



PUBLISHING IN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE JOURNALS

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The need for academics to get their work published can be fraught with problems, especially if they have to publish in the English language and within western culture, both of which may be unfamiliar to them.

Before considering a submission, authors need to satisfy the rigors of their studies: suitability of the subject matter for a particular journal; concepts, literature and instruments; and if the English is adequate. These are issues of responsibility of authors to readers and, on the part of editors and reviewers, to authors and through them to students and readers of the submitted texts. This short article elaborates on these themes by detailing specific items of importance.

Introduction

Institutions of higher learning have two missions: (1) to create knowledge (research), and (2) to disseminate knowledge (teaching). Many academics in most disciplines are therefore expected to publish, mainly in journals. This norm is even stronger in those institutions where graduate education is emphasized. There is little reason to conduct research or to write a polemical essay on a topic that one has been thinking about if it is not shared with colleagues. Non-academic professionals also publish their research and thinking on topics in numerous settings outside of academia.

Our starting point is based on the experience of publishing and editing in English-language journals, which can be daunting for authors whose first language is not English. It is unfortunate that the health care professional world (as other disciplines) is predominately dependent on English. It is also unfortunate that, in the main, research articles are expected to be written in a traditional format, which may be unfamiliar to some colleagues. The unspoken assumption is that this format is logical in the way it develops aspects of the research process: the topic, conceptual framework, setting and sample, literature review, findings, discussion of findings, recommendations, need for further research, limitations, and references. This limits many colleagues in other cultures to predominantly quantitative studies, even on topics that do not lend themselves to this format. Studies in ethics and morality, ethical decision making, and the development of moral attitude and sensitivity do not

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necessarily advance the field of study when measured quantitatively. It is then not surprising when such manuscripts are not accepted for publication. However, the institutions that demand results may not be very sympathetic to qualitative work either, leaving researchers in a difficult situation between the demands of their job tenure and the demands of journals for high quality work. Compromises are inevitable on both sides, perhaps with less than satisfactory results.

Many books and articles have been published about writing and we do not want to repeat the most obvious hints and tips. We restrict ourselves to some of the less obvious areas. Our comments are made with the idea of further assisting authors to submit well-written articles that have a better chance of receiving a positive peer review and therefore of being published in this or other journals. We are conscious of the ethical responsibility authors have to themselves, editors and peer reviewers, as well as to the sample population, if involved, and finally, to readers. In the same way, editors and peer reviewers have a responsibility to authors. Our intention is to foster these responsibilities.

This article is therefore intended to begin a dialogue on some of the possible issues that authors face in meeting the important expectations put upon them. Professional journal editors welcome additions to the body of knowledge in a specific field of study and editors usually give authors guidelines to follow in preparing their manuscripts for publication. Although these guidelines are generally helpful, they do not cover all the important points that authors need to consider during their preparation and before they submit their final draft to an editor. Certain aspects of publishing need to be thought about seriously before submitting an article to a journal editor. We do not restrict ourselves to publications in *Nursing Ethics*, but some examples from that experience necessarily draw on this journal.

Suggestions to enhance possibility of publication

1) The subject matter of the article or essay should fit the aims of the intended journal. Even the best researched and written article that has no mention of ethics does not fit *Nursing Ethics*, and has been sent to the wrong journal. Authors need to understand that every journal has limitations to its focus, which are usually set out on a back page as 'aims and objectives'. These should be read alongside the instructions for authors. Authors should closely examine several issues of a journal before submitting a manuscript so as to understand if their work would be suitable. Some journals publish only quantitative research, therefore a qualitative manuscript would not fit. Not only would it be unprofessional and unethical to submit such a manuscript, it is also a waste of time for everyone involved and is disappointing to the author when receiving a rejection. An international journal is concerned with international aspects and is not in the same way interested in a practice at a local site as a local journal may be. Authors can find it quite disappointing to be told that they should consider a local journal when they had aimed much higher.

The 'aims and objectives' of *Nursing Ethics* are to be 'practical' in approach, hence entirely theoretical or speculative manuscripts are normally not accepted. Manuscripts need to be relevant to the topic; in the case of *Nursing Ethics*, this is the health care professions.

