Writing a journal article: guidance for novice authors


Abstract

This article focuses on writing for journal publication. The purpose of writing is explored, paying particular attention to the message to be conveyed and the readership to which that message is addressed. The process of drafting and revising an article for publication is outlined, after which attention is turned to the peer-review process, what peer reviewers are looking for in an article, and what might then be required of the author in redrafting the article to meet the expectations of the journal. Prospective authors are encouraged to research the journal to which they plan to submit their work, and to then target their writing to the readership of that publication.

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Keywords

Authorship, critical reader, journal readership, peer review, writing for publication

Review

All articles are subject to external double-blind peer review and checked for plagiarism using automated software.

Online

Guidelines on writing for publication are available at www.nursing-standard.co.uk. For related articles visit the archive and search using the keywords above.

Aims and intended learning outcomes

The aim of this article is to assist prospective nurse authors in preparing an article for publication in a professional journal, to write with clear purpose and to plan the article carefully using journal guidelines. The article encourages the nurse author to liaise closely with critical readers both before and after submission to the chosen journal. It is important to note that writing for publication is a collaborative process and no journal article is ever the sole product of the author. Each article is crafted, to some degree, by constructive criticism shared informally before submission, for example by colleagues and supervisors (critical readers), and formally after submission by peer reviewers and journal editors. After reading this article and completing the time out activities you should be able to:

- Review your motives for writing for publication.
- Identify why it is important to write for publication.
- Summarise what is involved in planning and preparing an article for publication in a professional journal.
- Describe how to structure a draft article.
- Understand the importance of consulting critical readers before you submit your article for publication.
- Describe the purpose and benefits of the peer-review process.

Introduction

More than 40 years ago, the philosopher and writer Idries Shah cautioned against the unconsidered burgeoning of information,
and instead recommended considering how information might best be conceived, conveyed and used: ‘People today are in danger of drowning in information; but, because they have been taught that information is useful, they are more willing to drown than they need be. If they could handle information, they would not have to drown at all’ (Shah 1969). Simply writing more is not the mark of a successful professional; instead, it is important to decide the purpose for which the information will be used and how the writing can best be used to facilitate that.

Today, more healthcare information is available to professionals and patients than ever before (Virtual Physiological Human Institute 2013). The number of outlets for publication have increased, and journals are now published in print and online. Nurses might write both formally for publications and informally for blogs or websites. Irrespective of the format, there remains a critical requirement to write well and with clear purpose, and to remain mindful of the reader and how the information will be used (Thomson and Kamler 2013).

Although pressure to publish is increasing, for example as a requirement of an academic post, for professional or personal development, or to share innovation within a hospital trust, potential authors and readers may have less time and, therefore the responsibility to write clearly and with distinctive purpose is even more important.

Understanding motives for writing
Motives for writing for publication are recognised increasingly as important in the conception of journal articles (Watson 2012a). Failing to consider why you wish to publish can result in articles that lack focus. Several motives exist with regard to journal article writing. To publish is considered learned and professional because in doing so you are sharing knowledge, experience or expertise. Publication may convert an academic essay or thesis or a conference presentation or poster into an article that appeals to a wider audience. However, publication might also be driven by other motives.

Nursing is not purely a scientific process, but one that is contested in terms of ideology and values (O’Halloran et al 2010). Writing in nursing can be political and express views on best practice. The ego is an important consideration because authors develop their reputation through publication. Ragins (2012) identified how some authors write to impress, rather than write to express, and writing may be ‘foggy’ and cluttered with complex terminology. Some authors wish to be famous. Writing may also be cathartic (Andersson and Conley 2008). However, well conceived, clearly written and accessible nursing articles must move beyond expressive need and serve a purpose, for example to educate the reader about a new initiative, to contribute to, or identify gaps in, the evidence base or to critically review or change clinical practice.

In this article, it is argued that writing for publication is most usefully seen as a service, which helps to improve nursing practice and patient care through sharing information. Complete time out activity

Planning the article
Journal articles begin with a process of conception. It is important to establish the exact message you wish to convey to readers; this is then followed by phases of design and review (Figure 1). Conception of the article involves understanding why you think the article needs to be written (motives) and the purpose that the article will serve. You need to envisage the scope of the article, something that is always important given the finite space within a journal. From talking with other nurse authors, I am struck by the high proportion of thinking time to writing time required to produce an accessible and coherent journal article. Writing an article can be compared to an iceberg, where the writing work comprises that part of the article visible above the surface. The thinking or conception work – why the article is worth writing, who it will serve and how it might be constructed – corresponds to the greater proportion of the iceberg, which exists beneath the surface.

