete search, it offers a possible structure for authors as they search the literature.

Once you have explored the literature, it is time to consider current trends. Remember that the goal of the initial literature review is not to be comprehensive, rather it helps to further specify your idea. Do not dwell on this step for too long. You will return to the literature later.

#### **Table 1. *Sample Literature Search Log***

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**General Topic: Missed Nursing Care**

**Search Date: April 6, 2020**

**Date range for all searches: 2015-2020**

**Other filters for all searches: Peer reviewed, English language, Full-text**

**All searches done in CINAHL Complete**

**Search Terms and Boolean**

**Connectors (AND, OR, NOT)**

**Results and Notes**

**Missed care in nursing**

*79 results.* Workload, work climate, work culture, and work environmental factors and missed care appear to be linked, as well as patient safety, outcomes, adverse events, and consequences. This appears to be a global issue as there are articles from inside and outside of the United States and in many nursing settings.

**Missed care in nursing AND Prevention strategies OR methods OR techniques**

*36 results.* Again, workload, work climate, work culture, and work environmental factors are being attributed to missed care; perhaps strategies to prevent missed care lie in the opposite of these characteristics. Also, see the terms **rationalized** or **unfinished** care used.

**Rationalized nursing care**

*3 results.* Few results. However, articles do seem to address missed care to an extent and patient safety, outcomes, adverse events, and consequences. Not sure the term **rationalized** captures what is intended, however.

**Unfinished nursing care**

*8 results.* This query opened up a few more results than **rationalized nursing care** and **missed care in nursing**. Documentation is mentioned as an important and perhaps frequent unfinished nursing care.

**Summary: Missed or unfinished care in nursing is an area of global concern, with some evidence on factors that contribute to it; perhaps these factors could be extrapolated and reversed to become strategies to help prevent missed care. May also want to focus on strategies for bedside nurses since much of the current literature focuses on thoughts for nurse leaders and/or administrators.**

After initially reviewing the literature, consider current trends to further specify your idea. Use your expertise to supplement your review. Ask yourself questions such as:

- What are contemporary issues in nursing? Which issues warrant further study or discussion?
- What interventions are possible and/or evidence-based to address these issues?
- What are current developments in clinical, teaching, research, and/or administrative nursing practice? Are these developments appropriate given available evidence? What improvements are needed?

For example, it may be appropriate to identify a current nursing education trend (for example, the use of dedicated education units) and evaluate the appropriateness of this change.

After considering developments in nursing and healthcare, it is time to consider talking to others. This next strategy helps ensure you have a specific, focused, and meaningful idea that will get published and help advance the nursing profession. Begin by talking to co-authors and/or colleagues but also consider family members or friends that are unfamiliar with nursing to provide additional insight into your idea. Outside perspectives are helpful especially if you have become too close to your idea to see obvious flaws or potential other avenues. Pick individuals who will provide honest feedback and critically question your idea and its importance or the “so what” factor. If you are developing the manuscript with a colleague be sure to include time to discuss the idea, focus, and each writer’s responsibility and contributions to the article.

At this point, you may also want to send a query to a journal editor. Be sure you have a rough outline of your specific idea or manuscript before you query an editor. Additionally, make sure you know what was published in the targeted journal recently, so you are not suggesting a duplicate paper. Ask the editor for their feedback and carefully consider their response as you move forward.

Once you review the literature, consider current trends, and talk to others, you have the makings of a focused idea that will be published and contribute to nursing. It is now time to create your purpose statement and outline your content. After these steps, you will likely have a refined idea and may be ready to write your manuscript.

## **CREATE YOUR PURPOSE STATEMENT**

A purpose statement is one sentence that summarizes your paper. The purpose statement also keeps the paper focused and easily identifies the aim of the paper. Saver<sup>5</sup> suggests thinking of a purpose statement as a goal statement from a patient care plan. Be specific and keep refining your purpose statement. Is it clear and does it convey the paper's focus? Does it address the "so what" factor?

Once you have your purpose statement, record it and keep it in plain view when you outline and later write your manuscript.<sup>2</sup> For example, write your purpose statement on a notecard and keep it next to you while you write. This can help to keep your paper focused.

