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Reviewing Journal Manuscripts

An easy to follow guide for any nurse reviewing journal manuscripts for publication

By Charon A. Pierson, Editor-in-Chief
Journal of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners
Reviewing Journal Manuscripts

What is peer review?
Peer review, an important element in the production of scholarly work, is a formal system of examining scientific work prior to its publication in the literature. Refereed literature defines the boundaries of scientific knowledge and serves as the mechanism for advancing a profession. Thus, peer reviewers are essential partners with authors and journal editors in the effort to create and maintain the official record of a discipline (Dopher, 1999).

Despite this important role, reviewers might not be recognized for the work they do or the contributions they make to the production of knowledge in our respective disciplines. Even when reviewers do agree on their recommendations to authors (a very common occurrence), high quality reviews do aid journal editors in deciding if a manuscript has potential for publication. Most authors agree that peer reviews provide useful guidance for manuscript revisions (Christenbery, 2011; Shattell et al., 2010). Well-written manuscripts are both more interesting to read and may have a greater impact on the discipline.

Why become a reviewer?
Authors who have incorporated the suggestions of reviewers into their own manuscripts have greatly benefited from this service provided by other colleagues. Any author whose work has undergone peer review has an obligation to volunteer as a reviewer; to do otherwise may be seen as shirking a professional duty (Priem & Rasheed, 2006). Although reviewers may not be recognized for their work, there are many benefits to serving as a reviewer for journals, books, conferences, and grants. Reviewers can be recognized in a year-end thank you editorial or advertisement, or on the journal homepage. Top reviewers can be given special recognition and, in some cases, be invited to sit on the journal’s editorial board. Academics and professional researchers may actually receive formal “credit” within their own institutions for serving as reviewers; often this is counted as “service to the profession” in performance evaluations.

There are also less tangible rewards. Good reviewers are often seen as experts in their fields and a valuable resource to journal editors, publishers, professional organizations, and granting programs. Opportunities for other types of recognition may come from good, reliable work as a reviewer.

Who can be a peer reviewer?
Peers are colleagues or equals within one’s profession. This does not mean that only nurses can review nursing literature or that nurses cannot review health sciences research. Although all disciplines have a core body of knowledge specific to that discipline, there is often crossover in research, education, and practice arenas. Reviewers are selected based on their expertise relative to the content of the manuscript. Those who have expertise in research methodology and statistics are often called on to review a variety of disciplines, and topic experts may review in multiple disciplines.

What types of reviews are most common?
Most reviewing processes are formalized in some way. Informal reviews are more likely to occur prior to submission, although the same principles discussed in this guidebook apply to crafting a constructive informal review. Journals and other types of published works use different types of reviewing systems. Some journals use only an editorial board to review manuscripts and make decisions about publication. Publishers frequently maintain a list of reliable and expert reviewers for book and media projects. Agencies that grant money based on proposals solicit reviewers based on the particular request for proposals and the expected number of submissions. Open reviews are where the reviewers know the identities of the authors and, in some cases, the authors may know the identities of the reviewers. There are also commercial pre-submission professional reviewing services for which authors pay.

Blind reviews are of two types: neither author nor reviewer knows the identity of the other (double blind) or the reviewer knows the identity of the author but the author never knows the identity of the reviewer (single blind). Nearly all (95%) nursing journals follow the double blind process (Kainer & Fried, 2006). It is important to know whether or not the process is a blind review. If a reviewer can identify the author of the paper and the process is supposed to be double blind, the reviewer should notify the journal editor and await instructions. In some cases, the paper will be reassigned; in other cases there will be no change. There are advantages to each type of review. When reviews are double blinded, reviewers may provide a more objective critique of the manuscript (Roussin & Wilson, 2006). OPEN peer reviews have the advantage that reviewers are held publicly accountable for their comments and decisions. Reviewers may be asked to post their signed comments on a website or their comments might be published in the journal when the article is published (Wager et al., 2002). Exposure of reviewers’ comments provides an opportunity for the scholarly community to recognize the quantity and quality of work that goes into performing this valuable service and for new reviewers to examine the process of reviewing and revising manuscripts for publication. For example, Nursing Research posts selected manuscripts, reviews, and corresponding responses on its website (http://www.nursing-research-editor.com). This is an excellent site to use for teaching or self-learning to improve the quality of one’s reviews.

