Getting published a practical guide- Part I

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Abstract

The aim of this series of two papers is to introduce and guide potential authors on how to develop a successful writing strategy that will lead to publication in a targeted journal. A key aspect of the series is to assist individuals with approaches to address their fears and anxieties and engage with the process of writing a paper in a more confident and productive way and so minimising early rejection. The content will provide detailed and practical guidance on the various stages of developing a high quality manuscript, and this will be structured around three core areas that include: undertaking preparatory background work, the writing phase and conducting quality control. The series will also include issues on choosing an appropriate subject, an appropriate journal, authorship and co-authorship, the peer-review process and dealing with reviewers’ feedback, positively and effectively.
Introduction

Getting published in a peer-review journal is increasingly becoming an expectation of many nurses, midwives and other healthcare professionals, regardless of whether they are in academia, research, management or clinical practice (Albarran and Scholes, 2005, Hayhow 2013). Indeed, the increase in the number of nursing journals covering clinical, research, management and educational advances and developments is evidence of this, and of a demand to share good practice and high quality research that improves the delivery of care, and service provision. It is also indicative of the profession’s on-going commitment to developing a unique body of knowledge to draw upon to inform and advance decision making and standards.

While there may be a personal desire to get published, reasons such as not knowing where to start, what the process involves, fears of rejection, not having data to present, and lack of time are often put forward as obstacles hampering progression (Albarran and Pontin 2008, Ness et al 2013, Neal-Boylan 2016). Preparing a manuscript may initially appear daunting, but developing a clear and focused writing plan is a first step of the journey. Making this sustainable, practical and achievable within a defined timescale is also vital. This series of two papers aims to support novice authors in understanding the steps to getting published, and how make the process manageable and realistic.

- Preparatory work

How do I start and what should I write about?

This is an important consideration. The area should be one that you are highly acquainted with and in which you have depth of expertise. This might include:

- The outcomes of an audit or service evaluation (sharing good practice)
- An innovation in practice (sharing good practice)
- An unusual case study presentation
- A reflection on an incident that lead to changing practice
- Literature review (summarising the art and science of a topic, and identifying debates and controversies)
• The findings of academic study (presenting original work) – this might be work previously undertaken for a Masters’ degree, for example.

Writing about something you are knowledgeable on, is advantageous in promoting confidence as you will be very familiar with the literature, as well as with developments, trends, gaps and controversies in the field. In addition, your unique insights may also guide you in deciding what type of submission you may wish to develop - for example a review of the literature or reporting on a three year audit cycle of practice. Journals like the British Journal of Cardiac Nursing welcome a variety of contributions, however this is not the case for every journal and being aware of this is an important early decision. Visiting online journal pages, reading their guidance and scanning recent issues can help you to understand more about the range of papers published by different journals.

Having decided on the subject, narrow the focus and set boundaries early on about the scope of the paper, the target audience and what the paper is seeking to achieve. This can be accomplished by addressing the questions below (Cook, 2000) which will help to refine your ideas, screen out irrelevant content and make the process of writing specific and productive.

What is the aim/purpose of your paper, exactly?

You need to spend time thinking and rehearsing the purpose of the manuscript and what specific issue you wish to impart to the readership. Your detailed appreciation of the literature, practice and research in the subject will be paramount in firming up what you want to communicate. Once this is firmly articulated and you have decided how the content will be developed and structured, the sources required to achieve this will become clearer.

Who am I writing for, precisely?

This question is for you to reflect on which readers are most likely to gain from the content and message of your paper. This should prompt you to consider the writing style, language and terminology you may need to adopt to successfully engage with them. For example, a clinically focused paper and aimed at nurses new to a Coronary Care Unit would be very
different than one aimed at senior nurse managers, both in the messages and specific terms used. However, good quality writing should be accessible, informative and understood by a range of audiences including students, those outside the discipline and lay public.

Why am I sharing this?

Being clear, at the outset, of your purpose for writing is vitally important. Is the intention to share best practice, provoke debate, disseminate findings of original research or add to the evidence base in cardiac nursing or another area? Formalising this will be instrumental in defining the aim, the nature of the journal contribution and the message readers will take-away. Clarke and Thompson (2016) refer to the notion of ‘nailing your message’ and advise authors to be specific in communicating explicit messages about their contribution and its unique place in taking the discipline forward. Undertaking this exercise will ensure that you avoid the mistake of submitting a manuscript that wanders without focus (Genaro 2016, p2)

What about currency and originality of my paper?