Some prospective articles that have been conceived as potentially valuable have never made it to the draft stage. On reflection, the article has not seemed the right one to write, or, equally important, the prospective author considers him or herself ill-equipped to write the article.

It is important to understand your motives for writing, especially when others encourage you to write. Writing may be required to serve the purpose of an employer or organisation. However, the design of the article still requires an influential writer. What is it about other authors’ writing that impresses you – the clarity of their ideas or the accessibility of their language, for example? Are you concerned with helping others to develop their understanding of nursing practice?
Purpose of the article

Journals differ in the types of articles they publish. Nursing Standard for example publishes general research and continuing professional development articles, with relevant guidance available at: www.rcnpublishing.com/r/author-guidelines. The content and format of the article will depend on the type of article you choose to write. The length of article will depend to some extent on the type of article being written and

**FIGURE 1**

A summary of writing and publishing processes

The time required at each stage of the writing and publishing process varies, depending on numerous variables, for example single versus multiple authors, the type of article, the time required to research it and the peer-review process. However, the time between submission of the first draft of the article to the editor and publication, is typically measured in months, unless the article has been commissioned for a specific journal issue.

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<th>Article conception</th>
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<td>Understanding your motives for writing; developing a focus, scope and purpose for the article; identifying the most appropriate readership and the most appropriate journal for publication.</td>
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<td>Deciding whether you will invite others to write with you. For novice authors, writing with more experienced colleagues, a course tutor or lecturer can be a good way to start and generally increases your chances of publication. However, you must be prepared to take responsibility for a portion of the draft and discussion work involved. It may take longer to agree the content and details of the article when there are multiple authors. Identify informal critical readers who are willing to review your draft before submission to a journal. Research what information is required to write the article. Create a plan and decide the content to be included in each section of the article. Contact a member of the editorial team to discuss your ideas or proposed article.</td>
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<td>The article is drafted and informally reviewed by one or more critical readers. Adjustments are made to the first draft of the article, and the article is either prepared for journal submission or checked a second time with critical readers.</td>
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<th>Article submission and formal review</th>
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<td>The article is prepared and submitted in the required journal format and style, using the author guidelines. Particular attention should be given to the references, ensuring that they are presented in the required style for the journal and that the reference list is complete. The article will then undergo double-blind peer review – that is, the peer reviewers do not know your name and you do not know theirs. Possible outcomes of this review process are accept, minor revision required, major revision required or reject. The peer reviewers and the editor will provide information on the adjustments required. The purpose of this feedback is to assist you in improving your article and to check that the text is accurate, up to date and informative for readers. You, as the author, then embark on one or more revisions of the article as required, and in response to each revision you will receive feedback from the reviewers.</td>
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<th>Copy editing and preparation for publication</th>
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<td>If the article is accepted, it is handed over to the copy editor, who will edit the article and raise any additional queries and points of clarification. This may require additional information and/or references to be added to the text. You, as the author, will be required to review proofs of the article and make any necessary changes, checking these for accuracy before the article is published.</td>
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the chosen journal. However, the average length is between 2,000 and 5,000 words. Articles that exceed the stated word limit will often be returned to the author to cut before submission. Therefore, it is important to check requirements for article submission in the journal’s guidelines because as stated previously, the format and word limit often depend on the type of article being submitted.

It is important that you have a clear purpose for the article, that it is targeted to an identified readership (one that the journal serves) and that the subject matter that you would like to cover is not too vast or complex to be conveyed within the specified word allowance for that particular journal. Failure to clarify the purpose of the article is one of the main reasons why articles are rejected by journals. The text should remain focused on a specific subject area and deal with a few concepts or points in depth rather than trying to discuss all of the literature that has been written on the subject. For example, a peer reviewer might note in his or her feedback: ‘Your work seems to cover at least six concepts and it is not possible to do these justice within the length and scope of this article’.

