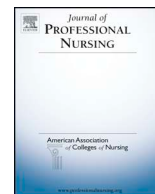




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# Journal of Professional Nursing

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## Why was my manuscript rejected?



Whenever I receive a manuscript for publication in the *Journal of Professional Nursing*, I am confident the authors worked hard to write what they believe is an excellent manuscript. Authors are optimistic for a positive outcome for their submission and anxiously await a decision with the hope of having only to make minor revisions, if any.

Unfortunately, the time from submission to receiving a decision about the manuscript can take several months. The reason for the delay is the difficulty I have in obtaining two helpful reviews for each manuscript. I often must invite up to 10 reviewers before I can find two who consent to complete the review. The other hurdles I face are the number of reviewers who return the review past the due date or who never return the promised review, and the number of reviews that are useless due to poor quality. I am seeking reviews that focus on the specific strengths and weaknesses of the manuscript but, unfortunately, there are times when I receive reviews that only summarize mistakes in spelling, grammar, punctuation, and American Psychological Association referencing style. These reviews are not helpful, so I must start over and find a new reviewer.

After careful scrutiny of the reviewers' comments and my own thorough evaluation of the manuscript, sometimes I make the decision to reject a manuscript. I write an extensive review of these rejected manuscripts to help authors understand why I made the rejection decision. Although I know authors are disappointed, my hope is that they can learn from their mistakes. It would be ideal, however, if authors could avoid some fatal flaws before they submit their manuscript.

The purpose of this editorial is to provide a synopsis of the major reasons I reject manuscripts sent to the *Journal of Professional Nursing*. Armed with this information, I believe authors can avoid rejection of their manuscript.

### Common reasons for manuscript rejection

Manuscripts are rejected for a variety of reasons, but most can be circumvented if authors are willing to take the time to consider carefully the issues and proposed solutions I discuss below.

#### *The topic is not a match with the purpose of the Journal of Professional Nursing*

The *Journal of Professional Nursing* is the official journal of the American Association of Colleges of Nursing. The focus of the journal is baccalaureate and graduate nursing education, educational research, faculty issues, policy related to education, educational administration, and education and practice partnerships. The *Journal of Professional Nursing* does not publish any manuscripts with a clinical or staff nurse topic. About 20% of submitted manuscripts are centered on clinical or staff nurse topics and these manuscripts are rejected without being read

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beyond the abstract or reviewed.

**Solution:** Find a journal whose purpose is a match for your topic. If your manuscript concentrates on clinical or staff nurse topics, consult the journal directory found on the website of the International Academy of Nursing Editors: <https://nursingeditors.com/journals-directory/>. Here, you can view an extensive list of nursing journals including a description of each journal, a link to the editor, and a link to the journal's website. Using this resource, you will be able to find a better match for clinical and staff nurse focused manuscripts. It is only when your topic is a match with the purpose of the *Journal of Professional Nursing* that your manuscript will be considered for the peer review process.

#### *The topic is too broad, or the manuscript has too many purposes*

Selecting a topic that is too broad is a common mistake, especially for novice authors. When a topic is too broad, authors do not have enough pages to address the topic adequately and the reader is left with a manuscript that does not provide sufficient information.

Another fatal flaw is when a manuscript has multiple purposes, or the purpose is stated differently each time it is cited. Within the limited pages of a journal article, it is difficult to effectively address multiple aims. Manuscripts with multiple purposes or indistinct aims do not offer the reader enough information to cover any of the aims in enough depth.

**Solution:** Focus the manuscript to a narrow piece of a broader topic. For example, rather than writing about online learning in general, write about strategies to help new faculty develop and implement their first online course.

If you find yourself writing multiple purpose statements for the manuscript, stop right there. A manuscript can only have one main purpose. If you have multiple purposes, then each purpose represents a separate journal article. Select one purpose, use the same purpose statement each time it is cited, and get started writing a manuscript that addresses that single purpose. Save the other purposes for future manuscripts.