Ensuring the work is contemporary and conveys a fresh and original perspective is achieved in part by preparatory background work; this is something that challenges new authors. While editors are keen to encourage submissions from established authors, they are also very interested in receiving contributions from professionals new to publishing, reporting and presenting a novel, refreshing and distinctive angle on their subject.

A practical way of addressing originality can be demonstrated in the background of the paper where ‘what is known and understood about the topic’ should be made clear. Articulating what is ‘less or unknown about the topic’ is equally essential. This might include unanswered questions or gaps in knowledge, understanding or practice. The analysis of data or systematic synthesis of existing literature could also demonstrate an original contribution to the field. Originality here refers to a novel angle, perspective or lens, whether through the use of a research methodology, theoretical model, analysis of the literature or analysis of data.
One of the first things you should do is to conduct a bibliographic database search of the topic you are planning to write about. Concerns may arise if it appears to have already received extensive coverage in the journal being targeted, but this should not be an obstacle, access journal papers and review for similarities with your work, but also for key differences. These may be in relation to choice of methodological approaches, the inclusion of diverse cultural groups, the gender and age of participants. Any of these differences may legitimise how your contribution stands apart, is distinctive and novel. It will be your task in setting the background to draw on existing published research to describe the strengths and limitations of the work, but equally to signal any gaps, how you will address these and, as Genaro (2016) urges, emphasise that the outcomes are important to nursing practice. If still unsure, contact the editor and provide a 200-word abstract outlining the nature and scope of your work stressing the novelty and distinctiveness.

In planning your manuscript, select your sources carefully and apply them to inform and augment the ideas being put forward. It is advisable that, with exceptions, only contemporary references should be included (some journals specify a date range, for example within the past 5 years) and not always solely from the United Kingdom. Moreover, Grove (2016) advises that citing rare, less mainstream and non-peer reviewed references and websites may be detrimental to getting published, so spend some time making you are citing the most appropriate work to support what you are saying.

**What journal should I publish in?**

Choosing the journal for your manuscript is probably one the most important decisions authors make (Albarran and Pontin, 2008; Cook, 2000, Holland and Watson, 2012). Every journal has its own ambitions expressed in its aims, scope and intended readership. Having a thorough and detailed understanding of a chosen journal will help promote alignment and fitness between the aims and focus of the manuscript with those of the journal’s ambitions conventions and readership (Albarran and Pontin, 2008).

**How should I choose a journal?**

Having a look at the aims of two or three journals which may be suitable avenues for publishing your manuscript is a useful exercise. Some journals are more receptive to a broad
range of submissions which might include pluralist research methodologies, literature reviews, clinical audits, practice developments and reflections on practice. Being aware of this early on is important in deciding where to submit and for developing a clear strong fit with the chosen journal aims and its audience. This may span cardiac nurses from the UK and beyond or you might be interested in a wider nursing or health professional audience, depending on the focus of your work. Be mindful that journals such as the BJCN are read in many countries and your findings may have wide interest and applicability to practice.

**Are there guidelines on writing for a journal?**

Each journal tends to provide clear structured ‘author guidelines’ for different types of submissions. These are aimed to guide authors in developing the content, the layout, formatting, and referencing of manuscript submissions according to a specific house-style. Table 1 provides an indicative example of the guidance offered across most healthcare journals, although in some cases additional information may be required. It is important to follow the advice given in the guidelines as failing to adhere to these simple recommendations is likely to lead to immediate rejection (Genaro, 2016; Grove, 2016). Journals that are published weekly or fortnightly are likely to expect more figures, photographs and tables which will be published often in colour, unlike others where there may be a limit and these will be in black and white.

‘Open access’ (OA) publications are new way of enabling rapid publication with a wider professional and public readership. With OA, once a manuscript has been reviewed and accepted, it will be exclusively published online and can be accessed by anyone anywhere in the world by anyone with an internet connection. This means increased visibility, readership and citations however, with this approach, a fee ranging from £400-£5000 is payable to secure publication. Most journals for healthcare professionals are available through personal, professional society or library subscription and, as such, accessibility and visibility may be lower but there is no financial cost to authors.

In summary, a successful writing strategy requires considerable preparatory work and understanding about the core aim of the manuscript, clarity about the intended readership,
conviction on the key take away messages and comprehensive appreciation of the journal choice. In part II of this practical guide, the focus will be on how to develop the structure of your manuscript, strategies for making writing productive, deciding authorship, and completing quality assurance activities prior to submission.

References


