

Responding to reviewers' comments as part of writing for publication

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Abstract

Aims The aim of this paper is to provide a resource for authors to help them in getting their work published. The focus is on dealing with, and responding to, the comments of reviewers.

Background The importance to research of nurses writing for publication is widely acknowledged. However, a number of significant barriers to nurses actively engaging in this form of dissemination has been identified. Ways in which nurses can avoid the pitfalls that would make their manuscripts more likely to be rejected have been the subjects of published articles. Significantly less attention has been devoted to providing authors with methods to assist them in responding when their manuscripts are rejected or major revisions are requested.

Discussion This article provides a brief overview of the process of editorial review. It offers a practical but structured approach to responding to reviewers' comments when undertaking major revisions and to

preparing a rejected manuscript for resubmission to another journal.

Conclusion Authors frequently respond negatively to reviewers' comments and this may result in their being dissuaded from writing for publication. A structured approach to dealing with reviewers' comments may help nurses in making the requested revisions and increase their chances of publication.

Implications for research The publication of research findings and other scholarly work are important for the professional advancement of nursing. Strategies to overcome the barriers to writing for publication are essential to achieving this goal. Helping authors to respond positively to reviewer critique and to make the necessary changes are important steps in this process.

Keywords

Nurses, publication, editorial review, rejection, major revisions, critique

Introduction

The dissemination of findings and outcomes is a crucial step in the research process (Cleary and Walter 2004, Nelms 2004, Happell 2008a, Moos and Hawkins 2009). By publishing this information, nurses can make positive contributions to the quality and improvement of health care. However, it is evident that nurses are often reluctant to submit their work for publication (Jackson and Sheldon 2000, O'Neill and Duffey 2000, Driscoll and Driscoll 2002, King and Price 2003, Worrall-Carter and Snell 2003, Happell 2005, 2008a).

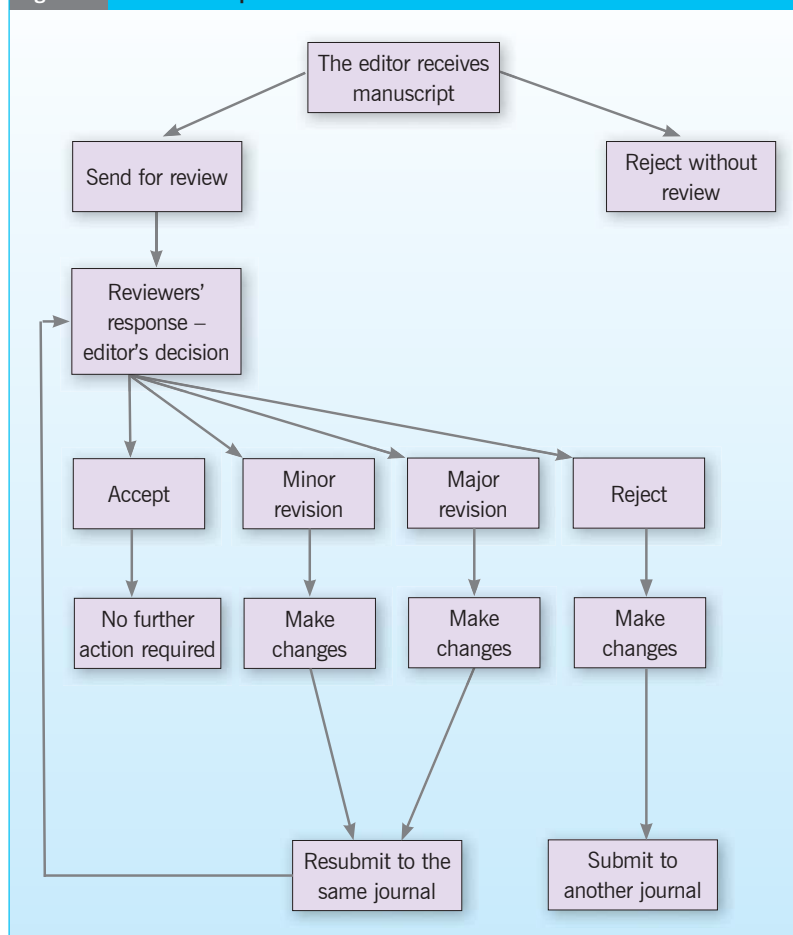
Two main factors have been associated with nurses' reluctance to publish their work. First, the culture of nursing practice does not place

the same value on written dissemination as other professions do (Mee 2003, Schilling 2005). Second, the nursing profession tends to rely more on oral communication than the written word (Hardey *et al* 2000, Martin and Street 2003).

