

# 12 TIPS ON WRITING FOR NURSING JOURNALS

by Diana Mason and Thomas Schwarz

**D**o you often have ideas that you think would make great articles? Why not write about them for publication? In our discussions with nursing students over the years, so many of you expressed an interest in writing about your experiences with patients through poetry, clinical articles, or editorials, but you weren't sure how to go about it. We encourage budding writers to read the following tips to learn more about publishing opportunities.

## 1. Find a Great Topic

Think about topics that are new and different, and even controversial. We tend to write best on topics we are most interested in and familiar with. Make sure your topic is focused, so it is as specific as possible. One of the errors that many novices make is to cover too much territory in one article. You should be able to sum up the article in one sentence; otherwise it is not sufficiently focused. And don't forget about the audience—where would you like to see your work published, and who will read it? Nursing students? Oncology nurses? Advanced practice nurses? What publication serves your target audience? Research various publications until you find a good match—which may not always be obvious. For instance, while the *American Journal of Nursing* and *Nursing 2003* are both for nurses, they have different styles and requirements. And they both differ in content, style, and audience from *Imprint*. Once you've found some possible matches, read at least three consecutive issues closely. Is there a column or department that matches your style and subject? Many publications have web sites so you can download articles easily and get a feel for their style. Are you eager to get started but not comfortable going solo? Try co-writing with a mentor or teacher.



## 2. Query the Editors

Once you have decided on your topic and located several journals you think might be interested, e-mail the editors a query letter in which you state the topic in one sentence, explaining why readers will be interested and why you are the right person to write it. Include all your contact information with your letter. The letter should be no longer than one page – editors are frequently rushed and will not take the time to read more than that. (Check the publication guidelines to see whether they have specific criteria for queries.) A well-written query letter can lead to an article even if that particular topic does not work out, so don't underestimate its importance. You can send queries simultaneously to as many journal editors as you wish; however, it is unethical to send the actual manuscript to more than one journal simultaneously. If more than one journal is interested in your manuscript based on your query, rank order your preferences for where you would like your manuscript published and only submit it to one at a time. Editors and peer reviewers will carefully evaluate your manuscript. If one journal accepts it while another is reviewing it, you've wasted the time and energies of the second journal. If one journal rejects your paper, submit it to another that expressed an interest. Note: some authors submit articles "cold" without any correspondence to editors beforehand. This is generally not



recommended, since you may end up putting a lot of time into a manuscript that particular journal never publishes.

### 3. Follow Author Guidelines

If the editor is interested in your article, congratulations on your first step! You are on your way...but keep in mind that this does not guarantee publication. The best way to improve your chances for publication is to comply with the author guidelines for format and style.

These are usually available online, in the journal itself, or through the editorial office.

### 4. Write a Detailed Outline, and Use It

A good outline helps you organize your manuscript and keeps you on track, serving as an informal guide to what you will write. A successful outline keeps you focused, and can help you avoid common writing problems like disorganization, lack of clarity, and extraneous information. Keep in mind that an outline should be fluid, and is meant to be changed as you go, depending on how your articles grows and changes.

### 5. Do a Literature Search, and Document your Article

One of the most serious problems editors encounter is plagiarism, which sadly often occurs accidentally, when authors copy information word for word without paraphrasing, or making the language your own. When you are researching

background materials for your article, do a literature search for relevant articles, review them, and highlight important points. Take care to paraphrase, or re-word, what you've read. It is not sufficient to cite the source. If you use someone else's words *verbatim*, (word for word) they need to be quoted and cited

in your references. Quoting without attribution is intellectually dishonest and violates copyright law.

### 6. Get Into the Zone

Writing is never easy, and it may take several trial runs to find out what conditions work best for you. What time of day is best for you? Do you prefer music or silence? Create a pleasant, clutter-free environment for yourself and try to set aside a block of time when you won't be interrupted.

### 7. Find Your Beginning

Often, getting started is the hardest part. Find your true beginning; that is, the place that serves as the best jumping off point. How about a provocative anecdote, quote, or statistic? Write whatever you need to get your fingers moving and onto that keyboard!

### 8. Procrastinate Later

If you find you are distracted, or that you keep procrastinating, take care of small jobs like entering references, or working on your introduction. Even getting a small amount done will motivate you.

### 9. Revise, and Revise your Revision!

Many say that writing is revising, so don't be surprised if you come back to your first draft days later amazed at the changes you want to make—this is all part of the process. The paper you submit for publication is usually your fourth or fifth draft, at least. There are two kinds of revisions

most commonly made – content revisions which may require changing the emphasis from one point to another, or rearranging the order or progression of several paragraphs; and basic accuracy of the manuscript in terms of spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Use spell-check, and review your article repeatedly for typos and grammatical errors. Articles with these types of problems are a poor reflection on the author and can undermine the chances of getting published.