#### *The topic is not of interest to the readers or the manuscript offers no new information*

If, after reading the manuscript, the reader says “who cares?” or “so what,” the manuscript is in trouble. For example, readers will not be interested in a synopsis of your course evaluations. [Table 1](#) lists topics that reviewers rate to be of little interest to readers. Another common reason for rejection is that the manuscript offers the reader no new information or no new slant on the topic.

**Solution:** A topic must spark the interest of readers and answer the

**Table 1**  
Topics of little interest to readers

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Students' knowledge of a topic
Students' attitudes towards a topic
Students' perception that they learned
Students' perception of their competence
Student or alumni satisfaction with their program
Course, program, curriculum, or conference evaluations

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“so what?” or “who cares?” question. Readers are looking for information they can use in their role as an educator. Select a topic that helps readers learn something new or offers a new angle on an old issue. The information you provide must be applicable and generalizable beyond your school.

#### *The audience is not clear*

When authors do not make the intended audience clear or attempt to write for too many audiences, the chance of rejection increases. Attempting to write for diverse groups usually results in a manuscript that is of minimal value to any of the groups.

Solution: Manuscripts must be written for a defined audience. For example, if the audience is faculty teaching in a nurse practitioner program, then all information must be presented at their level keeping in mind what they probably already know about the topic.

#### *The author guidelines were not followed*

For reasons I do not understand, many authors never read or follow the author guidelines for the submission of a manuscript. Required elements for the *Journal of Professional Nursing* such as an abstract and highlights sections are often missing. The *Journal of Professional Nursing* uses the American Psychological Association referencing guidelines, but I often receive manuscripts that use the reference style of the American Medical Association.

Solution: Every journal has author guidelines and editors expect authors to read and follow them. The guidelines explain the purpose of the journal, the format for the manuscript, the required reference style, the suggested page limitations, and guidelines for developing tables and figures. Please read all the directions before you start to write. The author guidelines for the *Journal of Professional Nursing* can be found at <https://www.elsevier.com/journals/journal-of-professional-nursing/8755-7223/guide-for-authors>.

#### *The manuscript contains multiple writing styles*

I often receive manuscripts that are written by more than one author and no one author edited the manuscript for a consistent style. For example, the writing changes from third to first person in the middle of the manuscript. Another problem is that information is repeated unnecessarily, which is a distraction from the authors' main message.

Solution: It is fine to submit multi-authored manuscripts. However, one author must edit the entire manuscript to use either first, second, or third person perspective. Also, the appointed author must remove redundant information and edit the manuscript to have one consistent writing style.

#### *There is confusion between fact and opinion*

I often receive manuscripts where the authors present their opinion as fact. Reviewers have very unfavorable responses when the two are confused and, therefore, they usually recommend rejection of the manuscript.

Solution: It is fine to write a manuscript that summarizes your stance on an issue. I welcome these commentaries and think we need more debate in the nursing literature. However, you must clearly inform the reader that the information is your opinion and not try and portray your opinion as fact.

#### *Student papers not written or formatted in a journal style*

I receive a significant number of student papers for publication in the *Journal of Professional Nursing*. Often these papers are based on a PhD dissertation or a DNP project. For example, I recently received a 274-page dissertation with all the graduation forms as appendices. A manuscript of this length would have been 93 journal pages. Authors have sent complete DNP projects - all 130 pages of one project formatted in chapters with a table of contents.

Solution: All student papers must be re-written to a journal format and style to be considered for publication in the *Journal of Professional Nursing*. See my previous editorial where I discuss how to help students turn their dissertations and projects into journal articles (Morton, 2016). I recommend that faculty teach students to write in a journal style from the start rather than having students write lengthy PhD dissertations and DNP projects and then attempt to have the work published. Please do not require students to submit the paper to a journal or have the paper accepted by a journal as a condition for graduation. When acceptance is a condition for graduation, I get emails from desperate students. For example, I received an email from a student begging me to accept her paper within a two-week timeframe from submission because her family had already purchased the plane tickets for graduation. When faculty require merely a submission of the manuscript as a condition for graduation, here is what happens. Reviewers and I spend a great deal of time offering students feedback on their manuscript and request a revision. Students ignore the invitation to revise the manuscript. When I contact students, the reason given for not revising is because they met the requirement for graduation, they have their diploma, and they never had any intention of revising the manuscript if given the opportunity by the editor. As a result, a great deal of reviewers' and my time is wasted. More importantly, the valuable message from the manuscript is lost.

