

AUTHOR RESOURCE REVIEW

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What It Takes to Be a Published Author

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Are you a nurse author looking to publish? With more nurses working in healthcare organizations seeking to showcase quality improvement initiatives, or nurses in school pursuing advanced degrees that require publication, it's not surprising that journal editors have reported an increase in author submissions to nursing journals. Unfortunately, the submissions are unpublishable for a variety of reasons. A recent survey done among members of the *International Academy of Nursing Editors* about student submissions noted that among the issues identified, failure to follow author guidelines and characteristics were paramount.¹ Editors noted that students submitted papers with word counts that exceed page limits, failed to follow formatting and reference guidelines, over- or under-referenced, had poor transitions, excessive use of quotes, or lack of detail or clear writing. These are also common errors in what I see in manuscripts submitted to the *American Journal of Nursing (AJN)* by many nurses new to the writing process.

I, for one, am excited that more nurses are writing—and that they are not solely academics and researchers, but clinicians who have the first-hand knowledge about care processes and outcomes. But what is lacking for many new writers is support from mentors who are knowledgeable about writing and the publishing process. Being a successful author (having one's work published in reputable journals) is in the realm of possibility for all nurses. Writing is a skill and like other skills, it takes practice, persistence, and patience.

Here are some basic tips for new authors:

Getting Ready to Write

1. Decide on the proper format your manuscript should follow. Is it research or a quality improvement report, a case report, or a clinical review? There are standard formats for scholarly manuscripts; you can find reporting guidelines on the [Equator network](#).
2. Identify the audience you wish to reach and which journals reach them. Make sure the journals are reputable—check if they are indexed in databases such as PubMed, Medline, etc. The website [ThinkCheckSubmit.org](#) offers suggestions for choosing an appropriate and credible journal.
3. Go to the journals' websites and review recent articles, noting the level of detail, tone, and style. Review the author guidelines. Send query letters. Once you've chosen the journal you will submit to, follow the author guidelines to format your manuscript and the references. Keep to the word limit.

4. Writing with a colleague or two can be helpful and can keep the manuscript moving forward. However, if you do work with co-authors, agree before you start on the order of authors, who will do what and when, and how you will solve any disputes. Remember that there are [guidelines](#) for who can be listed as an author.

The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors has four criteria for authorship that an author must satisfy:

“Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work; AND

Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; AND

Final approval of the version to be published; AND

Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.”²

On writing

1. Readers need to be engaged and interested from the beginning. An introduction should make the reader want to continue to read on—tell the reader why the topic is important and include compelling data to support the importance of the issue.
2. The point of writing is to communicate and inform, so do it in a forthright and logical, step-by-step format with clear and accessible writing. Aim to inform, not to impress. Avoid “pretentious prose” and jargon. Write in active voice rather than passive voice.
3. Avoid long, wordy sentences and long paragraphs that contain many different ideas. Karen Roush, PhD, RN, FNP wrote a series in *AJN* on writing for publication. She says, “An author is like a travel guide taking readers on a journey: You want the trip to be interesting and smooth. Your readers should always know where they are and where they're going. The way to accomplish this is to write good paragraphs, place them in the right order, and connect them with transitional words or statements.”³
4. Use primary sources as references, and be sure to save your references to refer to for queries by the editor. Many journals fact check.
5. Be sure that the words you write are your own—do not plagiarize or self-plagiarize from other published material. Most journals run manuscripts through plagiarism software and may report excessive plagiarism as unethical professional conduct. Use quotes for exact words (but use them sparingly), and cite when paraphrasing ideas from others.
6. Be prepared to write several drafts and have several false starts before you “get in the zone.” Begin anywhere that seems easiest (it doesn't have to be at the beginning), and just start writing. You can move things around later.
7. When you have a first draft, ask a few colleagues to read it. Ask them to tell you how to improve it, thereby giving them permission to criticize the work. Revise it and write a second draft. Use spell check. When you're satisfied you can't improve it, submit.

Submitting Your Manuscript and the Editorial Process

1. Most journals use online submission sites; follow the directions carefully.
2. If not rejected on the initial review, your manuscript will be sent out for peer review, which can take several weeks. If reviewers feel your manuscript shows promise with some revisions, the editor will compile and send the reviewer comments and

suggestions for revision. There will be anywhere from several to many (*AJN* often has 20 to 40 queries for comprehensive articles), depending on the article and the journal. These comments are made to strengthen the article and to ensure its accuracy and appropriateness for the journal. Do not take them personally. Answer each query as instructed—do not send additional information or rewrite unless asked to do so. There may be more than one round of revisions.

Once a manuscript is accepted, it will be scheduled for publication—which may not be for several months, depending on how often the journal is published and how far in advance issues are planned. Be aware you might need to update information if there are new research findings or laws that will make your manuscript inaccurate.

Writing takes time, often more than most new writers think it will take. Set aside time—each day if possible—and make writing a part of your routine and your professional life.

References

1. Kennedy MS, Newland JA, Owens, JK. Findings from the INANE Survey on Student Papers Submitted to Nursing Journals. 2017: *J Prof Nurs* 33:175–183.
2. International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. *Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals*. <http://www.ICMJE.org>.
3. Roush, Karen. Writing Your Manuscript – Structure and Style. 2017: *Am J Nurs* 117(4):56-61.