How to become a reviewer
Most journal editors and publishers welcome volunteers as reviewers; however, few graduates of nursing programs receive any formal education in how to review manuscripts (Christenbery, 2012). Thus, editors may be very cautious about using new reviewers until they see evidence that the reviewer can do an adequate review. Be sure to communicate with the editor about what you are comfortable reviewing, such as content areas, types of manuscripts or projects, and open or blind reviews. Whether or not a reviewer is asked to review repeatedly will depend on the quality of the first few reviews, so ask for feedback on these reviews to gauge if you are providing the kind of feedback the authors and journal editors expect. Clarify with the journal editor exactly what is expected of a reviewer. In most cases, this should be available through reviewer guidelines, author guidelines, or explicit written instructions with the invitation to review. You can also find generic checklists for reviewing some types of articles (see for example Tables 1 and 2 in Christenbery, 2012). There is also a suggested checklist for reviewers later in this guide. If your assignment is not clear, ask for more specific instructions or decline the request. Be sure to do the review in the time requested by the journal editor; because authors are eager to receive the results of their manuscript review and decision by the journal editor.

1. General guidelines for performing a review

Read for content
It is a good idea to read, or at least skim, the manuscript as soon as possible after receiving the request to review. If you have any concerns about your ability to do the review in a timely manner, notify the journal editor at once and provide a timeline within which you can accomplish the task. If you have concerns about your expertise for reviewing the content, advise the journal editor also as soon as you recognize this. It is only by reading the manuscript through once that you will be able to determine whether or not you can fulfill the obligation.

You might find the need to review some background articles to refresh memory on the topic; do your own preparation if necessary before providing feedback to the author on the specific details of the manuscript.
Read for specifics

Depending on the type of material under review, a reviewer may need to focus on one or more of the following:

- Accuracy of information
- Scientific rigor
- Originality of research
- Clarity of writing
- Appropriate tone and style
- Appropriate citation of material

A scholarly article should be based on the peer-reviewed literature of a discipline, and the ideas and research already published are referenced by authors cited and integrated into the text of the new work. In order to develop the work, the author may need to consult with experts, discovery, or argument to what has been presented previously. This is an area of some difficulty for many authors, and a well-written review is necessary. The manuscript is usually intended to be clear and free of errors.

The most common errors are use of a citation or quoting an expert on submission, as a random check, or at the suggestion of the reviewer. Unintentional plagiarism may be common in novice authors and a great deal may be perceived as a peer-reviewed literature of a discipline; therefore, the ideas and arguments are developed in an orderly fashion. The manuscript must be recognized as such. For example, a reviewer might comment on the title page of a journal that contains a statement that was submitted at different dates. Electronic references are for Biomedical Publication” at http://www.icmje.org. Not all reviewers awareness of copyright laws; however, ignorance of the law does not protect authors to assist them in improving the manuscript. This article is a “synthesized literature review” of the use of test messaging to reduce fruit and vegetable consumption. The use of innovative technologies in managing these complex diseases is often unclear and varies depending on the setting and I comment on the provision of the reviewer.

Provide appropriate and helpful feedback

Use a reviewer will be the “critique” of the manuscript for answer specific questions in the completion of a review. There are many guidelines for how to provide feedback and typically reviewers should follow the format or guidelines for the journal to which the manuscript was submitted. The following general suggestions are a reasonable way to review a manuscript.

Provide positive feedback first. Authors are more receptive to making revisions when the review process is fair; one element of fairness is a balance of negative and positive comments (Shapiro & Sitkin, 2006). Provide general suggestions about content, organization, and fit with the project. General suggestions for improvement help to organize the reviewer to provide a framework for the more specific suggestions to follow. Comment also on the appropriateness of the references (recent, primary, need for comprehensive).

