

Writing for professional publication.

Part 4: Supporting your statements

John Fowler



Abstract

Motivation, appropriate content and making good use of the author guidelines were topics covered in the first three articles of this series of writing for professional publication. In this fourth part, John Fowler, an experienced nursing lecturer and author, discusses the importance of avoiding unsupported statements in writing for professional publications.

Keywords: Publication ■ Professional development ■ Career development

One of the first and most important lessons to learn when writing for academic study or professional publication is the avoidance of unsupported statements. But what exactly is an unsupported statement, and why shouldn't they appear in professional publications?

Unsupported statements are opinions or views stated with authority, but without any evidence presented to support that opinion. Such opinions and unsupported statements form much of our daily coffee break conversations, and it can be quite therapeutic to vent our opinions. Many of the NHS's problems would apparently be solved if such staff room opinions were to be acted on. That liberty to express unsubstantiated opinions really is the difference between private conversations and academic or professional publication. Facts, opinions and discussions that appear in professional publications should be based on sources of evidence that are explicit and validated. Consider the following examples.

Dr John Fowler wrote his first article for publication as a staff nurse 30 years ago. Since then he has published over 50 articles in a variety of publications and edited seven nursing text books. He has supported over 40 nurses in writing for publication.

Unsupported statements

- All patients should be nursed in a side room
- Support is the most important quality a nurse should develop
- Using bandage X will reduce oedema.

Statements supported by research

- A randomized controlled trial with 500 participants concluded that... (Smith, 2010)
- A longitudinal study concludes that... (Brown, 2010).

Statements supported by 'best practice' guidelines

- The British Thoracic Society (BTS) (2009) asthma guidelines recommend the use of combination inhalers for selected patients who are poorly controlled.

Statements supported by other (non-research) published literature

- Smith (2010) believes that the introduction of an admissions ward has helped reduce patients' anxiety following transfer from A&E.

Statements supported by clinical expertise

- Having worked as a specialist asthma nurse for the last 5 years I would support the BTS guidelines (2009) that medication needs to

be accompanied by support and education if hospitalization is to be reduced.

If you examine the above examples of supported and unsupported statements you will realize that there are various degrees of 'strength' with which a statement can be supported. The strongest level of support is that of a systematic review of a collection of research, such as found in Cochrane reviews (<http://www.cochrane.org>). Individual pieces of research are the next strongest, but the method of research and the numbers of participants will determine the overall validity of the conclusions. At the other end of the continuum is the use of clinical expertise. If you have expertise in a specific topic, then you can use that expertise to support a particular position.

The relevant point of this in writing for publication is to recognize where you are coming from in terms of handling the vast wealth of evidence that is 'out there' in the literature. Can you make sense of a Cochrane review or a statistically based RCT? If not, don't choose a topic that has this sort of evidence base, nor a journal that publishes this style of article. Conversely, have you got evidence of how patients have responded to a new initiative that has been introduced in your area of practice? If so, what is the strongest way, in terms of evidence, that you could collect and present that in a publication? The point of professional publication is to present something that is more than a staff room discussion for the benefit of others in your profession.

Therefore, when writing academically or for professional publication, it is important to write with authority that is based on evidence. The level of evidence will often be determined by the type of journal or book you are writing for and the content of the article. Adapting your writing for specific levels and for particular journals will be the subject of future articles in this series. **BJN**

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