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Selecting a journal for your manuscript: A 4-step process

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Abstract

Background

Identifying the most appropriate journal for a manuscript can be challenging for both experienced and novice nurse authors. Several factors should be considered when selecting a journal (e.g., peer-reviewed, target audience, type of manuscripts accepted, type of copyright and publishing model used). Selecting the most appropriate journal can save time for both authors and publishers.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to provide nurses, particularly those new to scholarly publishing, with clear, plain language guidance on the processes and considerations involved in selecting a journal for publication.

Methods

A librarian and a nurse educator collaborated to develop an innovative 4-step process to help authors select the most appropriate journal for their manuscript.

Results

A case study is used to illustrate the process, and a worksheet is provided to guide the reader through the selection of an appropriate journal for their manuscript.

Conclusions

This manuscript can be used by individual nurse authors to find the most appropriate journal for their manuscript, as a teaching tool for nurse educators, and for others mentoring nurse authors who are new to publishing.

Keywords:

Publishing

Writing for publication

Journals

Manuscripts

Introduction

Selecting the most appropriate journal for a manuscript can be challenging. Many authors, particularly graduate students and others new to publishing, struggle to find and select a journal that is both a good fit for their article and accessible to their target audience (Roush, 2017). Selecting a journal that is not a good fit can waste precious time for both the author and the journal's editorial team.

Manuscripts should be written with a target audience in mind, and the audience should be a major determining factor when selecting a journal. Authors should also consider whether a journal is peer-reviewed, the intended or target audience, type of manuscripts published (e.g., literature review, research study, quality improvement), copyright and publishing models (subscription or open access), scope (topical congruence), indexing (can the journal be found through electronic databases), and the journal's scholarly impact (Griffiths & Norman, 2016; Kearney, 2015; Roush, 2017). Authors must be aware of copyright laws and publishing models so they can understand their rights and make informed decisions about their publications. They also need to understand the role institutional repositories play in making their article accessible to a wider audience.

This article orients authors to the publishing environment, familiarizes them with some important, yet often misunderstood publishing concepts and practices, and, through the use of a case study, demonstrates how an author can use available tools to identify and select the best journal for their manuscript. Appended to this manuscript is a completed *Identifying a Journal in 4 Steps Worksheet* using the case study example. A blank worksheet is also appended for readers to replicate the 4-step process while conducting their own search for the most appropriate journal.

Case Study

Kathy is a nurse manager on an intensive care unit in a large academic teaching hospital that is applying for magnet status. She is also pursuing her doctor of nursing practice degree. She has written an article for critical care staff nurses about her unit's recent application of evidence-based practice interventions that resulted in a decrease in urinary tract infections.

Kathy is unsure of the best journal for her article. She follows the 4-step process in this manuscript and completes the appended worksheet to help her select the most appropriate journal. These 4 steps are described below.

Step 1. Identify 2 Concepts the Setting for your Topic

Kathy's first step in searching for an appropriate journal is to define the clinical setting and the main concepts in her article. Kathy uses a worksheet, *Identifying a Journal in 4 Steps,* to organize her thoughts (see Appendix A for Kathy's completed worksheet and Appendix B for a blank worksheet).

Concept One	*Concept Two*	*Setting*
Urinary Tract Infections	Evidence-Based	Intensive Care

Step 2. Use the Main Concepts and Setting you Identified in Step 1 to Find 3 Prospective Journals for your Manuscript

Kathy uses the information she identified in Step 1 to help select three prospective journals that have published articles on this topic. She can use either of the resources listed below. She only needs to use one, not both.

(a) the Journal/Author Name Estimator (JANE) website *(found at http://jane.biosemantics.org/) Kathy can use Google or another search engine to access the JANE website*

or

(b) the Cumulative Index of Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL) database for journals. *Kathy uses her hospital library to access CINAHL. CINAHL is only available to paid subscribers.*

While both JANE and CINAHL are used in this case study, one may be sufficient for finding an appropriate journal.