An article may serve many purposes (Box 2), but there should be one that the reader can identify quickly (Ragins 2012). The purpose of the article should relate directly to the readership, and its success will depend on your ability to explain ideas clearly and succinctly to the reader. Just as in essay writing, it is necessary to examine how confident you are in explaining your arguments within a defined word limit. Novice authors usually overestimate what they can explain clearly in a single article, how many topics they can cover and what should be assumed about the readers’ existing knowledge. It is important to note that the article can become overly complex. Expert authors are more circumspect about what they can explain well and what they believe are the important arguments or explanations to share with the reader (Box 3).

As an author, you need to determine the reader’s expectations – what the reader might want or need from reading your article. Although conference papers often convert well into articles since they are prepared to inform and educate a wide audience, essays tend to be more problematic. If you are a nursing student, it can be tempting to write an article using an existing coursework essay. A tutor may have commended the work and suggested that you get it published. You should be cautious in such circumstances for several reasons. First, the essay was written for a different purpose and readership (the examiners). Second, it may have a different prescribed length, and third, it develops what has been taught within a course. A journal article makes original points about a specific area of practice or education, for example. The reader may not be familiar with the subject area or know what the author intends to convey. Therefore, ideas and information generated from coursework can be used to form the basis of a journal article rather than trying to adapt an essay for publication.

The process of selecting a suitable journal in which to publish is simplified when a clear purpose for the intended article is identified. As an author you may ask the following questions:

- Which journals address the needs of the nurses or healthcare professionals for whom I wish to write? Some journals serve a specialist practitioner audience, but if you think that your work is relevant to a wider audience, then consideration should be given to journals that have a wide readership.
- How complex are the ideas that I wish to share? Articles are necessarily written making some assumptions about what the

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**BOX 1**

**Caitlin’s publication plans**

Caitlin works as a clinical nurse specialist in rehabilitation nursing. She advises several different clinical teams on how to engage the patient fully in rehabilitation work. Her employers are keen for her to publish to improve the rehabilitation profile of the healthcare trust. She is interested in writing because she feels that the psychology of rehabilitation is misunderstood and that as a result work with patients is not always successful. A better understanding of what sustains and motivates patients in rehabilitation programmes might help other nurses to work more effectively. Caitlin wants to write on the psychology of patient rehabilitation, but hasn’t yet decided what she will cover or what her main messages will be.

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**BOX 2**

**Possible reasons for writing a journal article**

- To propose or review a theory.
- To convey insights learned from experience.
- To report research results.
- To encourage debate among the readership, for example, by sharing a case study.
- To explain new processes, technology or systems of work, for example the latest clinical guidelines.
- To share a new initiative or intervention in a given field of practice, for example a new type of wound dressing or treatment.
- To critically review the literature on a particular subject.
- To explore the evidence base for a particular area of practice.
- To develop colleagues’ confidence and expertise, for example writing as a group.
reader already knows. Complex information can be shared with the readership of a specialist journal. If the article is aimed at a wider readership, however, then the number of points discussed will need to be fewer and explanations developed more fully. The article should cover less material but more clearly, making fewer assumptions about the reader’s existing knowledge.

- Does the intended journal publish the type of articles that I believe should be written? Reading the journal will help you to decide this, whether it focuses on professional and practical issues, or whether there is a greater focus on abstract and philosophical information. Neither one of these is superior; it is rather a matter of deciding whether the journal serves the purpose of your article and whether it will convey information that you believe may serve nurses or healthcare professionals well (Box 4).

**Complete time out activity**

**Drafting the article**

Although journals may state that conventional headings and sections should be used within particular types of articles, such as research studies or literature reviews, it is important to remember the purpose of the article should also guide the structure of the text. Drafting a journal article is a process whereby the purpose of the work is made apparent, in which information is shared in a clear sequence, and one that helps the reader to understand what knowledge you as the author are trying to convey. If you have structured the work well — the purpose of the article is clear at the outset (introduction), ideas, debates and arguments are developed in the middle (main body), and the main points are summarised at the end (conclusion) — it is more likely the article will be accepted for publication.

Planning the article is important, particularly for the novice author. Without a plan that sets out sections, proposed content and relevant references, there is a chance that the article will become too long, lose focus and prove difficult to edit to the required word count. You should indicate the planned number of words for each section and check this as your writing progresses (Box 5).