### 10. Invite Feedback – Before and After You Submit

If you have slaved over your final article but still have some trepidation about submitting it to the editor, it's a great idea to seek feedback from others, preferably teachers, mentors, and those whose opinion you respect. Be sure to allow time for this process, particularly if you are sharing your article with several others. Be considerate, and allow others at least a week or two to get back to you. Ask readers to return the copy with any questions or comments, and to be as specific as possible. Review the comments to assess their validity. If five readers felt your first paragraph was too long and your ending too abrupt, there is a good chance that these are valid concerns. But remember, it is up to you to make the final determination. Feedback can be invaluable – just remember not to take criticisms personally. They are meant to help you. Keep in mind that for peer-reviewed journals, you will also get feedback from a panel of editors after you have submitted the article. This is an excellent learning opportunity.

### 11. Submitting and Tracking Your Manuscript

Submit the manuscript according to the author guidelines. Online submission is the most convenient. For example, *AJN* uses a web-based manuscript submission and review system (<http://AJN.edmgr.com>).

If you are on deadline, make sure you submit the article on time. Editors expect you to be professional and to adhere to timelines. Include a cover letter with all your contact information. Make sure you submit a clean copy of your article, without any stray marks or comments. Expect confirmation of your manuscript within several weeks, but if you do not hear anything it's a good idea to call the editor. Most journals are peer reviewed, which means several experts are reviewing it and not just one editor. (See box)

There are three scenarios for what follows: acceptance, request for revision, or rejection. If your work is accepted, celebrate and share the great news with your friends, teachers, and family. However, it's not over yet, as most editors require that you do some rewriting before final acceptance. If the journal is peer reviewed and you are sent the reviewers' recommendations, you need not follow all of them, but should explain your reasons in a cover letter to the editor with your revised manuscript.

You will also have to submit signed forms that assign copyright to the journal. This means that the journal holds the rights to copy and otherwise use your work. Most journals give authors permission to use their own articles as needed without charge. In addition, journals are

increasingly requiring authors to sign a statement disclosing any financial interests they may have with a product or organization or company included in the paper. Any significant interests are then disclosed in the author's bio that accompanies the article.

Once your manuscript goes into production, the journal's editorial staff will refine your manuscript, checking references and accuracy. You will need to review and approve changes and respond to editors' queries. Trust the editors to improve your manuscript – they do this for a living!

## 12. Rejected? Try Again!

If your work is rejected, do not be discouraged, as there are many possible reasons, particularly in a peer review context in which there are multiple reviewers with varying opinions. The editors might have received many submissions on the same topic since your original query, or, they may have felt the style was not suited to their publication. Try to find out the reason for the rejection from the editor, or if there is another publication that might be interested. Do not take a rejection personally, as many publications are inundated with articles and can only accept so many. *AJN*, for example, accepts about 15% of submissions.

The nursing world needs great journalists and writers! Don't miss the wonderful opportunities writing provides. ■

*Diana J. Mason, RN, PhD, FAAN, and Thomas Schwarz, RN, LNC, are Editor-in-Chief and Editorial Director, respectively, of the American Journal of Nursing, New York, NY. They have given numerous presentations to nursing students about writing for publication. AJN welcomes queries from students, particularly for "The AJN Student," a section of the journal for students and faculty being launched in February, 2004, and edited and coordinated by former NSNA president Michael Desjardins, RN, BSN. Send queries to [ajn@Lww.com](mailto:ajn@Lww.com). To submit to Imprint, visit <http://www.nсна.org/pubs/authorgd.asp> for guidelines.*

## resources

1. William Zinsser. *On Writing Well* Harper & Row, 6th Edition, 1998. New York, NY.
2. *Chicago Manual of Style* (15th Edition), 2003, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago. The Essential Guide for Writers, Editors, and Publishers.
3. Marilyn H. Oermann, *Writing for Publication in Nursing*, 2002, Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, Philadelphia.
4. Shirley H. Fondiller, *The Writer's Workbook* (2nd edition), 1999, National League for Nursing, Jones and Bartlett, Sudbury, MA.

## PUBLISHING IN PROFESSIONAL JOURNALS VS. OTHER PRINT MEDIA



*Publishing in professional journals is quite different from publishing in other types of documents such as magazines, newsletters, newspapers, etc. While journals rarely pay,*

*publishing in them is prestigious and considered essential to your professional standing as you move up the nursing ladder. Publications vary in terms of how they communicate with authors, track manuscripts, provide feedback (both written and verbal), and handle revisions, so it is best to find out the specific procedures for each journal you are interested in.*



## FREQUENTLY USED PUBLISHING TERMS

**Query:** A letter to an editor which describes an article topic for a future

manuscript you would like to write, and why you are the best person to write it.

**Peer Review:** When several experts evaluate your manuscript "blind," that is, without your identifying information on it. The reviewers will not be known to you. This anonymous

process is designed to ensure an unbiased recommendation as to whether the journal should publish your manuscript, and any other comments or feedback.

**Copyright:** The right granted by law to an author or publisher to exclusive publication of the work.

**Plagiarize:** To steal and use the ideas or writing of another as one's own.