To increase the level of publication by nurses, some authors have provided advice to help with and enhance the writing process (Heyman and Cronin 2005, Happell 2008b). The value of converting higher degree dissertations (Heyman and Cronin 2005, Happell 2008b) or quality improvement projects (Smith 2000) into publications has been discussed, as have strategies for moving from a conference presentation to a referred publication (Happell 2008c).

Correspondence to
Brenda Happell
Email: b.happell@cqu.edu.au

Brenda Happell RN, RPN, BA(Hons), Dip Ed, BEd, MEd, PhD is director of the Institute for Health and Social Science Research, and professor of contemporary nursing at the School of Nursing and Midwifery, Central Queensland University, Australia

Figure 1 The editorial process

Given this, any strategies to encourage nurses to write for publication are useful. However, it is unlikely that manuscripts will be accepted for publication on their initial submission.

The literature provides suggestions for reducing the chances of a manuscript being rejected (Litt 2002, Pierson 2004, Keen 2007, Morse 2007, Robinson and Rivers 2003, Moos and Hawkins 2009) and about how to deal with having a manuscript rejected (Chard 2001, Clarke 2005, Peregrin 2007). Considerably less attention has been devoted to identifying strategies for encouraging nurses to use editorial comments to revise their manuscripts so they will be accepted for publication.

Understanding the editorial process

Refereed journal publications follow a relatively standard process of review. However, this process (Figure 1) may not be well known to, or clearly understood by, authors (Wade and Tennant 2004, Moos and Hawkins 2009).

Review The editor or a member of the editorial team generally conducts an initial review of a newly received manuscript to consider its suitability for the journal. Whether it 'passes' this initial screening and proceeds to review will depend on factors including: the relevance of the topic to the journal's readership; the rigour or integrity of the manuscript content; the extent to which the content contributes to knowledge in the area; and the overall presentation of the manuscript, including grammar, spelling, expression and referencing style.

When the editor considers a manuscript worthy of review, it is usually sent to at least two reviewers. Reviewers are selected because of their expertise in either the content area or methodological approach used (Sullivan 2002). Manuscripts are sent to reviewers 'blind', the authors' names and any other potentially identifying material are removed to prevent the reviewers being unduly influenced by factors such as their like or dislike of the authors or the authors' statuses or positions, which might intimidate the reviewer into being uncritical.

Reviews are also completed anonymously so the reviewers can feel comfortable in providing honest critiques of manuscripts without being concerned that this will affect their relationships or standings with the authors. Reviewers should be honest in their critiques while showing sensitivity in their feedback to minimise the effect on the authors. Unfortunately, this is not always the case and reviewers can lack tact and diplomacy (Happell 2008a).

Editor's decision The editor will consider the reviewers' comments but still has the final decision regarding the suitability of the manuscript. The degree to which the reviewers' comments influence this decision depends on factors such as the level of agreement between the reviewers and the extent to which they have provided critiques of the manuscript that reflect content and rigour rather than matters of personal opinion (Happell 2008b).

The editor's decision generally falls into one of four categories:

- Accept without changes (or subject to minor amendments).
- Minor revisions required.
- Major revisions required.
- Rejection.

To have a paper accepted after its initial review is rare, even for experienced authors. Minor revisions are asked for when the editor supports the reviewers' recommendations regarding the need for changes, but does not consider that the required amendments warrant a re-review of the manuscript; however, some editors will send manuscripts for re-review when

only minor changes are requested. Minor revisions are usually typographical, grammatical or referencing changes; they may also be requests for explanation or elaboration of certain points.

