Publishing in clinical journals can be an exciting and rewarding opportunity for home care nurses to convey creative ways they address problems in their practice. This article provides strategies potential authors can use to select topics, develop content, adhere to appropriate format and style, and benefit from pre- and postsubmission manuscript critiques. An overview of the review and publication process is also discussed.

JOAN S. GRANT, DSN, RN, CS

Writing Manuscripts for Clinical Journals
Writing Manuscripts for a Clinical Journal

Dies (1993) aptly stated that virtually every clinician has experiences to share that can contribute significantly to nursing practice. The expert knowledge derived from clinical experiences is essential for the development of innovative interventions and programs to meet the complex needs of patients and their families. Unfortunately, many creative strategies used by nurses in their daily clinical practice are not shared because many nurses fail to write for publication.

The key elements of creativity, flexibility, patience, and persistence in writing enable practitioners to convert theoretical, research, and practical knowledge into usable forms for other nurses (Simon, 1994). These elements distinguish between a manuscript that nurses don’t bother to read and an exciting manuscript that nurses must read because it contains a new way of applying useful information to clinical practice.

This article contains useful information including:

- strategies potential authors can use to select topics and develop content;
- ways to assure adherence to appropriate format and style;
- ways to benefit from pre- and postsubmission critiques of a manuscript; and
- an overview of the review and publication process.

Selecting Topics for a Clinical Journal

Sometimes, nurses incorrectly assume that information or techniques they know and use are also known by most other nurses. Unfortunately, this fallacy can be a major barrier to writing. Evidenced based clinical decision making and clinical approaches to procedures and patient care are important to share with colleagues to advance the practice. Writing for a clinical journal provides nurses many opportunities to publish creative solutions to perplexing patient care problems. You may have thought, “I could write something like this,” “I did all this work on this inservice and I wish I could teach others,” or “I wish I could write an article like this!” With some help, and by learning more about the process, you probably can.

To identify topics, consider frequently encountered clinical issues and patient care problems and review relevant journals for gaps in the literature. Ask colleagues their opinions about potential topics and information that would benefit their clinical practice. Some writers use a personal journal to help identify possible topics for publication. Others put information about specific populations and literature they use to update policies and procedures into a notebook and use the collected material to identify potential ideas for manuscripts.

Some suggestions for manuscript subjects include the following:

- Clinical papers that review current knowledge, analyze recent developments, and discuss specific interventions that produce clearly measured patient outcomes are highly sought after by journal editors and publishers; this is especially true in home care.
- Manuscripts that suggest effective strategies to manage clinical issues for specific populations or that clearly describe practical instructional materials and approaches for educating patients and families are useful to practicing nurses.
- Articles or case studies that offer insight into the behaviors of nurses, patients, and families assist clinicians to individualize care and develop individualized care plans and outcomes.
- Many clinical journals publish articles that discuss research findings that have the potential to improve nursing practice and affect and measure interventions relative to cost, outcomes, and resource utilization.
- Some journals publish manuscripts based on themes. Future themes for specific issues are published long before submission deadlines to allow adequate time for authors to develop and write the manuscripts. Acceptance is limited due to the finite number of manuscripts that can be published in any given issue. However, the themes are usually broad enough that a revised manuscript can be submitted to another clinical journal if not accepted by the journal to which the paper was initially submitted.

Developing Content for the Manuscript

Writers can use a variety of strategies to develop content and increase the likelihood of having their
manuscript accepted for publication in a clinical journal by using the strategies described below.

1. Recognize your own personal writing traits, strengths, and those subjects that interest you.
2. Tailor the manuscript to the journal’s audience.
3. Focus content on one main idea.
4. Develop an outline to organize and expand the manuscript
5. Capture the reader’s attention with a dynamic opening paragraph.
6. Indicate important papers or studies in the literature and emphasize nursing implications.
7. Clearly show how your research compares and contrasts with similar research in the subject area.
8. Select an appropriate closing.

Each of these strategies is described in greater detail in the sections that follow.