Provide specific comments about need for clarification of terms, sentences, sections, and tables

- Too much use of jargon
- Tables are redundant
- What are you trying to say here?
- This article is well-written and the topic of great significance given the recent controversies and debates on this topic in the literature. The figures and charts add to the clarity of the manuscript and the argument. This manuscript is well-organized and written in a clear and concise manner.

Provide constructive feedback

- This article does not need major revision
- This article is confusing

Provide specific areas for feedback

- Suggested Areas for Feedback
- Unhelpful Comments
- Constructive Comments

Examples are from several different reviews and reviewers and do not illustrate a complete review of a single manuscript.

A COI could arise if an author is paid by a commercial entity to write the article, do the research, or compile the review. If a third party, such as a healthcare communications company, writes an article that is submitted to a biomedical journal, the COI is obvious. This may include educational grants, but journal editors, reviewers, and potential readers must be given all information to decide for themselves if any sponsorship has influenced the manuscript. The Council of Science Editors (网络: https://www.councilscienceeditors.org) of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) (http://www.icmje.org). Not all reviewers are aware of copyright laws; however, ignorance of the law does not protect authors to assist them in improving the manuscript. This article is a “synthesized literature review” of the use of test messaging to reduce fruit and vegetable consumption. The use of innovative technologies in managing these complex diseases is often unclear and varies depending on the setting and I comment on the provision of the reviewer.

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Examples are from several different reviews and reviewers and do not illustrate a complete review of a single manuscript.

A COI could arise if an author is paid by a commercial entity to write the article, do the research, or compile the review. If a third party, such as a healthcare communications company, writes an article that is submitted to a biomedical journal, the COI is obvious. This may include educational grants, but journal editors, reviewers, and potential readers must be given all information to decide for themselves if any sponsorship has influenced the manuscript. The Council of Science Editors (网络: https://www.councilscienceeditors.org) of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) (http://www.icmje.org). Not all reviewers are aware of copyright laws; however, ignorance of the law does not protect authors to assist them in improving the manuscript. This article is a “synthesized literature review” of the use of test messaging to reduce fruit and vegetable consumption. The use of innovative technologies in managing these complex diseases is often unclear and varies depending on the setting and I comment on the provision of the reviewer.

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- Too much use of jargon
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- This article is well-written and the topic of great significance given the recent controversies and debates on this topic in the literature. The figures and charts add to the clarity of the manuscript and the argument. This manuscript is well-organized and written in a clear and concise manner.
are also specialty IRBs that may have jurisdiction over any research or publication of clinical information. It is important to follow all relevant ethical guidelines for the country in which the research is conducted. An additional resource for ethics in publishing is the Best Practice Guidelines on Publication Ethics: A Publisher’s Perspective (Grali et al., 2014).

2. Basic principles to which peer reviewers should adhere

The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) has published Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers (Hames, 2013). These guidelines provide a basic standard for the ethical handling of the peer review process.

Peer reviewers should:

• only agree to review manuscripts for which they have the subject expertise required to carry out a proper assessment and which they can assess in a timely manner
• respect the confidentiality of peer review and not reveal any details of a manuscript or its review, during or after the peer review process
• not use information obtained during the peer review process for their own or any other person’s or organization’s advantage, or to disadvantage or discredit others
• declare all potential conflicting interests, seeking advice from the journal editor or the journal’s ethics committee if in doubt
• not allow their reviews to be influenced by the origins of a manuscript, by the nationality, religious or political beliefs, gender or other characteristics of the authors, or by commercial considerations
• be objective and constructive in their reviews, refraining from being hostile or inflammatory and from making libellous or derogatory personal comments
• acknowledge that peer review is largely a reciprocal endeavour and undertake to carry out their fair share of reviewing and in a timely manner
• provide journals with personal and professional information that is accurate and a true representation of their expertise
• recognize that impersonation of another individual during the review process is considered serious misconduct

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3. Organizing comments for your review

Table 2 can be used to structure a review for those desiring a more structured way to present information. The Essential Items and Parameters for Decision provide some specific guidance for comments related to a manuscript. For reviews submitted via online systems, it is important to follow all relevant ethical guidelines for the country in which the research is conducted. An additional resource for ethics in publishing is the Best Practice Guidelines on Publication Ethics: A Publisher’s Perspective (Grali et al., 2014).