A. Search the JANE website for journals that have published articles on this topic.

Kathy uses the JANE website, found at http://jane.biosemantics.org/ to identify potential journals. JANE is a is a freely available website that uses either sample text, for instance the title and abstract of a manuscript, or keywords, to suggest journals that have published similar articles (Schuemie & Kors, 2008). From the JANE website, Kathy can either enter the title and abstract of her manuscript, or click on "keyword" and enter terms for the main concepts she identified in step 2. JANE provides Kathy with a few dozen journal titles, lists whether or not they are indexed in Medline (see below for more information on indexing); displays the "article influence," a metric that tells Kathy how frequently an article has been cited in the last 5 years; and lists whether or not the article is open access (see below for more information on open access publishing).

B. Search the CINAHL database for journals that have published articles on this topic.

Kathy has access to CINAHL through her library's website. She enters the following search in CINAHL, making sure to keep her search terms general and not too specific. She is looking for journals that publish articles on similar themes, such as infection control or evidence-based practice, in settings similar to intensive care units.

Urinary tract infections AND evidence-based AND intensive care

Kathy executes the CINAHL search. In CINAHL, along the left-hand sidebar, there is a box that says "Publication." When Kathy expands this section, she can see a list of the journals that published the articles in her search results. Kathy can limit her search results to articles published in any of these journals by clicking the checkbox to the left of the journal title. Kathy reviews these journals and makes a list of the most promising journals—those that publish articles on similar themes.

Step 3. List top 3 Journals Found in JANE or CINAHL Database Search

Kathy now has a list of journals that publish research related to her topic of interest. Here are the top 3 journals from her search:

1	American Journal of Infection Control
2	Critical Care Nurse
3	AACN Advanced Critical Care

Step 4. Use each Journal's Websites to Evaluate the 3 Journals to Determine the Most Appropriate Journal for your Manuscript

Kathy can only submit her manuscript to one journal at a time. It is unethical to submit to multiple journals simultaneously. If her manuscript is rejected for publication, Kathy can submit to a different journal.

Kathy now needs to narrow her list down to the journal that is: a. the best match for her manuscript and b. will reach her intended audience of intensive care nurses. As Kathy makes her final selection of journals, she should consider whether each journal is peer reviewed, the audience of the journal, and the type of manuscripts accepted by the journal. She evaluates each journal using the worksheet provided (see appendix A).

Once Kathy has identified the most appropriate journal, she should read and follow all submission instructions, generally found in the journal's Author Guidelines section. After submitting her manuscript, Kathy will wait for feedback from the journal's editorial staff. Feedback will include peer reviewer comments and suggested revisions. Manuscripts are rarely accepted as submitted, and it is far more common to be asked to make multiple, sometimes very extensive revisions. Peer reviewer and editor suggested revisions should be viewed as a constructive way to improve a manuscript. Kathy understands that being asked to revise her manuscript is standard practice in academic publishing, and thoughtfully incorporating the revisions will improve the quality of her manuscript.

A. Peer review.

Kathy wants to publish in a peer-reviewed journal. Kathy searches for the journal website and clicks on the "About the journal" page, which should tell her if it is a peer-reviewed journal.

A peer reviewed journal uses a blinded quality control process whereby experts in the field review submitted articles. Many nursing journals make the process even more rigorous by

double blinding the peer review process—when double blinded peer review is utilized the identity of the author is hidden from the reviewers, and the identity of the reviewers is hidden from the authors. Peer reviewers evaluate the manuscript for appropriateness to the journal in terms of subject and article type, an up-to-date literature review, methodology, whether it is a substantive contribution to existing evidence, and whether there is sufficient information to help the reader apply information to practice.

B. Audience.

Kathy needs to identify the intended or target audience for each of the journals on her list and make sure the journal's audience matches that of her manuscript. There are a few ways she can do this:

Authors must have an audience in mind when writing—be it nursing students, nurse educators, nurses with a particular specialty, etc. Likewise, journals have a target audience and a specific scope. Information about the scope of the journal and the target audience can be found on the journal's website, generally in the "About this journal" section. It is important that the audience of the manuscript and journal match (Morton, 2013).