**Recognize Your Own Personal Writing Traits**

One of the first steps in successfully developing content for a manuscript involves recognizing your own personal writing habits. Individuals prone to procrastinate over the start of a task require short work periods to make the manuscript seem more manageable. Writers who prefer developing an idea and writing a rough draft in a few days require large blocks of time to construct and revise the manuscript. Alternately, potential authors who initially procrastinate but typically complete rough drafts in a few days do best if they establish deadlines to begin and allow large blocks of time to work on several rough drafts of the manuscript.

After you understand your own personal writing habits, plan to write more than one draft and set target dates for completion of major sections and subsequent drafts with the final submission deadline in mind.

**Target the Journal Audience**

Editors reject manuscripts because authors fail to target their manuscripts to the journal’s audience (Johnson, 1996). Knowing a clinical journal’s audience allows potential authors to develop manuscripts around content that deals with relevant clinical, operational, and educational issues influencing practice. As suggested by Burnard (1995), successful authors submit manuscripts that closely match the style of papers already published in the journal and save wasted effort because the article fills an editorial need without duplicating a topic or approach that was recently published.

**Focus Content on One Main Idea**

A manuscript should always focus on one main idea. At times, writers attempt to discuss a complex subject in a single manuscript when addressing only one dimension of the topic would be more appropriate. For example, instead of writing a general article about complications experienced by the homebound elderly, one author chose to provide useful specific information about bacteriuria and its prevalence, risk, and strategies to assist home health nurses to manage urinary tract infections in this population (Haus, 1998).

To facilitate reading and clarity, multiple points can be addressed briefly in an general or introductory paragraph; subsequent paragraphs can be used to discuss each individual point in greater depth and detail.

**Develop an Outline**

Many authors stress the importance of developing an outline to organize and develop a manuscript (Black, 1992; Fondiller, 1994; Johnson, 1992a). Although some type of outline is valuable in developing the manuscript, each writer adopts a unique approach to using the outline. Clinical manuscripts contain basic elements including:

- an introduction or opening paragraph;
- a literature review;
- the main idea;
- nursing implications; and
- summary or conclusions.

Try to organize information under these general headings; add supporting details under each heading in later drafts (Halm, 1997). Alternately, a table or checklist that emphasizes important points can serve as an outline and later confirm that essential content was covered in the manuscript. Table 1 provides an outline for a manuscript about bacteriuria in the homebound elderly (Haus, 1998).

The outline should initially be used to jot down thoughts or points to develop as the major elements. These ideas can serve as manuscript subheadings. Avoid feeling obligated to write thoughts in seemingly sequential order in the early drafts. Leave blank space for details, tables, figures, and references. Complete those sections as more literature is reviewed and innovative thoughts occur during the manuscript’s development.

Some authors first complete what they deem to be the easier sections of the manuscript. In one example, the author’s manuscript focuses on an ef-
Judge currency of content is to reference information published within the last 5 years. With limited recent literature on a topic, it is appropriate to say that more current references are unavailable. In determining the availability and currency of references, it is important to conduct an adequate and comprehensive search in the content area. A reference librarian can provide useful suggestions in conducting the search. Using e-mail, selected references on the Internet, and references with fax availability make it possible to identify potential ideas and obtain the most comprehensive literature available on a subject.

Implications for nursing practice must be emphasized and stated clearly in clinical manuscripts. Thus, a significant portion of the manuscript must delineate how nurses can use the information in their clinical practice. For example, describe a significant nursing practice problem in the manuscript’s introduction, and discuss the design, implementation, and results of therapeutic interventions for the problem in the body of the paper (Dowd & McElveny, 1997). Discuss important information nurses must consider in assessing patients or families that experience specific problems. Identify key critical components or major aspects of the treatment plan and describe how nurses can use special techniques or resources to provide patient care. Always describe the essential elements of useful interventions and important factors influencing the elements’ effectiveness with enough detail that nurses can implement them in clinical practice. In addition, provide suggestions for nurses to use when judging the effectiveness of interventions (for example, whether the interventions are time saving, easier for nurses/patient/families to use or understand, or have significant positive outcomes). Table 2 delineates pertinent elements to address nursing implications in clinical journals.