4. Reviewing Clinical Manuscripts

In addition to the general reviewing guidelines in Table 2, the following information is provided to remember when reviewing a clinical manuscript:

• fit with the journal’s mission and target audience. A clinically focused manuscript is an appropriate way to illustrate the application of research-based evidence. The target audience for a clinical article is a professional who needs the latest research to make sound decisions for practice.
• manuscript should reflect that focus by carefully citing selected, recent, relevant studies; organize the content around a clinical problem rather than a research question; provide diagrams or tables useful for clinical situations; and speak directly to the clinician in a straightforward style. Discussion should reflect a synthesis of the findings and lead to new understanding of clinical problems and therapies (Christenberry, 2011).
• Timelessness and uniqueness of the manuscript. Clinical practitioners have a need for current information delivered in a way that is appealing to read. The writing style must be easy to understand and well organized with headings so that a busy clinician can skim over areas of less importance or interest.
• Application to professional practice. The section on implications for practice should be a strong focus of the manuscript. Details about how the research or intervention could be implemented must be clear. The inclusion of clinically applicable screening tools and of patient education or consumer-friendly internet sources where patients can find valid and useful information are valuable elements that reviewers frequently find lacking.
• Elements of case study (if included) are relevant. Case studies can be a useful way to introduce material that is directly related to clinical issues. A busy clinician does not have time to read an exhaustive study; therefore, only essential elements should be presented. Anything that can be presented in figure or table format (i.e., laboratory values, chronology of key events, photographs of a lesion, etc.) will help fill in detail without creating extra verbiage. The most important point to clarify in a review is whether or not this is a real patient and if so, that the patient or family is not identifiable. If this is not clearly stated in the manuscript, it should be queried by the reviewers or the journal editor.

5. Reviewing Research Manuscripts

In addition to the general guidelines on reviewing a manuscript, a useful resource for specific elements of research manuscripts can be found at the Equator Network (http://www.equator-network.org/reporting-guidelines). Equator is the acronym for Enhancing the QUAlity and Transparency Of Health Research. Reviewers can search for appropriate checklists for various types of research, such as randomized trials (CONSORT), observational studies (STROBE), qualitative research (SRQR), diagnostic/ prognostic studies (STARD), quality improvement studies (SQUIRE), economic evaluations (CHEERS), and study protocols (PRISMA). There are many other variations on each of those categories, and most provide a checklist of key elements for inclusion in a study. These are useful for authors during the manuscript preparation stage, but equally useful for reviewers who need a reminder of what must be included in a good report of research.

Theoretical grounding of the research question and the methodology. Justification for conducting a study derives from historical context (Schroter et al., 2008). Research that is not grounded in the theory base of the discipline or field to advance the profession is not enough to describe precisely what was found in the research; it is essential to describe why it was found and how the findings relate to other research in the field (Baugh et al., 2006; Schroter et al., 2008). Appropriateness of the methodology and data analysis. Anyone reviewing a quantitative research manuscript should have a basic knowledge of research methods and statistics in order to interpret the authors’ findings and discussion. Some journals, however, will request specific expertise in data analysis to review research manuscripts. In