2) Know the subject. If a manuscript is data based, it is assumed that the researcher has read widely and deeply on the specific topic, and on other topics that impinge on the main one. For example, if the topic focuses on the ethics of women's reproductive health, one might read the research on that topic in general and more specifically on the aspect of the topic under study and as it concerns nurses, midwives and other health care professionals. Then one might read on topics such as social class, age, ethnicity and women who are similar to the sample, looking at these variables as they interact with the main topic, still keeping to the health care professions.

Another set of topics could be the religious and philosophical values that influence social definitions of women, sexual relationships, reproduction, etc. as they might have been studied by health care professionals. For a manuscript in an international journal, the researcher may want to read research conducted with women in other but similar and also different cultures and compare and contrast the materials.

Revealing the literature sources and/or experiential bases of a manuscript enriches the content if it is a data-based article or a polemical essay.

3) A regular disappointment for an editor is to receive a manuscript from an author who states that a tutor has told the person it should be published. Essays written for courses of study almost never make good journal articles. For a course of study it is necessary to demonstrate knowledge of the subject; a journal article or essay has to take the subject forward by adding to the knowledge base. However, even a small survey carried out for a course of study can in principle be a useful starting point for a study that can take the topic further, but this will need considerable work.

4) Thinking through the conceptual dimensions of an article or essay before writing it helps to clarify the logic of how to proceed and present it in written form. If a manuscript is badly conceptualized, then it is unlikely to be published. For example, if a researcher conducts a study on how school and community nurses deal with girls' and boys' views of the opposite sex, then it seems reasonable to assume that a six-year-old and an 18-year-old girl or boy would see the opposite sex differently. Lumping together girls and boys and disregarding age differences would create conceptual problems based on too broad a sample by age.

5) A literature search gives breadth and depth to the article or essay being written. People from non-English speaking countries who use literature written in English face a special problem. There may not be much or even any literature on their topic in their own language, forcing them to use materials written in English, including scales and other measurements. Authors need to think this through very carefully regarding the cultural fit. One way of dealing with this issue is to state the lack of literature or measurements in their own language as a limitation. However, such a limitation can greatly weaken the research or essay in its impact.

It is possible and sometimes necessary to use the literature and measurements from a similar culture. For example, authors in Australia, Canada, the UK and the USA, who come from similar but different cultures, regularly use the same literature sources for their reviews and instruments for their research.

However, if the example about how girls and boys view the opposite sex were to be researched in some parts of the Middle East, using a literature review and instrument from only western countries could be conceptually problematic. Once any research or

essay focuses on aspects of human behaviour and culture (not just on cells or molecules), there is a potential problem. Just because some idea or research tool is conveniently at hand does not always mean that it fits with the topic under study in a research paper or discussion in an essay. This may sound common sense, but given the pressure on researchers to produce results and publications, desperate means to achieve this are often used. Our experience as teachers and editors makes us wary of such practices.

6) The question that some authors may want to raise is: Why, if a research study is undertaken in a non-English speaking country, is there a requirement at some universities in such countries for faculty members and students to publish in English-language journals? If a study undertaken in country X is submitted, accepted and published in an English-language journal such as *Nursing Ethics*, who would be interested in reading such an article? Do the people in country X, who may benefit most from reading this article, have access to the journal and do (or can) they read it? If not, then should this article be published both in English and the language of the authors' home country? Some journals publish articles submitted in the language of the author and give the abstract in the language of the country of publication; *Revista Latino-Americana de Enfermagem* publishes articles in Spanish, Portuguese and English, for each one giving the abstract in the other two languages also. The *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* publishes in English and gives abstracts in French, Spanish and Arabic. Unless a manuscript can be made relevant to readers in different parts of the world or to different cultures – which is possible but takes imagination and some further research – it may be more efficacious to publish a complete study locally and perhaps publish some material from a study in a different format, such as a summary or cross-cultural analysis, in an English-language international journal.