The author who wished to share current therapies and interventions to deal with bacteriuria in the homebound elderly (Haus, 1998) serves as a good example. In the article, the author discussed the significance as well as the incidence, prevalence, and risk factors of bacteriuria. Additionally, by emphasizing current recommended treatments and implications for home health nurses related to infection control, collection of specimens, catheter care, patient and family education, and prevention measures, the author demonstrated implications for practice.

Table 1
Outline for a Manuscript About Bacteriuria in the Homebound Elderly

<table>
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<tr>
<th>I. Introduction</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Significance</td>
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<tr>
<th>II. Bacteriuria</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Incidence and prevalence</td>
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<td>B. Risk factors</td>
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</table>

| III. Treatment |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IV. Implications for Home Care Nurses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Infection control</td>
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<td>B. Collection of specimens</td>
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<td>C. Catheter care</td>
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<tr>
<td>D. Patient and family education</td>
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<tr>
<td>E. Prevention measures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| V. Summary |

(*Haus, 1998*)

**Capture the Reader’s Interest Early**

The opening paragraph must capture and hold the interest of the reader and convey that the information is valuable to the busy clinician’s practice. Thus, a writer must convince readers early in the manuscript that the topic is relevant, exciting, important, timely, or presents a unique slant not previously addressed in the literature (Johnson, 1995). State the primary purpose of the manuscript in the first or second paragraph and periodically review the manuscript to ensure that the content remains consistent with the purpose.

**Indicate Important Papers or Studies in the Literature and Emphasize Nursing Implications**

In developing content, indicate important papers or studies in the literature. A general guide to
1. Discuss important information nurses need to consider in assessing patients or families experiencing specific problems.

2. Identify key critical components or major aspects of the treatment plan.

3. Describe how nurses will use special techniques or resources to provide patient care.

4. Describe essential elements of useful interventions and important factors influencing their effectiveness with enough detail that nurses can implement them in clinical practice.

5. Provide suggestions for nurses to use in judging the effectiveness of interventions.

Clearly Show How Your Research Compares and Contrasts With Other Subject-Related Research

Begin original research articles by establishing an association between the research problem and clinical practice. State the purpose and scope of the research in the introduction (Johnson, 1992b). Discussion of clinical implications is the major focus of the article. In clinical journals, the literature review is thorough but brief and commonly integrated into the discussion section. The body of the paper must provide a clear and full description of the methodology, report relevant findings, highlight the clinical significance of findings in the discussion section, and emphasize implications for clinical practice. Some clinical journal editors prefer that authors translate statistical data into terms understood by the average clinical nurse. Other editors suggest authors write in teams having clinical and research expertise (Dowd & McElveny, 1997; Johnson, 1992b).

Many clinical journals use major research headings such as methods, findings, discussion, and implications for practice. However, some use content headings in the literature review and action headings to emphasize clinical implications for practicing nurses. For example, empowering family caregivers and meeting psychosocial needs are action headings that might appear in a manuscript about family caregiving. Short case studies, specific examples, sidebars, vignettes, bulleted lists, algorithms, checklists, and other literary techniques clarify and emphasize the material in clinical and research papers while emphasizing nursing implications and components of therapeutic interventions.

Select an Appropriate Closing

Authors typically either summarize or conclude with the primary message of the manuscript. A summary paragraph commonly provides an overview of essential points, while a concluding statement extends the information addressed in the manuscript by proposing inferences for clinical practice. In selecting an appropriate closing for your manuscript, review recent issues of the targeted journal and note whether the final paragraph typically summarizes content or draws conclusions. Table 3 provides an example of a summary and conclusion for the aforementioned manuscript about bacteriuria in the homebound elderly (Haus, 1998).

Adhere to Appropriate Format and Style

Review recent issues of potential clinical journals to identify the format and style used. Most journals carry a specific tone or voice that is unique to the journal. Clinical journals use a strict scientific style, a journalism writing style, or an amalgam of the two. Be sure to present the topic and content of your manuscript in a tone that mirrors the clinical journal in which you plan to submit your paper.