The editor usually requests major revisions when substantial clarification regarding the argument is required. This response is also given when, for example, the references used are out of date, the underlying argument of the manuscript is considered inadequate or incomplete, or the manuscript is not well written and structured. The decision to request major revisions rather than to reject usually reflects the editor's view that the manuscript has potential merit, and the paper is likely to be publishable if the issues raised by the reviewers are addressed. Under these circumstances, the revised manuscript will generally be sent for re-review.

The decision to reject the manuscript is generally a reflection of the suitability or the quality of the manuscript. Sometimes the presence of the word 'reject' is all the author sees and concludes that the paper is not of a suitable standard. But on some occasions, editors reject high quality manuscripts because they do not consider the work to be relevant to the audience – a manuscript discussing the attitudes of emergency nurses to patients who intentionally self-harm would have less relevance to a peri-operative nursing journal than an emergency nursing journal. It is important that authors submit to appropriate journals to avoid this happening. Published literature, such as Happell (2008a), can help authors in making a suitable selection.

An editor may also reject a manuscript because its topic has been the subject of a number of other manuscripts published in recent editions and enough attention has already been given to that area. In both these situations, the author should submit the manuscript to another journal.

A manuscript rejected because of quality reflects a number of issues that usually present in combination, such as:

- It may lack a clear and well-supported argument.
- It may describe research that is methodologically unsound or the author may have provided insufficient detail for the soundness of the study to be verified.
- Ideas and arguments may not be clearly expressed or it may contain a large number of grammatical, typographical or referencing errors.

The editor usually decides to reject the manuscript rather than request major revisions when the errors are so numerous or the methodological issues are sufficiently serious that the editor, perhaps in combination with the reviewers, does not believe

that the manuscript can be revised to a sufficient standard to warrant publication.

Responding to the editor's decision

If the editor's response to a manuscript you have submitted is acceptance or a request for minor revisions, this is excellent news. Where the decision is to reject the manuscript or request major revisions, you may find this quite distressing. Review is intended to provide constructive feedback to assist you in revising the manuscript or to provide an explanation of why the work is not considered suitable for publication (Happell 2008b). However, you may see rejection as a judgement on your ability to write for publication and decide to neither continue with this work nor submit other work for publication in the future.

It is perfectly natural to feel disappointed, even angry if you receive a negative response from an editor. The best way to deal with this is to push the manuscript and comments aside for a few days until these feelings have subsided. Authors are often surprised to learn how frequently manuscripts are rejected or require significant revisions, even those manuscripts written by highly experienced authors, so at this point you should read through the comments carefully, trying to avoid feelings of defensiveness or incompetence. Even reviews that appear harsh to you will almost certainly include feedback that will improve the quality of your work if you adopt the changes. Since reviewers have taken the time and effort to read through and critique your work, it is important that you respect that commitment by giving thorough consideration to their feedback.

Major revisions

The first step should be to read through the reviewers' and editor's comments carefully. Comments and requests for changes should be divided into three groups:

- Those you agree with.
- Those you strongly disagree with.
- Those you do not necessarily agree with but could conceivably change without a major effect on the integrity of your paper, such as a minor change to the title.

You should cut and paste the feedback into a separate Word document and respond to each specific point made. Journals that use internet-based review processes generally require written responses to reviewers' comments; however, even if that is not specifically requested, you should provide it as it demonstrates to the editor that you have taken the feedback seriously. It also assists the reviewers

and the editor with the re-review process. It is not unusual to feel compelled to adopt changes even when you do not agree with them. This is not the case. Reviewers may have expertise in the content area of a paper, but they may not be as experienced in publishing as you and they are certainly not infallible. Reviewing is not an absolute science, as the differences between the feedback of reviewers for the same paper often demonstrates. For example, there may be a section of the manuscript that one reviewer considers important and argues that it requires expanding, while the other reviewer considers it irrelevant and recommends it be deleted. To a greater or lesser extent, reviews reflect opinion and authors can and do disagree with reviewers' opinions.