The plan, which will have references added before writing begins, has three important characteristics. First, the number of main points to be made is modest, typically two per section. Articles that cover too much ground can seem superficial and there may be a temptation to write in a shorthand way. Shorthand writing is typified by paragraphs that have several subjects and that lead the reader through a series of rapid cognitive leaps as ideas are shared (Box 6). Such shorthand writing is often the product of authors panicking, as they remember all that they had intended to address. A novice author
usually needs more ‘word space’ to convey ideas clearly and especially where reference is also made to the literature. For example, each point may require two or more paragraphs to convey information clearly. Second, there needs to be adequate allocation of words for the introduction. The introduction is needed to set the context and to convey the purpose of the article accurately. It is here that the narrative begins, the explanation of what you note from experience and your review of the literature. A concise and structured introduction will contribute to the flow and direction of the rest of the article. Third, you should have an idea about what the conclusion will be within the plan of the article. This is possible because your article makes a well understood case, one that you have considered carefully. You begin to write only when you know what case you wish to make. The conclusion returns to the case made in the introduction.

Complete time out activity

In planning an article, you anticipate the sequence of ideas that readers can follow most easily and help them to understand what is being explained. To some degree, this is a cultural matter; different cultures have different conventions of the way they reason with written information (Cortazzi and Jin 2013). In Chinese and some southeast Asian cultures, for example, the convention is that the work arrives at the case (the main argument) in the conclusion at the end, and the author leads the reader to that point. In western society, however, it is more conventional to make your case early on in the article, and then to discuss the arguments for and against. Here, it is assumed that the reader finds it easiest to have an overview first to know where the article is leading.

Complete time out activity

Consulting to best effect

Writing an article is influenced by your knowledge of the subject matter, the allocation of thinking time (deciding what you wish to say), and the quality of your written expression. Nurse authors vary in the breadth and depth of their vocabulary and their confidence in constructing sentences and paragraphs. It is easy for the nurse to assume that he or she does not have the skills to write well, and equally easy to assume (by someone who has a wealth of words at their disposal) that others will appreciate a complex explanation. In reality, good articles use the most appropriate words, often the simplest words, and to precise effect (Ragins 2012).

No matter how well educated you are, there is always a need for consultation, review and editing of the article. Consultation provides an opportunity for you to write more clearly, recognising how a reader might receive your words. Consultation and review not only protects the reputation of the journal, it also protects your reputation as an author.

Once the first draft of an article has been written and references added, it is good practice to conduct a first informal consultation. The purpose of this consultation is to determine whether the article makes sense. If it does not, then you need to identify what was not clear. Informal consultation can be conducted with local critical readers, for example colleagues, supervisors and mentors who are familiar with the subject area.

Complete time out activity

BOX 5

Caitlin’s outline plan for her article

Psychological constraints on patients’ engagement in rehabilitation

Introduction (600 words):
- Main problem – patients faltering in their rehabilitation (secure the reader’s interest).
- Confusion as to why this occurs.
- Unspoken, but sometimes identified, psychological constraints.
- Signposting – identifying from clinical experience which psychological factors seem important and organising the article in sections.

Constraint 1 – patient fear (600 words):
- Fear of injury or further mishap, for example myocardial infarction. The need to understand body capacity and risk assessment.
- Fear of failure – taking responsibility for their role in the partnership. Worrying that they will not please the rehabilitation team and/or their relatives.

Constraint 2 – misunderstanding the patient’s role (500 words):
- Expectations of the passive patient role.
- Anxiety associated with shared decision making.

Constraint 3 – patient confusion (500 words):
- Dealing with mixed messages from staff.
- Misunderstanding about the process of rehabilitation – what happens and why.

Constraint 4 – change overload (500 words):
- Information overload and deficit.
- Doubts about learning capability.

Conclusion – deductions (300 words):
- Importance of insights into patient experience.
- Setting shared and realistic goals, for example those that acknowledge the psychology of rehabilitation.
- Monitoring changes in patient perception.
After the informal review, the article is revised and written acknowledgement added regarding any contributions made by the critical reader. Errors in grammar or syntax might have been identified and should be corrected. The critical reader may also advise you on your writing style. Sentences may have been overly long and convoluted, which may mean it is difficult to convey exact meaning. Short sentences written in plain English are easier to understand. If you have not asked permission to use quotations, figures, tables or diagrams from other publications, this needs to be obtained. The article submitted to a journal will be checked for plagiarism by comparing it with other published work, often using plagiarism detection software, to ensure the author has acknowledged all sources correctly and that new and independent writing is presented.