Author guidelines, often called Information for Authors, are written to assure consistency in format and style, prevent potential reviewer bias, and assist editors to present a sophisticated product for their readers. These guidelines are commonly available in the published journal, by writing to the editorial office, or online at the journal’s Website. Author guidelines typically request that authors double-space their manuscripts, use a specific type size, and include generous margins on their hard copy. Adhering to these simple requests allows editors and reviewers room to write notes, ask questions, or request changes. Although it is tempting, avoid enhancing the manuscript with special features such as boldface or italic type, all upper-case letters, and headings with differing font sizes. Such formatting codes cause additional work for the editors who must remove the codes during preparation of the manuscript for publication (Squires, 1993). In short, it is the content of your paper, not its ty-
Table 3
Summary and Conclusion for a Manuscript About Bacteriuria in the Homebound Elderly

Summary

In summary, urinary tract infections are one of the most common bacterial infections in the elderly and often encountered by home health nurses. Nurses are responsible for evaluating signs and symptoms associated with bacteriuria in patients, implementing infection control practices, collecting specimens, and providing catheter care, patient and family education, and prevention measures.

Conclusion

In conclusion, urinary tract infections are one of the most common bacterial infections in the elderly and often encountered by home health nurses. Due to the high incidence of bacteriuria in the homebound elderly, home health nurses are in key positions to provide valuable patient education, early intervention, and effective management of urinary tract infections in this population. These innovative intervention programs are essential for improving quality of life in the elderly and their family members.

(Haus, 1998)

Use Pre- and Postsubmission Critiques

Potential writers enhance their chances of receiving an acceptance letter by asking colleagues to critique the manuscript before its submission (Black, 1992; Lanza, 1995). Additionally, because...
Table 4
Useful Resources for Learning Format and Scholarly Writing Styles


most manuscripts eventually accepted for publication are revised one or more times after initial submission (Dowd & McElveny, 1997), ask colleagues to critique the manuscript following post-submission revisions. Asking individuals who have different types of expertise to provide their opinion is helpful. For example, someone with a successful publishing record can provide suggestions about authorship, grammar, punctuation, the rhythm, and the pace of the manuscript (Fondiller, 1994). Clinical experts can evaluate accuracy, currency, and applicability of the content to practice. Lastly, seek opinions from typical readers of the proposed journal. These reviewers assist writers to put a content area within an appropriate frame of reference for practitioners. For example, before submitting an article to a home health journal, consider asking nurses who have expertise in this area to critique the paper.

When asking for assistance, encourage the individuals critiquing the manuscript to provide honest opinions. Ask reviewers to identify any unclear paragraphs or sections and to suggest specific ways to make the material more specific and to the point.

Understand the Review and Publication Process

The journal editor is responsible for the journal’s content and decides the acceptance of submitted papers. Although editors rely on the advice of content reviewers, they are not bound by this advice. Thus, an editor may find merit in a paper that a reviewer otherwise rejected and the editor may offer direction to the writer for revision. The editor runs the editorial office where manuscripts are received, acknowledged, cataloged, sent for review, and accepted or denied. Reader comments about previously published journal articles are also directed to the editor for publication in the journal’s letter column. Should the letter warrant commentary from a specific author, the editor will forward the letter and ask the author to provide a short commentary response for publication.

Every manuscript submitted should have an accompanying cover letter to the editor stating the title and purpose of the manuscript and a brief explanation as to why the journal’s readers would be interested in the topic. In this short paragraph, the author should explain how their manuscript extends current knowledge about topics or views old topics in a new way. Always provide a corresponding address as well as phone number, fax number, or other means of communication at your disposal (such as an e-mail address).

Upon receiving the manuscript, many editors send a postcard or short letter to the author stating that the manuscript has been sent out for review and provide tentative times necessary for the review process. Some editors request that writers submit a self-addressed stamped envelope if they wish to be notified about receipt of the manuscript and the manuscript returned if rejected. Some editorial offices have a policy by which rejected manuscripts are not returned. In addition to a hard copy, many journals now request manuscripts on computer diskettes either at the time of submission or upon acceptance of the revised manuscript for publication.

