

LEADERSHIP & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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The Bane of Accurate Referencing: How to Achieve “Perfection”

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The standards of professional performance for oncology nursing practice and advanced oncology nursing practice (Brant & Wickham, 2004; Jacobs, 2003) note the importance of leadership. Oncology nurses serve, in differing capacities, as leaders, role models, and mentors for the development of self, peers, and colleagues to ready the profession for an evolving future. As professional nurses, one way to share our knowledge and skills is through writing. Although checking references perhaps is not the most enjoyable part of the writing process, professional nurse authors have a responsibility to do so for accuracy and to ensure appropriate recognition of the work of others through quotation. The process of referencing and citing other people's work includes three important realms: accuracy of the information being cited, correctness of the information in references, and, lastly, formatting citations correctly according to journal standards (Carroll-Johnson, 2004).

According to the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (American Psychological Association, 2001), “Authors are responsible for all information in their reference lists. Accurately prepared references help establish your credibility as a careful writer. An inaccurate or incomplete reference ‘will stand in print as an annoyance to future investigators and as a monument to the writer’s carelessness’ (Bruner, 1942, p. 68)” (p. 216). Although copy editors and reviewers also work to achieve accuracy in published manuscripts, the ultimate responsibility rests with authors.

Why Use References?

An article contains references for many reasons. They assist an author in supporting and expanding the work or information presented in the article and also serve to give credit to the original work of others. They help readers locate more detailed information. Accurate references are crucial for

readers seeking fast and easy access to the information cited. Those that contain errors can delay or even prevent retrieval. The completeness of references also speaks volumes about how thorough and current a writer's literature search was, assisting readers in evaluating the caliber of the article. Inaccurate and incomplete references indicate carelessness and can damage a writer's and journal's credibility. Ultimately, a significant percentage of reference errors in articles can undermine the clinical and research nursing literature (De Jong, 2004; Kirchhoff, 1995; Schulmeister, 1998). Additionally, inaccurate references often are taken as accurate by future authors, so inaccuracies are perpetuated. Unfortunately, a startling percentage of authors submit reference lists with minor (those that do not prevent retrieval) and major (those that prevent retrieval) errors (Kirchhoff; Oncology Nursing Society [ONS], 2005).

Error Rates in References in the *Oncology Nursing Forum*

In an effort to reduce the number of incorrect references, the *Oncology Nursing Forum* (ONF) began an initiative in 2005. The journal's staff now verify every reference in every article. The January issue's 13 articles had a total of 495 references, 119 (24%) of which had content-related errors such as misspelled author names, incorrect titles, incorrect or missing volume and issue numbers, incorrect initials, incorrect year, incorrect page numbers, and failure to list references cited in the text (ONS, 2005). In the March issue, 15 articles had 597 references, 151 of which had content-related errors, for a 25% error rate. The May issue saw a drop in the error rate: Of 748 references in 15 articles, 135 had content-related mistakes, for an 18% error rate. Authors were instructed to investigate discrepancies, and all of the errors were corrected before the issues were printed.

This action provided background data to track the types of errors that occur in articles

submitted to ONF, as well as their frequency. Authors with manuscripts accepted for publication in the May 2005 issue (and thereafter) receive a letter informing them of the opportunity to check their references for accuracy. Any manuscript found to contain more than a 5% error rate in the reference list at the time of copy editing will be removed from the production schedule. Following correction of the errors, the manuscript can be rescheduled for production (Carroll-Johnson, 2004).

ONF's finding of a 24% error rate is lower than that found in the past in other healthcare literature. A decade ago, a study of nursing journals found a 38% error rate in clinical journals and 21% in nonclinical journals (Kirchhoff, 1995). Two studies in 1998 examined random samples of references in three nursing journals. Taylor (1998) discovered an overall citation error rate of 46% (38% of all references contained at least one major error, and 14% contained at least one minor error). Schulmeister (1998) found that 32% of her sample contained citation errors. A larger study examined randomly selected references from 11 nursing journals and uncovered a 43% citation error rate (Lok, Chan, & Martinson, 2001).

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The problem is not confined to nursing journals. In four dermatologic journals, 41% contained citation errors (George & Robbins, 1994). A study of four anesthesia journals found at least one error in 50% of the references (McLellan, Case, & Barnett, 1992). Another two authors focused on public health journals and found a 31% rate of citation errors (Eichorn & Yankauer, 1987).

How Can Professional Nurses Ensure Accurate References?

Learning to write well and correctly does not come naturally for many professionals. Nurse authors need tools and strategies to ensure that their reference lists are accurate (see Figure 1). The tools include Web sites, books, and librarians. The advent of electronic data-

bases has significantly facilitated the ability to check the accuracy of elements in references. Figure 2 lists some of the most common errors to look for while examining manuscripts before submission. Another strategy is to take a writing class offered by a university or hospital. The expertise of seasoned authors can be invaluable to new authors in guiding them through the process of writing accurate and appropriately referenced manuscripts.

ONS seeks to support its members in several ways to further their growth as professional writers. One such opportunity is the *Clinical Journal of Oncology Nursing Mentor/Fellow Program*, which pairs new writers with experienced nurse authors. Each mentor/fellow pair submits a manuscript to be peer-reviewed and published.

