

Why you should read this article:

- To understand the importance of writing for publication
- To familiarise yourself with the role of peer review
- To be aware of the differences between continuing professional development articles and research articles

Reflections on writing journal articles

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Citation

Pawlyn J (2020) Reflections on writing journal articles. Learning Disability Practice. doi: 10.7748/ldp.2020.e2074

Peer review

This article has been subject to external double-blind peer review and has been checked for plagiarism using automated software

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Conflict of interest

None declared

Accepted

27 January 2020

Published online

April 2020

Abstract

There is an expectation that nurses should use evidence to inform practice, but having access to this evidence requires other nurses to write about and publish their work to generate new evidence. There is also an expectation that nurses should publish to improve knowledge, although for some the thought of writing can seem challenging. This article presents a reflection on the author's experience of writing, from her first attempt at publishing through to becoming a published author, and then publishing continuing professional development articles. It provides insight into the work involved in becoming a published author.

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Keywords

communication, continuing professional development, education, reflection, writing for publication

Key points

- *Publication in professional journals increases the audience for a nurse's work*
- *Publication also increases the credibility of the nurse and the credibility of the research, and strengthens the nursing profession*
- *The level of work involved in writing an article will vary, from a paper that appears to come together quickly to one that requires considerable research and effort*
- *Continuing professional development articles focus on supporting others to develop their knowledge and practice in a clinical area, and require the development of activities that engage and test the reader*

Introduction

There is an expectation that nurses should use evidence to inform their practice. However, having access to this evidence requires other nurses to write about and publish their work to generate new evidence. For some nurses, attempting to become a published author can seem challenging, but there are several benefits to becoming published. For example, it increases the credibility of the nurse and the credibility of the research, and strengthens the profession. Publication in a professional journal also increases the audience for a nurse's work and ensures it becomes a permanent and searchable record.

Nurses decide to publish for several reasons. For some it might be to disseminate findings, for example from an audit or research project; others may want to share examples of optimal practice, or share experiences in the hope that it will positively inform and influence the practice of others.

The thought of writing can seem daunting at first, and the level of work will vary, from a paper that appears to come together quickly to one that requires considerable research and effort. It is important that nurses who are considering writing are honest about their availability to write and accept that it will require dedicated time and effort to produce the polished professional publication that they are aiming for.

This is a reflection in three parts: my first attempt at publishing, becoming a published author, and publishing continuing professional development (CPD) articles. This article uses Driscoll's (1994) 'What? So What? Now What?' framework to provide a structure for reflections. The aim of this paper is to share my reflections on the process of writing for publication, to explain the process and encourage others to write for publication.

A first attempt at publishing

I finished my degree in specialist community practice (learning disabilities) in 2000. During my studies, I conducted research into the aural screening and aural health checks for people with a learning disability and was keen to disseminate this to a wider readership. I knew at this stage I wanted to publish in a journal. However, I did not attempt to publish immediately upon completing my degree and research. I lacked confidence initially, and then found my busy work schedule meant I had no time to begin the process of publishing my work.

It was not until two years later that I found the time to begin the process. I started by exploring the journals and spoke with colleagues about their recommendations of who to publish with. The focus was on a research journal valued by the research community. Once I had chosen the journal I wanted to publish with, I accessed their author guidelines and followed them as I wrote the paper. At that time papers were submitted in hard copy, so I sent a printed version to the publisher. I received a version of my article back a few weeks later, with reviewer comments.

The reviewer's feedback focused on the papers referenced in the article being too old, because it was now two years since I had completed my research as part of the degree. There were also comments requesting clarification of the methodology and results. I considered what I could and should do to respond. I was writing by myself and found the volume of comments high, and due to being busy with work I did not have the time to attend to the revisions. Instead of sending it back with my corrections, I put the reviewed paper away and haven't read it since.

Becoming a published author

In 2010 I completed a master's degree in eLearning in professional education. I also reflected on my previous attempt to publish and did not want another failed effort. I was determined to be published, but I was also aware that a co-author could assist me with the process, which is something I did not appreciate during my first attempt on my own.

To recruit a co-author, I approached my dissertation supervisors and then other subject experts at work. However, no-one was available, or willing, to support me, so I decided to write my article alone. My article focused on my findings while researching how learning disability nurses used e-learning in their CPD. I considered that the audience for my article would comprise learning disability nurses, and therefore selected Learning Disability Practice as the journal most accessible to this audience. I followed the author guidelines when developing my article and submitted it via email for consideration.

