

# Supporting nurses towards publication: the librarian's role

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## Abstract

*Nurses increasingly turn to librarians for advice and assistance regarding writing for publication. Career progression is not the only motive. In the centres of clinical excellence and university hospitals experienced nurses may come under pressure to contribute to the publishing output of their multidisciplinary teams in order to secure future funding. At other times they may be expected to disseminate the findings of their own academic work, postgraduate dissertations or theses, often with their mentors as co-authors.*

*Oxford University Health Care Libraries have established the practice of one-to-one consultations arranged by outreach librarians who specialize in particular healthcare fields. This format is perfectly suited to provide help and support to nurses who are preparing articles for publication.*

*The consultation usually takes 45 minutes to an hour and may cover the following:*

- *Review of the literature search strategy and recommended resources*
- *Specific journal title: impact factor, in-house formats and style, author guidelines*
- *Common pitfalls when adapting academic work into articles*
- *Harvard or Vancouver citation style*
- *Submission and peer review process, authorship and copyright issues*
- *Examples of published work – preferably by nurses in the same field*

*The instruction on how to approach writing for publication is an integral part of user education content. Senior nurses are increasingly likely to approach librarians for assistance and support. This is best achieved through individually tailored training sessions.*

## Background

The Health Care Libraries at Oxford consist of the Cairns Library at the John Radcliffe Hospital and the Knowledge Centre at the Churchill Hospital. The outreach team includes seven librarians and the team manager and covers both hospital sites as well as surgeries

and health centres in the county of Oxfordshire. We believe we are the largest such team in the United Kingdom. With around 15,000 potential users, mostly highly pro-active clinicians and researchers, we are kept rather busy most of the time.

In addition to our reference service and the mediated literature searching we undertake tailored training and workshops in basic and advanced search skills for various clinical groups and research teams. These sessions are booked in advance to suit the timetable of our users and we carefully negotiate the content with their leaders. We used to offer a scheduled programme of generic training as well, in slots of one or two hours, but the uptake had been consistently low. It became clear to us that the generic approach had lost its appeal and we decided to explore alternative formats.

In 2005 we came up with the idea of a one-to-one training session (part search skills instruction and part research/CPD consultation), and offered it to the whole community using the global e-mail system within the Oxford Radcliffe Hospitals Trust. This format of training has become fantastically popular. In 2009 the outreach team clocked up 318 sessions, so much so we were forced to reduce our promotional efforts.

One-to-one training is expensive and time consuming (most sessions require some preparation time as well), however there is no doubt that this approach meets the specific requirements of our users like no other training format.

### **Changing world of nursing**

In the past decade specialist nursing has gained a remarkable empowerment. The clinical and research remit of highly skilled nurses now incorporates significant critical decision making, interdisciplinary involvement, management and education. It is therefore not surprising that they also publish more. Just like doctors, today's nurses benefit from having a few papers on their CV to help their career progression. At other times they may find themselves under pressure to publish in order to secure funding for their multidisciplinary teams as publishing output becomes increasingly relevant for any research proposal. When experienced nurses undertake Master's and PhD programmes they are expected to disseminate results of their postgraduate research by publishing in peer reviewed journals, often with their mentors as co-authors.

The literature sometimes refers to a certain lack of confidence amongst nursing professionals when it comes to approaching journal editors with their submissions. Yet the number of nursing journals is rising, with many new titles dedicated to highly specialized fields. In my subject area I have been particularly aware of the *British journal of cardiac nursing* (<http://www.cardiac-nursing.co.uk/>) which was launched in 2006 (accessible in full text via Internurse <http://www.internurse.com/>). The Oxford based cardiac nurses have contributed from the earliest issues and I have been privileged to assist some first time authors.

## **One-to-One consultation**

The nurse-librarian consultation is an opportunity to raise several issues related to the preparation of an article for publication. A successful session can de-mystify the process and save the author significant time and effort. Ideally this should take place early in the project, however most nurses are unaware of potential benefits. One-to-one training is primarily aimed at advancing literature search skills and it is usually from the cohort of nurses who had previously attended such training that a librarian would receive a request for consultation related to publishing. Exceptionally this could be on advice of a colleague who has already benefited from such session. Perhaps librarians ought to do more to promote this kind of support.

### *Review of the literature search strategy and recommended resources*

This is often the main focus of the consultation. No matter how competent the author may be to write on their chosen topic, they still face a challenge of retrieving a comprehensive reference list. Going over the search strategy together and clarifying the inclusion criteria will ensure that crucial publications have not been missed. Exploring additional resources such as TRIP, UpToDate and NHS Evidence, might help too. My favourite tool is PubMed Single Citation Matcher. I ask the author for three or four favourite papers from the list of references already collated. We put them through Citation Matcher to find out if papers had received any comments and to check the first couple of pages of related articles. This exercise has a good reassurance value.