Many nurse authors do not work at academic institutions that allow easy access to a library. Alternatives include getting help from local, hospital, and community college libraries. ONS members have an additional resource via e-mail. ONS Information Resources Supervisor Mark Vrabel, MLS, AHIP, is willing to help members find and verify references. To request such services, members may e-mail library@ons.org. Using such services appears to help cut reference errors. "The journal with an in-house librarian who verifies the accuracy of references had few errors in citations" (Oermann, Mason, & Wilmes, 2002, p. 260).

Conclusion

Inaccurate references not only are frustrating but also prolong the time needed to locate

Tools

• PubMed's Citation Matcher for Single Articles

www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query/static/citmatch.html

Search by journal name, date, volume or issue number, first page, author name, title words, or any combination thereof.

• Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL®)

www.cinahl.com

Access abstracts and full text from many journals online, or have documents faxed or mailed to you. Membership and fees may be required.

• Google™ Scholar

http://scholar.google.com/advanced_scholar_search

Search for scholarly articles by title, title words, author, publication, date, or any combination thereof.

• Library of Congress Online Catalog

<http://catalog.loc.gov>

Use basic or guided search engines to find texts by title, author, subject, call number, LCCN, ISSN, ISBN, or key words.

• Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2001)

Use the "Checklist for Manuscript Submission, References" (p. 381).

• Librarians at hospitals, nursing schools, healthcare settings, and the Oncology Nursing Society (e-mail library@ons.org)

Tips

• Different journals use different bibliographic formats. For example, the *Oncology Nursing Forum* and *Clinical Journal of Oncology Nursing* adhere to the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, but other journals may use the *Chicago Manual of Style* or American Medical Association guidelines. Familiarize yourself with the style used at the journal where you will submit your manuscript and format your references and citations accordingly.

• Start with accurate notes or photocopies of original sources. This will prevent last-minute omissions and trips to the library. Some journals require that authors send in a photocopy of the first page of each article referenced.

• Use more than one author to check citations and references. If you are the only author, ask a colleague to help. As one person scans the text for citations, the other should make sure that every citation has a corresponding reference and that every reference has been cited in the text.

• For extra security that you have located every citation, use the search function on your computer to locate left-hand parenthesis, for example.

• Use the spell check function on your computer to help find author names that may have been spelled two different ways. Most last names appear in the spell checker. When you click on "Ignore All," that name should not appear in the spell check again unless it is spelled differently.

• Check every element of each reference against the original source, a copy of the original, or a citation in a database such as those mentioned previously in this figure. Pay careful attention to the spelling of last names, order of initials, year, complete title, complete journal or book name, and correct volume, issue, and page numbers.

• Use computer programs that automate the creation of bibliographies such as Reference Manager® or EndNote®, both sold by Thomson ResearchSoft in Carlsbad, CA.

Figure 1. Tools and Tips to Ensure Reference Accuracy

Note. Based on information from Kirchoff, 1995.

Common general errors

• Something is cited in the text, but the reference is not listed.

• A reference is listed at the end of the article but not cited in the text.

• A citation in the text does not match the reference exactly (e.g., the name is spelled two different ways, the year in the citation does not match the reference).

• An author's or editor's last name is misspelled in the reference list when compared to the original source. Also, initials often are incorrect or transposed. The order of authors should match the original source, not be listed alphabetically.

• The year in the reference is incorrect when compared to the original source.

• The title in the reference is inaccurate (e.g., missing words, added words).

• Page numbers are incorrect, often not even overlapping the page numbers of the original source, making retrieval difficult.

• The reference does not adhere to the journal's bibliographic style. See the first bullet point under "Tips" in Figure 1.

Common errors specific to journal articles

• The journal name is abbreviated, incomplete, or simply incorrect. For example, *Annual Review of Nursing Research* cannot be shortened to *Nursing Research* because they are distinct journals.

• The volume number or issue number is wrong or the issue number is missing. An issue number is necessary when each issue begins with page 1 rather than continuing from the last page number in the previous journal.

Common errors specific to books

• Chapter authors and book editors are not provided or are listed incorrectly (see Figure 1).

• A reference cites a chapter but leaves out the chapter's title, authors, or page range.

• The edition number is not provided.

Figure 2. Common Errors in References and Citations

Note. Based on information from Oncology Nursing Society, 2005.

original sources. Numerous inaccuracies may make readers question the accuracy of an entire manuscript or chapter. In addition, reference errors can damage an author's reputation and weaken the credibility of a journal.

Professional oncology nurses and leaders in nursing have a responsibility to make sure references are accurate. Accountability starts with authors but continues with consumers of printed literature. Nurses have a professional responsibility to report inaccuracies in articles through letters to the editor (Kirchhoff, 1995). When authors correct errors during the writing process, they assist reviewers, editors, journals, and the nursing profession. *ONF* benefits from a reputation of being an excellent, high-quality journal. Oncology nurse authors can help continue this tradition by doing their part, through implementing some of the strategies in this article, to ensure accurate references in the oncology nursing literature.

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