4-Step Process for Selecting a Journal for your Manuscript

Title Page

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Introduction

Selecting the most appropriate journal for a manuscript can be challenging. Many authors, particularly graduate students and others new to publishing, struggle to find and select a journal that is both a good fit for their article and accessible to their target audience (Roush, 2017). Selecting a journal that is not a good fit can waste precious time for both the author and the journal’s editorial team.

When selecting a journal, authors should consider whether it is peer-reviewed, intended or target audience, type of manuscripts published (e.g., literature review, research study, quality improvement), copyright and publishing models (subscription or open access), scope, indexing (can the journal be found through electronic databases), and the journal’s impact (Griffiths & Norman, 2016; Kearney, 2015; Roush, 2017). Authors must also be aware of copyright laws and publishing models so they can understand their rights and make informed decisions about their publications. They also need to understand the role institutional repositories play in making their article accessible to a wider audience.

This article orients authors to the publishing environment, familiarizes them with some important, yet often misunderstood publishing concepts and practices, and, through the use of a case study, demonstrates how an author can use all of the tools at their disposal to identify and select the best journal for their manuscript. Along with the case study, a 4-Step Process Form: Identifying an Appropriate Journal for your Manuscript is provided. See appendix for a blank copy of the form for readers to replicate the 4 step process for their own search for the most appropriate journal.

Case Study

Kathy is a nurse manager on an intensive care unit in a large academic teaching hospital that is applying for magnet status. She is also pursuing her doctor of nursing practice degree. She is interested in publishing an article about her staff’s recent application of evidence-based practice interventions that resulted in a decrease in urinary tract infections.

Kathy is unsure of the best journal for her article. She follows the 4-step process outlined in this manuscript to help her select the most appropriate journal. These 4 steps are described below.

Step 1. Identify 2 concepts and the setting for your topic.

Kathy’s first step in searching for an appropriate journal is to define the clinical setting and the main concepts in her article. Kathy uses a form 4-Step Process: Identifying the Appropriate Journal for your Manuscript (see Appendix A for a Blank copy) to organize her thoughts.
Urinary Tract Infections | Evidence-Based | Intensive Care

**Step 2. Use the main concepts and setting you identified in Step 1 to find 3 prospective journals for your manuscript.**

Kathy uses the information she identified in Step 1 to help select three prospective journals that have published articles on this topic. She can either conduct a search of: (a) the Journal/Author Name Estimator (JANE) website (found at http://jane.biosemantics.org/) or (b) the Cumulative Index of Nursing and Allied Health (CINAHL) database for journals. Kathy has free access to JANE as it is an unrestricted website but she only has access to CINAHL because her organization’s library pays for the subscription. While both JANE and CINAHL are used in this case study, one may be sufficient for finding an appropriate journal.

A. **Search the JANE website for journals that have published articles on this topic**

Kathy uses the JANE website, found at http://jane.biosemantics.org/ to identify potential journals. JANE is a freely available website that uses either sample text, for instance the title and abstract of a manuscript, or keywords, to suggest journals that have published similar articles (Schuemie & Kors, 2008). From the JANE website, Kathy can either enter the title and abstract of her manuscript, or click on “keyword” and enter the same keywords she used in her CINAHL search. JANE provides Kathy with a few dozen journal titles, lists whether or not they are indexed in Medline (see below for more information on indexing); displays the “article influence,” a metric that tells Kathy how frequently an article has been cited in the last 5 years; and lists whether or not the article is Open Access (see below for more information on open access publishing).

B. **Search the CINAHL database for journals that have published articles on this topic**

Kathy has access to CINAHL through her library’s website. She enters the following search in CINAHL, making sure to keep her search terms general and not too specific. She is looking for journals that publish articles on similar themes, such as infection control or evidence-based practice, in settings similar to intensive care units.

| Urinary tract infections AND evidence based AND intensive care |

Kathy is not necessarily interested in the individual articles that make up her search results, what she wants to do instead is review the publications that her search results come from. In CINAHL, along the left-hand sidebar, there is a box that says “Publication.” When Kathy expands this section, she can see a list of the journals that published the articles in her search results. Kathy can limit her search results to articles published in any of these journals by clicking the checkbox to the left of the journal title. Kathy reviews these journals and makes a list of the most promising journals—those that publish articles on similar themes.

**Step 3. List top 3 journals found in JANE or CINAHL database search.**
Kathy now has a list of journals that publish research related to her topic of interest. Here are the top 3 journals from her search:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Journal Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>American Journal of Infection Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Critical Care Nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>AACN Advanced Critical Care</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Step 4. Use each journal’s website to evaluate the list of three journals to determine the most appropriate journal for your manuscript.