## **OUTLINE YOUR CONTENT**

Part of developing your idea for publication involves outlining your paper's content. Outlines help create disciplined writings where tangents are avoided, reveal gaps in logic, and facilitate optimal headings and subheadings. Additionally, outlines help make writing the first draft of your manuscript easier.<sup>2,5</sup>

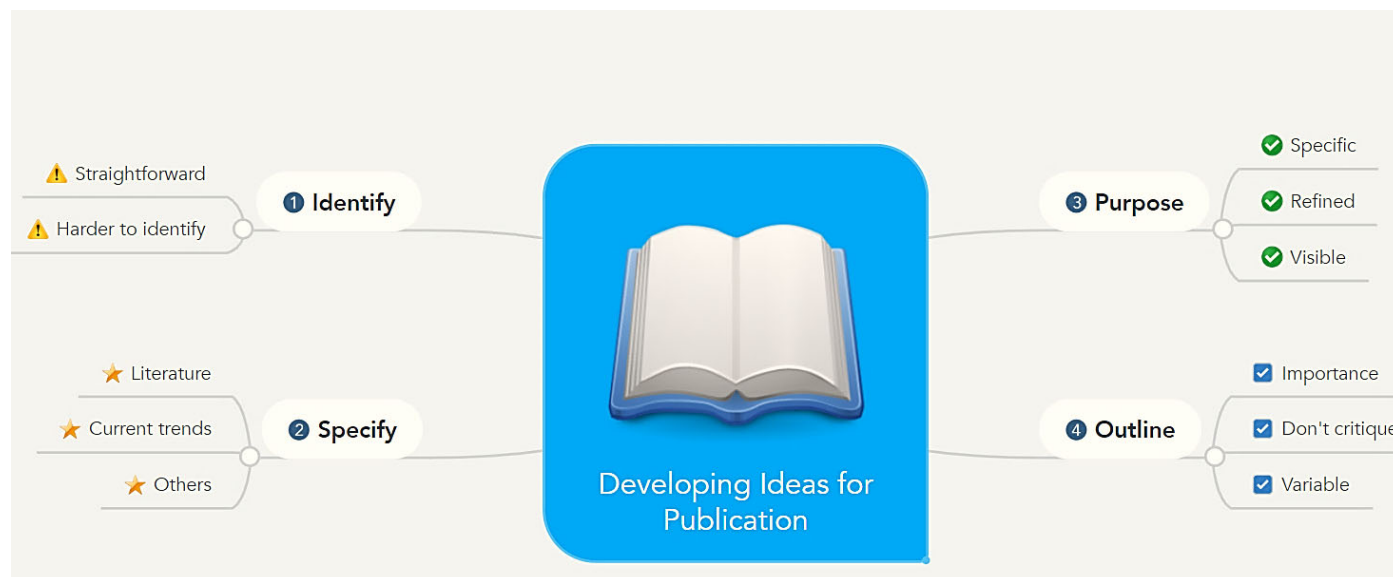


An outline is the plan or blueprint for your paper. Don't forget to have your purpose statement visible as you brainstorm. Keep in mind that formatting rules or critiquing your ideas are not important at this point. Instead focus on writing down everything you can, even ideas that may be peripheral and removed later.<sup>3,5</sup> The exact technique you use and how detailed your outline is will depend on what will work best for you and your intended paper.<sup>2,3,5</sup> For example, you may use a formal outline completed electronically in a standard format. Or, you may choose to make an informal outline using headings for your proposed paper or a mind map. Topic sentences, tables, and figures can also be inserted into outlines.<sup>5</sup>

A mind map structures subjects and topics and shows how they fit together. To create a mind map, place your central idea or topic in the middle of the map. Then, add branches and subbranches for your sub-ideas or subtopics. Look at the relationships between these ideas and draw linkages. Consider adding some order or reorganizing your map for a logical flow of ideas. You can draw mind maps on paper. Consider using colored pencils or markers to inspire creativity or help further prioritize your ideas.<sup>5</sup> You can also complete mind maps electronically using computer applications (apps). These apps provide functions which can help refine and develop your ideas. McIlhenny and Shellenbarger<sup>1</sup> have a listing of seven apps, with pricing and features, that can be used to create mind maps.

A sample mind map for this article is provided in Figure 1. Notice that the central idea is in the center of the map. Topics and subtopics are outlined, and ideas are numbered for a logical flow.

Figure 1. Sample Mind Map for this Article



## CONCLUSION

The strategies offered by this article help nurse authors develop ideas for publication, including efforts in identifying, specifying, and outlining topics that are new and important to nursing. This will ensure authors do the basics, that is, verifying the: importance, relevance, and timeliness of ideas, adequacy of the rationale for papers, sufficiency of literature reviews and presentations, and congruence between questions, issues, investigations, implications, and conclusions.<sup>5</sup> This helps publications reach and impact their intended audiences.

Following these strategies gives you a great start on your paper, which will help you complete your other preparatory activities and further refine your idea. Get to it and get writing! We need your ideas!

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