While waiting for the feedback, I reflected on my previous experience. I recognised that the feedback from reviewer comments is not personal, but that it involves peer review, and therefore represents feedback from my colleagues. Any feedback comprises my colleagues' thoughts and opinions, and it should not be an issue if these are different to mine. As a result, when I received the peer review feedback this time, I greeted the comments positively and considered each suggestion in turn. The editorial team were

supportive, contacting me with proposals for revisions and suggesting editorial changes via email, and we established a strong working dialogue.

My article was eventually published in 2012 (Pawlyn 2012), an achievement of which I am proud.

Publishing continuing professional development articles

In 2018, I decided to publish with Learning Disability Practice again. I responded to a call from a colleague at the journal, inviting learning disability nurses to write a CPD article. I had committed to writing two CPD articles, one discussing inhaler technique for people with a learning disability, and another on management of indwelling urinary catheters. However, I now needed the support of colleagues to co-author, because despite having clinical experience in both areas of practice, I believed that writing with nurses who had a clinical specialism in those areas would improve the quality of the article.

I approached some colleagues in my workplace with relevant clinical expertise to assist with writing the article and invited them to contribute. Three people said yes, however one eventually felt their workload was no longer able to support writing and dropped out before we had begun developing the article. My plan was to be a co-author on both articles, with my colleague taking the lead on the clinical speciality and with me leading on the learning disability focus of the article. For example, one of my colleagues had clinical expertise in respiratory nursing, so they took the lead on the article discussing inhaler technique, and I was a co-author providing learning disability knowledge.

The three of us reviewed the author guidelines on the website and read a previously published CPD article, which assisted us with clarification of the design and content ideas, and which we followed while developing the articles. We wanted to include photographs to explain the techniques we were discussing in each paper, and to provide examples of equipment that was referred to in the text. To overcome copyright and the expense of using rights-managed images, we decided to take our own photographs for each article and uploaded these with the first drafts.

We submitted our first draft of 'Inhaler and nebuliser technique for individuals with a learning disability' in March 2018 and our first draft of 'Care and management of indwelling urinary catheters' in May 2018.

In July 2018, I received peer review comments for the article discussing inhaler technique. After responding to these, we were informed in September 2018 that the article was accepted. It was then published in January 2019 (Clark and Pawlyn 2019).

Re-writing articles after peer review

The second article on indwelling catheters required two re-writes – one in June 2018 and one in August 2018. We disagreed with the request from peer reviewers to re-write our article and responded with our rationale for not making specified changes. Nevertheless, we received a second series of comments and the second re-write request, and once again we justified and evidenced our decision not to make the changes indicated.

At this stage, we had become frustrated, and could have given up on the article. But I remembered my experience in 2010, and the peer review comments I had received that I did not take personally. These comments, and the requests to re-write the article, were not personal. However, we knew our approach to the article was appropriate.

By October 2018 we had submitted our third version of the article, and believed we were close to finishing. However, a further two revisions were requested in November and December 2018, which was not ideal because the academic year had just begun and our work was getting busier. Fortunately, there were only minor revisions requested after this, and the article was accepted in January 2019, and published in July 2019 (Tremayne and Pawlyn 2019).

Writing continuing professional development articles versus other formats

In my experience, the difference with a CPD article compared to other article formats is that a CPD focuses on supporting others to develop their knowledge and practice in a clinical area, and it requires the development of activities that engage and test the reader. To ensure the article was up to date, I had to update my own knowledge before beginning writing.

By comparison, my research article was a discussion and presentation of the findings of a research project that I had been working on for several years, so the material felt familiar. There was no requirement to update my own knowledge because it had been developing as a result of working on the project.

Conclusion

I have learned a lot from writing for publication. I have been a reviewer for Learning Disability Practice since 2013, and I always ensure my reviewer comments support, advise and guide authors to produce the most accurate and unambiguous article possible. I believe that this role has informed and influenced how I receive reviewer comments on my own writing and improved my understanding of the importance of welcoming the critique and questions from my peers. I learned that it is important not to take feedback personally, because what colleagues write is from their professional perspective.

I also value having confidence in my evidence-base, because this ensures that I can support my decisions and that I can be confident that my article is presenting current, evidence-informed and safe practice. It also ensures that my articles are going to make a difference in practice and will strengthen the profile of nursing in the field of learning disabilities.

There are several benefits to sharing practice and writing about it in Learning Disability Practice. There is a 'family feel' involved in writing for the journal, because you are interacting with colleagues who work in the learning disability field, and who want to do their best for people with learning disabilities. It also provides an opportunity to learn about the work others are doing, which is a valuable method of developing and improving practice.

Reference

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