One way to identify intended audience is to enter the title of the journal into Google or another internet search engine and visit the journal's website, specifically the "About this journal" section. Another option is to use the International Academy of Nursing Editors' Journal Directory. The International Academy of Nursing Editors (INANE) compile and maintain an alphabetically organized journal directory. The INANE website can be found at https://nursingeditors.com/. The Journal Directory includes a brief description of the journal which will help the author get an idea of the journal's intended audience and its frequency of

publication. The INANE Journal Directory also includes the name of the journal, the editor, the publisher, professional association, and a link to the journal's author guidelines.

C. Type of manuscript.

Kathy will be able to use the author guidelines to make sure that the journal publishes her type of manuscript (literature review, primary study, etc.) and make sure her manuscript is formatted appropriately for the publication.

It is important to make sure the journal publishes the type of manuscript you have written. For example, if Kathy authored an opinion piece, and the journal she is interested in only publishes research studies, Kathy would know her manuscript is not a good match for that journal. A paper that is either outside the topical scope of a journal, not written for the journal's target audience, or is a type of paper that the journal does not publish is more likely to be rejected (Griffiths & Norman, 2016; Kearney, 2015).

D. Copyright and publishing models.

Kathy narrowed her list of journals to three that might be appropriate for her topic. In reading about each one, she found that one is an open access journal and the other is a traditional subscription based journal. The different publishing models affect copyright, access, and author processing fees. Kathy consults with a librarian to learn about copyright laws and publishing models. Here is what Kathy learns:

Copyright law.

To paraphrase the U.S. Copyright Law Preamble, copyright exists to promote the progress of the arts and sciences by securing for authors and inventors the exclusive rights to their writings and discoveries (U.S. Const., art. I, § 8, cl. 8). Essentially, Copyright Law was put in place as a way to ensure authors, artists, and inventors have control of their work once it is in

"tangible medium of expression," i.e. written down or recorded (Copyright Law of 1976, 2016). While this protection was put in place to protect authors and artists, it is common for scholarly journals to require authors to transfer copyright to the journal's publisher. Transferring copyright to the publisher means the author no longer owns the work, and is no longer able to post the work to their personal website; widely share their publication; permit others to use their work; create derivative works, such as a translation; or re-publish their work in a different format, from an article to a book chapter, for instance. Authors can request permission from publishers to reproduce their own work in whole or in part. Many major publishers offer web-based forms for requesting permissions. Understanding that the transfer of copyright to the publisher is the norm in academic publishing and may be contrary to the interests of the author is essential for those attempting to gain an understanding of the scholarly publishing ecosystem.

Publishing models.

Traditional subscription-based journals. Subscription based journals use a traditional publishing model. In this model, an author writes a manuscript, submits that manuscript to a journal, and, if the journal is peer-reviewed, the manuscript goes through the peer review process. If the article is accepted for publication, the author is asked by the publisher to sign a contract. Generally, this contract asks the author to sign over their copyright and in effect grants the publisher sole ownership of the manuscript. The manuscript, now a published article, is only available to subscribers of the journal. The author or the author's institution must pay subscription fees to access the publication.

Open access journals. Open access (OA) content, in contrast to subscription based content, is scholarly literature made free of charge and immediately available in the digital environment, and without many of the use restrictions one finds in traditionally published

content (SPARC). Publishing OA can improve the accessibility, reach and impact of scholarly literature. One study found that OA articles, as compared to articles published in subscription based journals, had between 30 and 200% more citations, depending on discipline (Swan & Chan, 2010).

There are various ways of making a publication OA. One way is by publishing in a strictly OA publication. This is commonly referred to as direct OA. Under the direct OA model, the content published by the journal is freely available online, while the author or the author's institution pays the fees that cover the costs associated with publishing and distribution, commonly referred to as author processing fees. This method should be contrasted with traditional publishing, in which the reader of the article or the reader's institution (generally the institution's library), supports the cost of publication by subscribing to the publication and paying subscription fees.