Once the work is submitted to the journal, a second and formal review process begins (Watson 2012b). This formal review process is usually more demanding than the informal consultation. Peer reviewers (two or more) are tasked with reading the work against review criteria set by the journal. These criteria include the clarity and accuracy of the article and its aim, its relevance to nursing practice, use of the literature, and clear use of tables, figures and scenarios, all of which should support rather than detract from the article. Where research is reported, questions will be asked about the credibility of the research design and the claims made.

Peer reviewers use their experience of nursing and writing to examine the information presented. Importantly, the role of the

**BOX 7**

**Responses to Caitlin’s submitted article**

Caitlin received a letter from the journal editor asking her to revise the submitted article, using the written feedback from the two peer reviewers for guidance. She noted the following:

- Both reviewers wanted her to review sections of her writing where it was not clear how the references were being used, for example to support her arguments or to offer contrary view points.
- Both reviewers liked the structure of her work, but identified deductions in her conclusion that didn’t seem to fit clearly with the preceding information. She was asked to check and revise this.
- Reviewer 1 alerted her to some recent policies on patient consultation and engagement in care planning, and suggested that she needed to discuss this in her article.
- Reviewer 1 encouraged her to link some of her points to psychological theories that helped to explain patient difficulties, for example concerning group compliance.
- Reviewer 2 asked Caitlin to consider whether she thought the case made was unduly optimistic with regard to how best to respond to the patient’s difficulties.
- Reviewer 2 welcomed the practical focus of the article and valued the fact that it centred on practice experience rather than rehabilitation theory.

Caitlin incorporated the reviewers’ recommendations within the article and submitted her revised version. As part of the notes, she explained that she had now linked her work briefly to two psychological theories, a compromise that improved the work, but which did not complicate the article unduly. Subsequently, the second version of the article was accepted for publication and progressed to the copy editing stage, during which the copy editor worked with Caitlin to refine her article before publication.
reviewer is not to determine what the author should argue (it is not an ideological check), but to check that writing is accurate, clear and relevant to the journal readership. Peer reviewers exercise an ethical guardianship of the journal in that they contest the accuracy and completeness of the information shared. Where they offer comments on the stance taken by the author, these may be rhetorical and designed to prompt reflection on whether the author is expressing a perspective that is easily defended and one that supports the author's reputation when the work is published. Reviewers are often excited by innovative writing, but recognise that it could leave the author exposed in a subsequent debate. They might, therefore, offer reflections designed to help the author anticipate the consequences of an article once it is published.

The formal review process can last from two weeks to several months, depending on the complexity of the article, the type of work presented and the number of revisions required. At the end of the review period, reports are submitted to the editor, who collates the reviewers' commentaries and responds to the author (Box 7). It is relatively rare for an editor to accept an article at this point; there is nearly always some revision to be made. Because the review process is double blind, different reviewers may request different revisions, and you will need to decide how best to include this feedback in your article. Editors want to encourage you to write for publication to share your knowledge and expertise in an informative manner. Therefore, they are usually willing to discuss with you what seems most important to correct, augment and clarify, but they will not dictate the exact form of the revised writing; that remains the responsibility of the author. You can choose to reject some of the recommendations made by the reviewers, but you should be able to justify your response. It is useful to include this information when resubmitting your revised article. The editor of the journal will make the final decision on whether the revised article is suitable for publication.

**Complete time out activity**

**Conclusion**

Authors preparing work for publication need to write with clear purpose and with the target readership in mind. Although articles might be written out of a personal need to express a view or to advance the author's professional reputation, the more pressing need for articles is often associated with well constructed information that helps nurses to improve patient care.

Successful articles are usually founded on a clear and explicit purpose, one that the author has reflected on for some time before the work was constructed. The article should have a clearly defined scope, meet the needs of a carefully identified readership, and be structured to help the reader follow the arguments presented. At best, it should be written by an author who welcomes the constructive critique of informal and formal critical readers who want to help improve the work presented.

Nursing needs journal contributions from nurses in a wide array of practice settings to communicate and disseminate information, research findings and new initiatives that can be used to update and improve patient care. The diversity and complexity of nursing means that the profession will benefit from articles that draw on experience as well as theory and research. Clinicians have a great deal to contribute in helping to ensure that nursing theory is applied to practice. By working through the processes shared in this article, you should be better prepared to add your well-reasoned insights to a body of knowledge that contributes to nursing practice and patient care.

**Complete time out activity**

**References**