Table 2: Sample Review Checklist

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<tr>
<th>Essential Item</th>
<th>Parameters for Decision</th>
<th>Reviewer Comments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is the content (research or review) original and of sufficient importance to enhance in a meaningful way?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is this manuscript appropriate for this journal?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is the current state of knowledge about the topic accurately represented? If not, what specific areas are missing?</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What specific question or gap in knowledge does this research/review address?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Were the methods adequately described and was the method appropriate to answer the question posed?</td>
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<tr>
<td>For reviews, was the method for article retrieval systematic and was the evidence rated in a standard manner? Systematic reviews are preferred as the most unbiased way to answer clinical questions so that negative or conflicting results are not dismissed. The preferred method for reporting systematic reviews are the PRISMA guidelines (<a href="http://www.prisma-statement.org">http://www.prisma-statement.org</a>). Another appropriate format is that used by the Joanna Briggs Institute (<a href="http://www.jbigriggs.org">http://www.jbigriggs.org</a>). If the review is biased, this is a fatal flaw and the manuscript should be rejected.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>For research, were the design, sample selection, methods, and analysis plan appropriate to answer the research question? A basic understanding of methods and analysis is helpful here, but common sense can go a long way. Sometimes the research is well designed but not well written; using appropriate reporting guidelines such as those found at the Equator Network (<a href="http://www.equator-network.org">http://www.equator-network.org</a>) can support the writing process. If the research does not report an appropriate design, methodology, sample selection, or analysis, this is a fatal flaw and the manuscript should be rejected.</td>
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<tr>
<td>For quality improvement reports (or practice improvement projects), is the methodology clearly differentiated from research? The project should be novel enough to disseminate and the conclusions must not exceed the scope of the project or the findings. If the author confused research and quality improvement methods, this is a fatal flaw and the manuscript should be rejected.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Were ethical procedures followed?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research must be approved by the appropriate research oversight committee of the country in which the research was conducted. Human and animal subjects must always be protected from harm. The use of protected data, even if de-identified, requires permission of the appropriate responsible parties. A statement must be included in the methods section about research approval, even if the research was considered exempt. Any use of cadaver in research or education projects requires a statement that the cadaver lab is certified and follows ethical guidelines for the handling of human remains.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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Were ethical procedures followed? Research must be approved by the appropriate research oversight committee of the country in which the research was conducted. Human and animal subjects must always be protected from harm. The use of protected data, even if de-identified, requires permission of the appropriate responsible parties. A statement must be included in the methods section about research approval, even if the research was considered exempt. Any use of cadaver in research or education projects requires a statement that the cadaver lab is certified and follows ethical guidelines for the handling of human remains.
outliers, missing data). A reviewer who is not comfortable making these decisions and how the measuring was done. Common errors (Schroter et al., 2008) are currently several journals that publish meta-synthesis articles, and users of scientific literature have been known to quote them when they do not change once assigned to an article. Spot check a few references or (Digital Object Identifiers) to identify references is not only appropriate but also often the only way to verify methodological rigor. The manuscript must contain some of the data. In qualitative research, the analysis section may be in qualitative as in quantitative studies. The analysis section may be compromised if the data is not presented in a clear and coherent manner. To verify methodological rigor, the manuscript must contain some of the data. Data in qualitative research are quotes from participants, documents, or other media. Quotes from interviews or focus groups must be backed by the data, but they should not go beyond the data in their interpretations of the findings or the conclusions. The analysis section is an important tool in the development of the best evidence for future research. The results section of a qualitative methodology should be linked back to previous work. When this discussion is strong, the reader will have a clear picture of the depth and breadth of the research as well as what further questions remain.

Limitations addressed. All research is flawed to some degree and all researchers should be aware of these limitations of their work. These limitations should be addressed in a systematic fashion so that readers can determine if the findings are appropriate. A good summary of the limitations gives reviewers additional information about the validity and the reliability of the methods. Methodological rigor in qualitative analysis is clearly addressed. A well-defined, systematic approach to the data analysis is as essential in qualitative as in quantitative studies. The analysis section must be long enough for the reader to make sense of the manuscript. This is one of the strengths of a qualitative study, but the author often will require mentoring in writing, which is a helpful way to go. A manuscript that reports a systematic review of the literature answers the question that the reader can understand how data were collected and analyzed and to make some decisions about how the findings fit the current literature. To verify methodological rigor, the manuscript must contain some of the data. In qualitative research are quotes from participants, documents, or other media. Quotes from interviews or focus groups must be backed by the data, but they should not go beyond the data in their interpretations of the findings or the conclusions. The analysis section is an important tool in the development of the best evidence for future research. The results section of a qualitative methodology should be linked back to previous work. When this discussion is strong, the reader will have a clear picture of the depth and breadth of the research as well as what further questions remain.