OA publications improve access to information and are particularly important in clinical settings where access to high quality information can be vital to patient care. However, an unfortunate side effect of the OA movement is the rise in the number of scam emails received by authors, researchers, and academics from what are commonly called predatory publishers. Email scams from predatory publishers have the potential to cause confusion and frustration among authors. Authors should carefully evaluate journals that solicit publications via email, paying particular attention to the databases that include, or index, that journal's content (indexing is discussed further below). If a journal is indexed in major discipline specific databases, such as Medline or CINAHL, an author can be confident it is not a predatory journal. While authors need to be aware of the existence of email scams related to predatory publishing, these scams should

not malign the entire OA movement, as there are many reputable, trustworthy OA publishers and publications.

Traditional journals that offer open access options. In addition to direct OA, there is also delayed OA and hybrid OA. When an article is published as delayed OA articles are embargoed, meaning the most recently published articles are available only to paid subscribers, and then after a delay the content is made fully available. Hybrid OA is when an author publishes in a traditional, subscription based journal and then pays an additional author processing charge (APC) to make their article OA. In this model, the publisher makes money from both subscribers as well as from authors who chose to pay APCs.

Repositories. Another way of making an article OA is through the use of repositories. Repositories are digital services that collect, preserve and make available scholarly and artistic content. Articles or manuscripts can be archived in a digital repository. Digital repositories are generally either discipline specific, for example the Virginia Henderson Global Nursing e-Repository, or associated with an institution or university. One of the primary benefits of achieving OA through archiving is that it is compatible with traditional publishing. An author can publish in the journal of their choice, and then upload an approved version of their article to an institutional repository or discipline specific repository, where it will be available to anyone with an internet connection.

As previously discussed, when an article is accepted for publication in a traditional journal the author is asked to sign a contract with the publishers. The contract generally transfers copyright (ownership) from the author to the publisher, and it limits the author's ability to broadly distribute their work, which can preclude or delay the uploading of the article to a repository. However, authors do have options when it comes to retaining some of their rights.

One option is negotiating the contract the publishers ask the author to sign. If the author successfully negotiates their contract with the publisher, they can retain some or all rights to distribute their article, including putting a version of the article in a repository. This will ensure that their work is widely distributed and has the most significant impact possible; something that is good for both the author and the publisher.

Another option that allows authors to put a version of their work in a repository is an institutional or funding mandate. Many funders, such as the National Institute of Health, the Gates Foundation, and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), to name just a few, have OA mandates, which means authors are required to place a version of their publications and/or data into a repository. Likewise, mandates at educational institutions are becoming increasingly common (Sterman, 2017). Researchers, faculty members, and authors at Harvard, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of California, and Oregon State University, are some of the institutions that have adopted institutional OA mandates (Registry of Open Access Policies, https://roarmap.eprints.org/) These mandates are, in technical terms, non-exclusive license agreements. That means that the funder or the institution has permission (license) to include the work in a repository, but the author, not the institution retains ownership of the work itself.

E. Other things to consider when selecting a journal

Authors should also consider indexing**,** journal impact factors, affiliations with professional organizations, and ‘submission by invitation only’ when selecting a journal.

Indexing in databases.

Kathy should determine whether each of the 3 journals on her list are indexed in PubMed and CINAHL.

Publishing in an appropriate journal is important for reaching a target audience, but authors also need to ensure that the journal is indexed by the primary scholarly databases used in their field. As previously discussed, in nursing and health sciences, two of the most widely used databases are PubMed and the Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature, more commonly referred to as CINAHL. Medline, a subset of PubMed, consists of a vetted collection of high quality journals. A journal that is included in Medline or CINAHL has been evaluated for quality and contains articles that are easier for readers to find, as compared to non-indexed journals. Indexing information is commonly found on the journal's website in the "About this Journal" section.