7) A useful tip is for the author to contact an editor informally before submitting a manuscript or essay to ask if the journal editor is interested in the suggested topic. An abstract and some indication of possible length are good guides to what might be acceptable. If the editor shows interest, this does not necessarily mean that the manuscript will be published, since it must probably be peer reviewed before being accepted.

The process of putting a draft aside and letting it 'get cold' so that the author can become distanced from it is an important part of writing. This enables authors to notice any problems that can still be found in the manuscript and that may not have been evident while writing. A manuscript is worth working on, and a good manuscript will have been through many drafts, 6–10 being quite normal.

8) Grammar and style considerations, while not the most important factor in a manuscript, do influence how the work can be understood by others. A consideration must always be that some expressions are understood differently in a different culture. An example is the frequent use of 'sayings' in Chinese culture to explain certain situations. These are not the equivalent of 'proverbs' in western culture and therefore may obscure the text rather than enlighten it unless explained simply and integrated into the text.

Editors usually have access to services of professional copy editors who will edit the language of a manuscript before it is sent for peer review. Different charges apply,

which may be useful for colleagues from non-English speaking countries, but will also increase the cost, mostly to the author personally. This is also discriminatory because need for this service tends to fall on authors from poorer countries. However, authors can also enhance the acceptability of their work by having someone else who is not too close to the text, or whose English is more advanced, read and critique it in advance of submission.

9) The system of referencing used differs between journals. *Nursing Ethics* uses the Vancouver system, in line with other health care journals. New and inexperienced researchers and authors are often surprised by how much detail is required in references, and most copy editors spend much time obtaining the correct details. It is a sign of the professionalism of an author that references are correctly used and written. These authors have themselves benefited from correct references and it is their ethical responsibility to do the same for the readers of their own texts.

10) Receiving and interpreting peer reviews is as important as being able to write an article. Most editors will give some help with understanding the reviews, but this is essentially the author's task. Reviews can be difficult to deal with, because no two reviewers will say exactly the same thing, and may even contradict each other. It is important to understand that reviews are critiquing the manuscript, not the author (hence the importance of double-blind reviews).

Not everything that reviewers mention in their comments applies. Most often, the cry from reviewers is 'clarify, clarify, clarify'. What may seem obvious to authors, having worked with their material, is not necessarily clear to anyone reading the text. Thus reviewers can potentially reject a manuscript because some particular item has not been clarified at the beginning (eg how a word or concept is used in the text) and is still unclear at the end. With a few words or sentences, some things can be put right. However, many manuscripts need more attention, and authors can easily become discouraged by having to work on their text when they had thought it was already well written. This is where authors from non-English speaking areas of the world need practical and sometimes financial support and encouragement to understand that good manuscripts need to go through many drafts and revisions.

Some authors who are not used to the review system believe that every item mentioned in reviews has to be corrected. This is far from the case, and what has been changed or left unchanged indicates the independence and expertise of the author, which matters.

When authors have made the necessary changes, a list of the changes made, or not made, should normally be sent to the editor, together with any necessary explanations, when the manuscript is returned after review.

11) Once a manuscript has been accepted for publication, it will be copy edited at the publisher's expense. Copy editors are invaluable to ensure the eventual satisfactory readability and presentation of the work. Good copy editors will always check with authors if any major changes have to be made.

12) Reading and correcting proofs is the last stage in article publication. Although proofs are read by at least one person at the publisher's expense, the author's last responsibility is to check that no mistakes have been left in the text. This applies

particularly to statistics, tables, figures and references. Reading proofs is an exacting job, as every letter and number has to be checked and verified. Throughout the publication process the various people involved rely on each other for the author's benefit, and authors need therefore to take the time – usually they are given only a short time to read and correct proofs – to see that their work goes before the public as correct as possible.

Some final words

We hope that this brief article on publishing your articles and essays will help. It was written in that spirit. It is of vital importance that editors of international journals receive written work from numerous countries, otherwise the journal cannot be considered international. It is not only for the sake of the journal but also for the readership that we gain knowledge from diverse sources. It can be said that publishing in international journals is a professional ethical obligation, but it must be understood that the standards expected of authors apply to everyone. That too is an ethical obligation. Therefore we think these comments can help all authors, and especially those who submit from non-English speaking countries.

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