It is only appropriate for Kathy to submit her manuscript to one journal at a time. Kathy now needs to narrow this list down to the journal that is: a. the best match for her manuscript and b. will reach her intended audience of intensive care nurses. As Kathy make her final selection of journals, she should consider whether each journal is peer reviewed, the audience of the journal, type of manuscripts accepted by the journal, indexing (can the journal be found through electronic databases) and publishing model used by the journal. She evaluates each journal using the form provided (see appendix X).

A. Peer Review

Kathy wants to publish in a peer-reviewed journal. Kathy searches for the journal website and clicks on the “About the journal” page, which should tell her if it is a peer-reviewed journal.

A peer reviewed journal uses a blinded quality control process whereby experts in the field review submitted articles. They evaluate the manuscript for appropriateness for the journal, an up to date literature review, methodology, whether it is a substantive contribution to existing evidence, and whether there is sufficient information to help the reader apply information to practice.

B. Audience

Kathy needs to identify the intended or target audience for each of the journals on her list. There are a few ways she can do this:

One way to identify intended audience is to enter the title of the journal into Google or another internet search engine and visit the journal’s website, specifically the “about this journal” section. Another option is to use the International Academy of Nursing Editors’ Journal Directory. The International Academy of Nursing Editors (INANE) compile and maintain an alphabetically organized journal directory. The Journal Directory includes a brief description of the journal which will help Kathy get an idea of the journal’s intended audience and its frequency of publication. The INANE Journal Directory also includes the name of the journal, the editor, the publisher, professional association, and a link to the journal’s author guidelines.

Generally, authors have an audience in mind when writing—be it nursing students, nurse educators, nurses with a particular specialty, etc. Likewise, journals have a target audience and a
specific scope. Information about the scope of the journal and the target audience can be found on the journal’s website, generally in the “About” section.

C. Type of manuscript

Kathy will be able to use the author guidelines to make sure that the journal publishes her type of manuscript (lit review, primary study, etc.) and make sure her manuscript is formatted appropriately for the publication.

Scope is not only limited to topic, it is also important to review the types of papers a journal publishes. For example, if Kathy authored an opinion piece, and the journal she is interested in only publishes research studies, Kathy would know her manuscript is not a good match for that journal. A paper that is either outside the topical scope of a journal, not written for the journal’s target audience, or is a type of paper that the journal does not publish is more likely to be rejected (Griffiths & Norman, 2016; Kearney, 2015).

D. Copyright and Publishing Models

Kathy narrowed her list of journals to three that might be appropriate for her topic. In reading about each one, she found that one is an open access journal and the other is a traditional subscription based journal. The different publishing models affect copyright, access, and author processing fees. Kathy consults with her librarian to learn about copyright laws and publishing models. Here is what Kathy learns:

Copyright law.

Kathy should familiarize herself with copyright law, intellectual property rights, and publishing models.

To paraphrase the U.S. Copyright Law Preamble, copyright exists to promote the progress of the arts and sciences by securing for authors and inventors the exclusive rights to their writings and discoveries (U.S. Const., art. I, § 8, cl. 8). Essentially, Copyright Law was put in place as a way to ensure authors, artists, and inventors have control of their work once it is in “tangible medium of expression,” i.e. written down or recorded (Copyright Law of 1976, 2016). While this protection was put in place to protect authors and artists, it is common for scholarly journals to require authors to transfer copyright to the journal’s publisher. Transferring copyright to the publisher means the author no longer owns the work, and is no longer able to post the work to their personal website; widely share their publication; permit others to use their work; create derivative works, such as a translation; or re-publish their work in a different format, from an article to a book chapter, for instance. Understanding that the transfer of copyright to the publisher is the norm in academic publishing and may be contrary to the interests of the author is essential for those attempting to gain an understanding of the scholarly publishing ecosystem.

Publishing models.
**Traditional subscription-based journals.** Subscription based journals use a traditional publishing model. In this model, an author writes a manuscript, submits that manuscript to a journal, and, if the journal is peer reviewed, the manuscript goes through the peer review process. If the article is accepted for publication, the author is asked by the publisher to sign a contract. Generally, this contract asks the author to sign over their copyright and in effect grants the publisher sole ownership of the manuscript. The manuscript, now a published article, is only available to subscribers of the journal. The author or the author’s institution must pay subscription fees to access the publication.

**Open access journals.** Open access content, in contrast to subscription based content, is scholarly literature made free of charge and immediately available in the digital environment, and without many of the use restrictions one finds in traditionally published content (SPARC). Publishing open access can improve the accessibility, reach and impact of scholarly literature. A study found that open access articles, as compared to articles published in subscription based journals, had between 30 and 200% more citations, depending on discipline (Swan & Chan, 2010).