Journal impact factors and other metrics. Those publishing because of tenure and promotion imperatives are frequently urged to publish in "high quality" publications. But what determines quality in a journal? One commonly used measure is the journal's impact factor, a measurement of the yearly average frequency of citations to articles published in that journal. While impact factor is widely used, and regarded as the single most important measurement of journal quality, it is also highly problematic and easily exploitable (Chorus & Waltman 2016). Impact factors vary across disciplines, with journals from younger scholarly disciplines with smaller pools of researchers (like nursing) having, on average, lower impact factors than disciplines with larger pools of more established researchers (Caceras et al., 2017). Impact factors can also be manipulated by either decreasing the denominator or increasing the numerator in the equation. The denominator can be decreased through the publication of excessive numbers of non-citable articles. The numerator can be increased through the publication of editorials and review articles that include high numbers of citations from that journal (Chorus & Waltman, 2016; PLOS Editors, 2006; Wilhite & Fong, 2012). Because of the problems associated with

impact factors, they should not be the sole metric authors use to determine the quality of a publication. Authors should seek out publications that share their article's intended audience and are widely and appropriately indexed, as previously discussed. If an author is in doubt about the quality or appropriateness of a journal, seeking advice from a mentor, teacher, or trusted colleague with publishing experience in the same field can be very helpful.

Other metrics authors use to evaluate journals include review time (the time between submitting a manuscript and receiving feedback from reviewers), production time (the time between a manuscript being accepted and actual publication), and acceptance rate (how many submitted manuscripts are accepted for publication). This information, while challenging to find, can be helpful when selecting a journal, particularly when publishing is required for tenure or promotion. Two resources that provide this information are Elsevier Journal Finder and Cabells International.

Elsevier Journal Finder, found at (https://journalfinder.elsevier.com) uses a sample text to aid the author in identifying journals that are potential matches for a manuscript (similar to JANE). Elsevier Journal Finder provides the author with a list of journals, and includes metrics such as review speed, production speed, acceptance rate and other key metrics. It is important for the author to know that Elsevier Journal Finder only suggests journals that are published by Elsevier, and does not include titles from other publishers. Cabells International is a subscription based resource which, like CINAHL, must be accessed through a library or other academic institution. Cabells provides journal information, journal metrics (including impact factor and acceptance rate), and submission information for authors.

Affiliation with a professional organization. Some journals are published by professional associations and share that association's scope and audience (Kearney, 2015). For

instance, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing publishes the *Journal of Professional Nursing,* the Hospice and Palliative Nurses Association publishes the *Journal of Hospice and Palliative Nursing,* and the Emergency Nurses Association publishes the *Journal of Emergency Nursing*. Publishing in a journal that is affiliated with a relevant, trusted professional organization is a good way of ensuring both quality of the journal and fit with the audience and theme.

Submission by invitation only. Review the author guidelines page to ensure that the journal accepts uninvited submissions. A small, select group of journals only publish invited manuscripts.

Step 5. Use the Findings in the Table to Determine the Best Journal for your Manuscript

The journal that is peer-reviewed, matches manuscript audience and article type, and operates under a copyright/publishing model that is congruent with the author's needs and interests should be prioritized.

Conclusion

Finding a journal that is a good fit for a manuscript is an important yet challenging part of the publishing process. This is especially true for the author new to publishing or publishing on a new topic. Finding appropriate journals does not have to be a difficult or mysterious process. The authors have described a 4-step process to make journal selection easier. This narrative is accompanied by a case study which allows the reader to see the application of the 4 step-process. The narrative and worksheet were refined through use and feedback from doctoral nursing students.

A blank *4-Step Process Worksheet* has been included to allow the reader to apply what they learn in this manuscript to selecting the most appropriate journal for their own manuscript

This resource can be used by anyone, but may be particularly helpful for a nurse publishing for the first time, as a teaching tool for faculty to use with graduate nursing students, or for academic leaders mentoring new faculty. Making the process of journal selection more efficient may lead to more successful authors with less frustration and wasted time of both authors and publishers.

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