

Writing for professional publication.

Part 7: structure and presentation

John Fowler



Abstract

How to get your work published is the essence of this series on writing for professional publication. The previous articles focused on the preparation required before you start writing your article, ways to create interest in the reader's mind, and the importance of writing a well-constructed abstract. In this article John Fowler, an experienced nursing lecturer and author, discusses the structure and presentation of a potential article and how this differs from an essay that may have been written as part of a university course.

Keywords: Publication ■ Professional development ■ Career development

Student nurses and qualified staff on university courses often write a two or three thousand word essay as part of their assessment. If the lecturer marking the essay is impressed by the standard of the work they may give the feedback: 'Very impressive, you should get this published.' Encouraged by this, the student sends the essay off to a journal, only to receive a rejection letter some weeks later. Feeling dejected and possibly let down by the lecturer who had encouraged publication, the student never tries to publish work again.

What the lecturer should have said was, 'You should *adapt* this work for publication.' Journal editors refer to such essays as 'term papers'. They have been written to fulfil the criteria of university assessments rather than as an article for publication—for example, approximately 70% of the essay will review published literature in a way that is informative, but not necessarily original.

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.

So, what are the characteristics of an article written for professional publication?

- Its purpose is to communicate new ideas in an informative and interesting way
- It is well presented: paragraphs are usually quite short, and headings are used to guide the reader into the subject
- Approximately 20% of the article will relate the work to the underpinning literature, while 70% will present new information or discussion and application of established knowledge.

The literature

One of the big differences between writing for a course and writing for publication is how the literature is used and what percentage of the written work is given over to its review. In an article for publication, the section reviewing the literature is there to show the reader where this article 'fits' in terms of the established body of knowledge on the subject. It will therefore normally be short, concise yet thorough. In an international journal it should reflect the international literature as well as the national. It should reflect a historical perspective and then locate the current thinking. All of this needs to be achieved in approximately 400 words.

The body

Having established the theoretical foundations of your work, you then need to identify the theme of your article. This should be introduced in a concise yet informative way that creates interest in the reader's mind. They should be left knowing the exact details of what you are writing about. Use numbers and precise language, e.g. 'a change of practice on a 10-bed unit after 3 weeks of planning', or 'the development of a multidisciplinary care pathway for 2000 respiratory patients a year.'

Having introduced the main theme of the article, you then need to say what it is that you have done, or discuss a different perspective on something that has already been written about. A good article will also have two or three sub-themes woven through the body of your article. For example, if you were writing about the development of a care plan you may include as sub-themes some of the following: finance, ethics, change management, infection control, or patient satisfaction. Having sub-themes to your article will help give it depth and application to practice. These themes can be drawn together in your conclusion.

The conclusion and way forward

When writing the conclusion, ask yourself how does the body of your article relate to the relevant literature? What themes have emerged and been developed? How does this impact on practice? What are the challenges in taking this work forward? What are your views? The conclusion is the place to address all of these questions.

You can begin to see how an article differs from an academic essay. While both have a foundation of evidence as their base, their structure and presentation differ. Next time, we examine the importance of targeting your article to the most appropriate journal. **BJN**

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