There are various ways of making a publication open access. One way is by publishing in a strictly open access (OA) publication. This is commonly referred to as Direct OA. Under the Direct OA model, the content published by the journal is freely available online, while the author or the author’s institution pays the fees that cover the costs associated with publishing and distribution, commonly referred to as author processing fees. This method should be contrasted with traditional publishing in which the reader of the article or the reader’s institution (generally the institution’s library), supports the cost of publication by subscribing to the publication and paying subscription fees.

Open access publications improve access to information, and are particularly important in clinical settings where access to high quality information can be vital to patient care. However, an unfortunate side effect of the open access movement is the rise in the number of scam emails received by authors, researchers, and academics from what are commonly called predatory publishers. Email scams from predatory publishers have the potential to cause confusion and frustration among authors. However, the existence of such scams should not malign the entire open access movement, as there are many reputable, trustworthy open access publishers and publications.

**Traditional journals that offer open access options.** In addition to Direct OA, there is also Delayed OA and Hybrid OA. When an article is published as Delayed OA articles are embargoed, meaning the most recently published articles are available only to paid subscribers, and then after a delay the content is made fully available. Hybrid OA is when an author publishes in a traditional, subscription based journal and then pays an additional author processing charge (APC) to make their article open access. In this model, the publisher makes money from both subscribers as well as from authors who chose to pay APCs.

**Repositories.** Another way of making an article open access is through the use of repositories. Repositories are digital services that collect, preserve and make available scholarly and artistic content. Versions of articles can be archived in a digital repository. Digital
repositories are generally either discipline specific, for example the Virginia Henderson Global Nursing e-Repository, or associated with an institution or university. One of the primary benefits of achieving open access through archiving is that it is compatible with traditional publishing. An author can publish in the journal of their choice, and then upload a version of their article to an institutional repository or discipline specific repository, where it will be available to anyone with an internet connection.

As previously discussed, when an article is accepted for publication in a traditional journal the author is asked to sign a contract with the publishers. The contract generally transfers copyright (ownership) from the author to the publisher, and it limits the author’s ability to broadly distribute their work, which can preclude or delay the uploading of the article to a repository. However, authors do have options when it comes to retaining some of their rights. One option is negotiating the contract the publishers ask the author to sign. If the author successfully negotiates their contract with the publisher, they can retain some or all rights to distribute their article, including putting a version of the article in a repository. This will ensure that their work is widely distributed and has the most significant impact possible; something that is good for both the author and the publisher.

Another option that allows authors to put a version of their work in a repository is an institutional or funding mandate. Many funders, such as the National Institute of Health, the Gates Foundation, and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), to name just a few, have open access mandates, which means authors are required to place a version of their publications and/or data into a repository. Likewise, mandates at educational institutions are becoming increasingly common (Sterman, 2017). Researchers, faculty members, and authors at Harvard, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of California, and Oregon State University, just to name a few, have all adopted institutional open access mandates (Registry of Open Access Policies, https://roarmap.eprints.org/) These mandates are, in technical terms, non-exclusive license agreements. That means that the funder or the institution has permission (license) to include the work in a repository, but the author, not the institution retains ownership of the work itself. The license is non-exclusive, so the author is free to publish the work elsewhere, including in a scholarly journal of their choice.

E. **Other things to Consider when selecting a journal**: indexing, journal impact factors, and affiliations with professional organizations,

**Indexing in databases.**

*Kathy should determine whether each of the 3 journals on her list are indexed in PubMed and CINAHL.*

Publishing in an appropriate journal is important for reaching a target audience, but authors also need to ensure that the journal is indexed by the primary scholarly databases used in their field. In nursing and health sciences, two of the most widely used databases are PubMed and the Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature, more commonly referred to as CINAHL. Medline, a subset of PubMed, consists of a vetted collection of high quality
journals. A journal that is included in Medline or CINAHL has been evaluated for quality and contains articles that are easier for readers to find, as compared to non-indexed journals. Indexing information is commonly found on the journal’s website in the “About this Journal” section.

**Journal impact factors and other metrics.** Those publishing because of tenure and promotion imperatives are frequently urged to publish in “high quality” publications. But what determines quality in a journal? One commonly used measure is the journal’s impact factor, a measurement of the yearly average frequency of citations to articles published in that journal. While impact factor is widely used, and regarded as the single most important measurement of journal quality, it is also highly problematic and easily exploitable (Chorus & Waltman 2016). Impact factors vary across disciplines, with journals from younger scholarly disciplines with smaller pools of researchers (like nursing) having, on average, lower impact factors than disciplines with larger pools of more established researchers (Caceres, et al. 2017). Impact factors can also be manipulated by either decreasing the denominator or increasing the numerator in the equation. The denominator can be decreased through the publication of excessive numbers of non-citable articles. The numerator can be increased through the publication of editorials and review articles that include high numbers of citations from that journal, and through coercive citation (Willhite 2012, PLOS Editors 2006, Chorus & Waltman 2016). Because of the problems associated with impact factors, they should not be the sole metric authors use to determine the quality of a publication. Authors should seek out publications that share their article’s intended audience and are widely and appropriately indexed, as previously discussed.