6. Reviewing Systematic Literature Review Manuscripts

A manuscript that reports a systematic review of the literature answers the question that the reader can understand how data were collected and analyzed and to make some decisions about how the findings fit the current literature. To verify methodological rigor, the manuscript must contain some of the data. In qualitative research are quotes from participants, documents, or other media. Quotes from interviews or focus groups must be backed by the data, but they should not go beyond the data in their interpretations of the findings or the conclusions. The analysis section is an important tool in the development of the best evidence for future research. The results section of a qualitative methodology should be linked back to previous work. When this discussion is strong, the reader will have a clear picture of the depth and breadth of the research as well as what further questions remain.

7. Checking References

As many as one third of references in a typical journal may contain errors (Ze Dong, 2006). Every citation in the text should have a corresponding reference in the reference list. The reference list should be kept in alphabetical order by the last name of the author, if one is available. If there is no author, use the title of the article. For electronic references, use the date the article was published. For references that are not published, use the date the article was submitted or accepted. To verify methodological rigor, the manuscript must contain some of the data. Data in qualitative research are quotes from participants, documents, or other media. Quotes from interviews or focus groups must be backed by the data, but they should not go beyond the data in their interpretations of the findings or the conclusions. The analysis section is an important tool in the development of the best evidence for future research. The results section of a qualitative methodology should be linked back to previous work. When this discussion is strong, the reader will have a clear picture of the depth and breadth of the research as well as what further questions remain.

Findings add new information to the state of the discipline. A good systematic review is not just a matter of what is already known; rather, it should be a look at a new complex problem. The goal is to synthesize findings, and the conclusion criteria must be clearly provided in the evidence. Thoroughness in the search demands a search of foreign language literature, “grey literature” (i.e., theses, unread works published in conferences or other sources), and personal communication with experts in the field (Greenhalgh, 1997b). It is important to verify methodological rigor. The manuscript should be readable and comprehensible. A good summary of the limitations gives reviewers additional information about the validity and the reliability of the methods. Methodological rigor in qualitative analysis is clearly addressed. A well-defined, systematic approach to the data analysis is as essential in qualitative as in quantitative studies. The analysis section must be long enough for the reader to make sense of the manuscript. This is one of the strengths of a qualitative study, but the author often will require mentoring in writing, which is a helpful way to go. A manuscript that reports a systematic review of the literature answers the question that the reader can understand how data were collected and analyzed and to make some decisions about how the findings fit the current literature. To verify methodological rigor, the manuscript must contain some of the data. In qualitative research are quotes from participants, documents, or other media. Quotes from interviews or focus groups must be backed by the data, but they should not go beyond the data in their interpretations of the findings or the conclusions. The analysis section is an important tool in the development of the best evidence for future research. The results section of a qualitative methodology should be linked back to previous work. When this discussion is strong, the reader will have a clear picture of the depth and breadth of the research as well as what further questions remain.

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8. Style, Grammar, and Punctuation

In some journals, issues of style, grammar, and punctuation will be corrected by copy editors. If reviewers are not expected to make specific recommendations about grammar and spelling errors, it is acceptable to make a general comment on these problems, such as, “There are many grammatical errors that interfere with the flow of the manuscript and would potentially affect a reader’s understanding of your work.” In cases where the journal editor relies on the authors to correct such errors, it is important that reviewers be specific about corrections needed for grammar, syntax, and spelling.

Abbreviations and jargon are always potential causes of misunderstanding and are to be avoided if possible. It is always best to assume that the reader will not be familiar with the abbreviation or jargon and to provide them in a clear manner. The journal should also define any abbreviations or jargon used in the manuscript. Reviewers may also be located in another country, so be specific when defining terms and put them into a wider context as appropriate. When English is not the first language of the author, a reviewer should be specific when defining terms and put them into a wider context as appropriate.

References


Only available to member institutions

Keahey, M. & Freda, M. (2005). Nurse editors’ perspectives on their ability to detect, and does training improve

References...
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Face-to-face is still the best way to share the importance of your work. Think about simple messages to promote your article at your next conference – whether networking with colleagues, or presenting formally.

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