#### **Common reasons for research manuscript rejection**

I receive many manuscripts that report research findings. There are some common reasons these manuscripts are rejected, but most of these reasons can be avoided.

#### *Incorrectly claim the manuscript reports research*

I am aware that many faculty members are under pressure to conduct research and publish the findings of their studies. However, faculty often are confused between research and outcomes evaluation. I receive many manuscripts that are outcomes evaluation focused and they should be labelled as such.

Solution: When writing the manuscript, ask yourself if you are reporting the discovery of knowledge or are you reporting the outcomes of an evaluation project. Correctly identify the work as one or the other early in the manuscript. Carefully consider if readers will be interested in the results of your evaluation activities. Those results may not answer the “Who cares?” question as discussed above.

#### *The review of the literature is missing*

I am stunned by the number of research reports I receive that contain no review of the literature section in the manuscript. Authors jump directly from an introduction section to the methods section. When we

took our research courses, we were taught that our research questions must be placed in the context of previous studies. This basic step of the research process seems to have been lost in recent years.

**Solution:** Research studies will not be published in the *Journal of Professional Nursing* unless they have a synopsis of previous research for the topic. The review of the literature must be a synthesis of the results of previous studies, not a “litany of the saints” meaning a lengthy discussion of one study at a time. The review of the literature should tell the reader what is known about each of the study variables, what is not known, and how the reported study fills the gap.

#### *The wrong method was used to answer the research question*

I often receive research reports where the researchers asked a cause-effect question but used a research design that does not allow one to answer a cause-effect question. Cause-effect questions must be answered with an experimental design, but researchers often explain that they used a descriptive or correlational design.

Another major flaw with research methods is the researchers' claim that they conducted a qualitative study or a mixed methods study with components of quantitative and qualitative designs. I receive manuscripts in which the researchers asked a few open-ended questions and erroneously state they are conducting qualitative research. Unfortunately, these supposedly open-ended questions are sometimes leading questions such as “Tell me about the barriers you faced in your new position” or the questions are really seeking quantitative responses such as “Explain how often you experience bullying in your workplace.” These are not the types of interview questions used in qualitative research. Also, asking one or two open-ended questions at the end of a survey does not constitute a mixed methods study.

**Solution:** It is imperative that the correct research method be used to answer the research question. Quantitative research designs are used to quantify answers to a problem through the generation of data that are analyzed by statistical tests. The goal is to collect measurable data that can be interpreted to draw quantifiable conclusions and uncover patterns. Quantitative methods include descriptive, correlational, and experimental designs.

Qualitative methods are used to explore issues, perspectives, opinions, experiences, or motivations. Qualitative research designs include phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, case study, historical, and narrative. Merely asking a few open-ended questions does not constitute qualitative research.

#### *Institutional review board approval was not obtained*

I receive manuscripts reporting research where the subjects were students or faculty. Some of these reports never mention that the researchers obtained institutional review board (IRB) approval for their work. When I question the researchers, I have had some tell me that they decided the study was exempt from IRB approval, so they never submitted the study to the IRB. Others tell me that no IRB review was needed because the subjects for the study were “just students.”

**Solution:** The policy of the *Journal of Professional Nursing* is that if the subjects in the study were humans, then the study must undergo IRB review. It is never the researchers' prerogative to determine if a study is exempt from IRB review. Some institutions have a policy that if a study meets certain criteria, then the study is exempt. Those criteria have been established by the IRB so, in essence, the study meets IRB regulations, and the exempt decision is not made by the researchers.