**Affiliation with a professional organization.** Some journals are published by professional associations and share that association’s scope and audience (Kearney, 2015). For instance, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing publishes the Journal of Professional Nursing, the Hospice and Palliative Nurses Association publishes the Journal of Hospice and Palliative Nursing, and the Emergency Nurses Association publishes the Journal of Emergency Nursing. Publishing in a journal that is affiliated with a trusted professional organization is a good way of ensuring both quality of the journal and fit with the audience and theme.

**Step 5. Use the findings in the table to determine the best journal for your manuscript.** The journal that is peer reviewed, matches manuscript audience and article type, and operates under a copyright/publishing model that is congruent with the author’s needs and interests should be prioritized.

**Conclusion**

The authors have described a 4-step process to make journal selection easier. This narrative is accompanied by a case study which allows the reader to see the application of the 4 step-process. The narrative and form were refined through use and feedback from doctoral nursing students. A blank 4-Step Process Form has been included to allow the reader to apply what they learn in this manuscript to selecting the most appropriate journal for their own manuscript. This resource can be used by an individual nurse wanting to publish, as a teaching tool for faculty to use with graduate nursing students, or for academic leaders mentoring new faculty.
Finding a journal that is a good fit with a manuscript is a very important part of the publishing process but it can be challenging. This is especially true for the author new to publishing or publishing on a new topic. Finding appropriate journals does not have to be a difficult or mysterious process. Making the process of journal selection more efficient may lead to more successful authors with less frustration and wasted time by authors and publishers.

Acknowledgements:

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References


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U.S. Const., art. I, § 8, cl. 8

Step 1. Identify 2 concepts and the setting for your topic.
Identify the main concepts and the setting for your topic. Keep the description of your concepts brief and general, and when describing your setting, do not use acronyms, i.e. use “intensive care” instead of ICU.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept One</th>
<th>Concept Two</th>
<th>Setting</th>
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</table>

Step 2. Use the main concepts and setting you identified in Step 1 to find 3 prospective journals for your manuscript.
List your final search terms here:

A. This method uses the Journal/Author Name Estimator (JANE) at [http://jane.biosemantics.org/](http://jane.biosemantics.org/) (JANE) website [available to everyone] to identify prospective journal titles. From the JANE homepage, select the Keyword search option and enter your concept terms and setting.

-OR-

B. This method uses the CINAHL database which is available to those with access through your institution’s library. Search in the CINAHL database for journals that have published on this topic by putting main concepts and setting in the search fields and click “Search.” From the search results page, in the left hand side bar, select the box “Publications” box to view the journals that the search results came from.

**Hint:** If JANE or CINAHL suggest publications that are not nursing focused, try adding the term “nursing” to your search.

Step 3. List top 3 journals found in JANE website or CINAHL database search.

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<td>3</td>
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</table>

Step 4. Use each journal’s website to evaluate the list of 3 journals to determine the most appropriate journal for your manuscript.
This table will walk you through evaluating your list of three journals. Much of this information can be found on the journal’s website. Enter the title of the journal into Google or another search engine to find the journal’s website. Once on the website, look for the “about this journal” section, or the “for authors” section.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Peer Reviewed (Yes/No)</th>
<th>Journal #1</th>
<th>Journal #2</th>
<th>Journal #3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B. Audience</td>
<td>Journal #1</td>
<td>Journal #2</td>
<td>Journal #3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Who is the intended/target audience of your manuscript?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Who is the audience for each journal?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Does your intended audience match the audience of the journal? (Yes/No) If no, do not proceed with that journal.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C. Type of Manuscript</td>
<td>Journal #1</td>
<td>Journal #2</td>
<td>Journal #3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. What type of manuscript are you publishing? (e.g. literature review, research study, quality improvement)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Does each journal publish the type of manuscript you want to publish? Yes/No</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Copyright and Publishing Models</td>
<td>Journal #1</td>
<td>Journal #2</td>
<td>Journal #3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Subscription or open access?

2. If open access, do you have financial support to pay author processing fees? (Yes/No)

E. Other things to consider: indexing in databases, journal impact factors and other metrics, affiliation with a professional organization

Step 5. Use the findings in the table to determine the best journal for your manuscript. The journal that is peer reviewed, matches manuscript audience and article type, and operates under a copyright/publishing model that is congruent with the author’s needs and interests should be prioritized.