### *Specific journal title: impact factor, in-house formats and style, author guidelines*

By the time a prospective author approaches a librarian they may or may not have decided on their target journal. Those who come with a specific title in mind usually act on advice of colleagues who have already published. Occasionally they are approached by editors directly. A senior nurse specialist or a nurse educator may be invited to submit an article related to their particular expertise or some cutting-edge topic. However, most novice authors will find it difficult to choose a suitable journal. Which audience are they trying to address: practitioners, researchers or managers? Should they approach an academic or a specialist title? And what about the role of impact factor in the journals' ranking (or the fact that many nursing journals have not been assessed for their impact factor)? The librarian will be able to offer guidance and check which journals have already covered similar topics. Browsing the recent issues of selected journal titles will provide the necessary insight. This is where the library subscription to electronic or print copies of nursing journals comes to the rescue.

Every journal has slightly different approach to their in-house formats and for many an article is not the only form they would accept. For a novice author this could be a salvation. For their first attempt at publishing they might prefer a letter on some topical subject, a short commentary or a book review. It is essential to explore the author guidelines on the

journal's website before committing to a particular format. Any instruction given by the editors regarding the journal's scope, style, manuscript presentation and target audience is best followed to a T.

Most journals will require the author to select six to eight key terms to reflect the content of the paper. This choice will influence the readers' ability to retrieve the paper from medical databases. The librarian should offer to assist with the selection of most suitable subject headings.

### *Common pitfalls when adapting academic work into articles*

Many postgraduate dissertations and theses in the field of nursing have the potential to improve service development and advance clinical practice. It is therefore important that the findings are disseminated within the professional community. The greatest barrier for a novice writer is a disparity between the size of their completed academic work and the maximum prescribed length of a journal article. It is worth exploring the potential for more than one paper. This could be achieved by adopting a different focus for each target audience, thus creating papers on the same topic but aimed at different journal titles. For example, the focus on theoretical background and methodology of the study may be suitable for an academic journal while the paper with emphasis on implications for practice could be submitted to a professional nursing title. In both cases the key points and major conclusions need to be presented with appropriate data to support them.

### *Harvard or Vancouver citation style*

Nurses who graduated in the UK will be familiar with Harvard citation style which they had practised for their assignments and dissertations. In the world of scientific publishing both Harvard and Vancouver are used and journals are very specific about their preferred style. The authors may sometimes resent the fact that this is not negotiable. It is very useful to have a library handout available to clarify differences between the two styles. Alternatively, there are good academic websites which are equally helpful.

Referencing is often perceived as a tedious aspect of writing for publication, prone to errors and inconsistencies. For nurses who aspire to publish an introduction to a reference manager such as Endnote may be a good investment.

### *Submission and peer review process, authorship and copyright issues*

Many first time authors will be aware of the ground rules but the librarian can still refer to them in a benevolent way. It is important to acknowledge that delays and temporary setbacks on the path towards publication are almost inevitable. Any supportive comment to sustain enthusiasm will be welcome. I might say something along the lines of 'Your resilience is likely to get tested', knowing that nurses belong to a robust lot. The peer review process is another worry, however the received wisdom advises to remain positive and prepared to make corrections and revisions. It is extremely rare to have a paper accepted unconditionally.

The online submission requires attention to detail (especially if figures and images are involved) and there is no harm in attempting a mock submission in order to become familiar with the interface, provided we opt out before the final step (and even if we don't there is usually a remedy at hand). Careful consideration ought to be given to authorship, taking into account any significant contribution made by colleagues past and present and acknowledging any financial assistance or competing interests. Any material borrowed from another source (graphs, images, scans) must have a copyright permission.

I usually by-pass any reference to the (not uncommon) prospect that editors might reject the submission, and instead I ask quite early on: 'Have you thought of your second choice journal title?' This usually keeps the consultation within the arena of positive thinking.

*Examples of published work – preferably by nurses in the same field*

Any example of a recent publication by experts in the same nursing field or by known colleagues and collaborators is a perfect tool for de-mystifying the art of publishing in scientific journals. It helps to be able to retrieve such examples at short notice. Over the time I have collated a list of authors affiliated to the Trust who have published in nursing journals and I use them as psychological boosters.

The one-to-one consultation is a success when, after barely an hour, the nurse returns to their clinical department confident that the task in hand is perfectly manageable. With appropriate support and encouragement they will find the experience of writing for publication highly rewarding.

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