Dealing with requested amendments that you agree with or are not strongly opposed to is a relatively straight-forward process. You make the changes and note these below the relevant section in the response document. The level of detail to provide here will vary. For example, if the amendment refers to a spelling error, you can respond by stating 'amended'. If the request is more complex, you should consider a fuller reply. So in response to 'a more detailed explanation of the methods used in this study is required', an appropriate answer might be: 'More detail about the methods used in this study has been provided, including the methodology used, the study setting, the target participants, the process for recruitment, the study procedure, the ethical issues and data analysis.'

When responding to feedback that you do not agree with, it is important to be respectful and to clearly and unemotionally state an argument for not making the requested changes. For example, in response to a reviewer's comment that: 'the content of this paper does not contribute new knowledge in this area. In the discussion, the author(s) relate these findings to the previous work of Harding (2005), Johnstone (2003) and Mermagus (2008). Given the similarity of the findings to these studies, it appears reasonable to conclude that this research does not contribute anything new,' the author should word the response in a manner such as: 'I disagree with the reviewer's comment in this instance. Although there are similarities with the findings of the previous work outlined by the reviewer, this is the first known study of its kind conducted with a paediatric population, the Harding study was conducted in the operating theatre and the Johnstone and Mermagus studies were conducted in A&E.' It might also be useful to add a statement like: 'The discussion section has now been amended to more clearly articulate this important contribution to

knowledge.' Not only does this demonstrate respect for the reviewer's opinion, it will probably strengthen the impact of the work.

When revisions are completed and resubmitted, editors are likely to send manuscripts out for re-review, providing they are confident that the requested revisions have been made or there are justifications for not making the changes. To avoid new issues being raised by new reviewers, the revised manuscript is usually sent to the same reviewers if they are still available. The process will be the same as for the initial review: the editor will receive the reviewers' comments and make a decision to accept, request minor revisions, request major revisions or reject the manuscript. Where minor revisions are requested, you should view this as positive as it means that the manuscript is moving closer to acceptance. A request for major revisions or rejection usually occurs when the reviewers or editor do not think that the feedback has been adequately addressed.

Rejection

Rejection does not need to mean the end of a manuscript. There are numerous journals in the nursing and health fields – a manuscript rejected by one journal may well be accepted by another because of the differences in opinion between their editors and reviewers. Some journals have high rejection rates of 80 per cent and 90 per cent because of the large number of manuscripts they receive. These journals will therefore reject many manuscripts that may be welcomed by other publications. The important thing is to persist, not be discouraged, and view the rewriting and resubmission of the manuscript as a learning process.

Deciding to resubmit should not mean sending the unchanged manuscript to another journal. It would be highly unlikely that none of the feedback warranted attention. Therefore, it is useful to follow the same process as for major revisions: consider what should be changed in light of feedback; distinguish those changes from those with which you do not agree; make the changes; then resubmit. If you find it difficult to understand the reviewers' comments or you do not feel capable of making the changes, it would be useful to consider seeking the mentorship of a more experienced author. This would bring not just expertise in writing and publishing, but the author will have less of an investment in the content area and therefore bring more objectivity to the writing process. A mentor can also decipher reviewers' comments and assist you in viewing these comments as constructive rather than offensive.

Summary and conclusions

Critique of written work can be difficult to receive without feeling inadequate or incompetent. These feelings can dissuade the novice author from trying again. Critiques from editors and reviewers are an inherent component of the publishing process and while they may be difficult at times, careful consideration of feedback is likely to result in an improved final product and so should be viewed as constructive rather than offensive. It is also important to acknowledge that reviewers are fallible so it is not unreasonable to disagree with them and not want to make some of the changes they have suggested. In this article, I have suggested that authors divide reviewers' comments into three main categories: those they agree with, those they strongly

disagree with and those they are prepared to concede. Each group of comments should then be addressed separately, indicating where changes have been made and providing a well-argued rationale if there is disagreement with the need for any change. Finally, eliciting the support of an experienced author as a mentor may provide valuable support to assist nurses in getting published.

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This article has been subject to a double-blind review and checked using antiplagiarism software

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