#### *The sample size is too small*

I receive manuscripts reporting quantitative studies where the

sample size is too small to draw any conclusions from the study. For some qualitative studies, researchers end data collection when they cannot find any more participants rather than ending the search for participants when data saturation is achieved. Another common problem with obtaining an adequate sample is that too often investigators limit their study to a single site and therefore cannot acquire a large enough sample to answer the research questions.

**Solution:** When conducting a study, it is essential to determine that you have an adequate number of subjects to answer the research question. A power analysis can be done to determine the needed sample size for quantitative studies. Statistical power is the probability that the test will detect an effect that actually exists. When conducting a regression analysis, statisticians have recommended guidelines for the number of subjects needed per variable. Conduct a power analysis, calculate the number of subjects needed per variable, or expand your study to multiple sites to obtain an adequate sample size. For qualitative studies, obtain a large enough sample that enables you to achieve data saturation.

#### *The instrument has no established reliability or validity*

Nursing education researchers frequently develop their own instrument to gather the requisite data to answer the research questions. Unfortunately, they fail to report any testing of the reliability or validity of the instrument. Others try to establish validity by merely testing face or content validity. Researchers that use instruments with no established reliability or validity are likely to have the manuscript rejected.

**Solution:** Whenever an instrument is developed, the researcher must establish the reliability and validity of the tool. There are four types of validity that must be established: construct, content, face, and criterion. Test-retest reliability and internal consistency are two types of reliability testing for instruments. If you are unable to do all the work to establish the reliability and validity of a tool, then use with permission one in which the reliability and validity already have been determined. In this case, it is important also to report the reliability of the instrument with your subjects.

#### *Conclusions are not supported by the data*

I am amazed at how often researchers make conclusions for which they have no data or the data point in the opposite direction. For example, I received a research report where the mean scores of the experimental group were higher than the mean scores of the control group, but the difference was not statistically significant. Yet, the authors recommended that their intervention be used because the scores of the experimental group were higher than those of the control group.

Another mistake I commonly see is a research report in which authors tell readers they had an adequate sample size and used reliable and valid instruments, but they did not achieve the expected results. Rather than discussing why they did not attain the anticipated outcome, authors state their hypothesis would have been supported if they had a larger sample and better instruments. Then they go on to discuss the findings they hoped to achieve rather than explain the true results.

**Solution:** When the differences between the experimental and the control group are not statistically significant, you are required to conclude that your intervention did not achieve the desired effect. In the discussion, you must conjecture why the intervention made no difference. The fact that one score was higher than another does not matter. Always discuss the results as they are and explain why they may have occurred.

### Salami publishing and resulting self-plagiarism

Researchers sometimes try to publish multiple research reports from one research study. When researchers are slicing their work too thin, we refer to this attempt as “salami publishing.” Salami publishing often leads to self-plagiarism because authors are repeating the same review of literature and methods section in each of the publications. An example of inappropriate slicing of the research is when researchers report the results of only six of the 20 questions in the research instrument. In a separate manuscript, they report the results of the remaining questions.

I had an author who submitted two manuscripts addressing the same research question. One manuscript reported the outcomes of a survey and the other reported the results of two open-ended questions. Rather than salami publishing, the results of the survey and open-ended questions should have been reported in one manuscript since they both addressed the same research question.

Another example of salami publishing is when researchers conduct a longitudinal study but attempt to publish a separate report for each point in time. The goal of longitudinal research is to examine trends over time, therefore, breaking the time into separate parts is not appropriate.

Solution: All the data used to answer a research question need to be reported in one manuscript. Separate manuscripts may be possible if you are reporting different research questions. If you have any questions about the risk of salami publishing, consult the editor of the intended journal.

### Conclusion

As the editor of the *Journal of Professional Nursing*, I am committed to helping authors successfully publish their work. By avoiding the pitfalls that I have discussed, I believe that authors can achieve their

goal of sharing their important work with others through publication in the journal.



### References

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Patricia Gonce Morton