Upon submitting the manuscript, most authors are required to sign a copyright release statement verifying the article is original, is not under consideration by any other journal, and has not been previously published. This statement also indicates that...
the manuscript is not under current review by an online professional newsletter or journal. Duplicate publication of material leads to violation of copyright and falsely infers there is more information available on a subject than actually exists. However, developing manuscripts that are based on previously published abstracts is appropriate (APA, 1994).

Authorship is granted to individuals who have contributed significantly either to the design and implementation of a study, the analysis of results, or to the preparation of a manuscript. Minor contributions to a manuscript are acknowledged appropriately on the title page, in a footnote, or at the end of the text (APA, 1994; Squires, 1993).

Although variable, it can usually take 3 to 4 months to receive notification about the outcome of the review. Knowing the usual amount of time required for a decision on a manuscript is valuable (e.g., 2 weeks to 1 year) because this can be a factor in submitting to a clinical journal. If excessive time lapses in the review process, it is appropriate to call the editor to ask the status of the manuscript. Some author guidelines specify the time it takes for a manuscript to be published after it is accepted. The average wait before the manuscript is published is 7 to 12 months after manuscript acceptance (Sparks & Rizzolo, 1998; Swanson, McCloskey, & Bodenstein, 1991).

In peer-reviewed journals, manuscripts typically are evaluated by two to four individuals from a group of educators, practitioners, and researchers who have expertise in the content area of the manuscript and can make the content reliable and more applicable to the national audience (Dowd & McElveny, 1997). For example, a study submitted to a peer-reviewed clinical journal is evaluated by reviewers who collectively are knowledgeable about the research process, subject population, and clinical problem. In non peer-reviewed publications, the editor and editorial staff primarily make decisions about manuscripts; the manuscript may not have undergone clinical review.

Content reviewers are typically provided criteria by the editor for use in critiquing manuscripts. The criteria enable reviewers to examine potential manuscripts from a consistent frame of reference and commonly address:

- organization;
- clarity;
- appropriateness of content;
- clinical application;
- originality;
- adequacy of illustrations; and
- appropriateness of references (Dowd & McElveny, 1997).

Copies of these reviews are often sent to the authors when a revision is requested.

Editors commonly reject manuscripts due to poor writing or for content reasons (e.g., content is inaccurate, unimportant, poorly developed, too technical, or inconsistent with the purpose of the journal).

Other reasons a manuscript may be rejected include:

- lack of organization;
- too lengthy for publication; or
- the material presented for publication was recently covered, or is already scheduled to be covered in the journal.

Lastly, editors often reject research manuscripts if they are written in a term paper style or if they have methodological, data interpretation, or statistical problems (Dies, 1993; Dowd & McElveny, 1997; Swanson et al., 1991).

In preparing a manuscript, Dowd and McElveny (1997) advise all potential authors to expect at least one or more revisions and resubmissions. Although acceptance rates vary widely across journals, most manuscripts eventually accepted for publication have been revised at least once. Occasionally, the editor will send the revised manuscript to one or two of the original reviewers. If the revisions are extensive, the editor may send the revised manuscript to a new reviewer.

Upon receiving a letter from an editor who asks for revisions, authors should remember that content reviewers represent typical journal readers. If the content reviewers interpret something in the manuscript as incorrect, poorly written, or lacking depth, it is much better to correct the errors or deficits prior to publication. Although Dowd and McElveny (1997) noted that the real art of writing is rewriting, it probably is more accurate to say that true skill in writing develops from rewriting, and rewriting, and rewriting...

A revised manuscript being returned to the editor should include a letter acknowledging the valuable opinions of the reviewers. List the revisions made in the manuscript related to the reviewers' comments. Always provide a rationale and cite the literature if any suggested revisions are not made. Lastly, offer to consider further suggestions for revision or to answer any questions the editor might have about the revised manuscript.
Copy Editing and Publishing Houses

Although some journals are self-published, most are published by publishing houses. Publishers work closely with the editor and editorial offices and copy edit the manuscripts submitted by the editorial office for publication in a specific journal.

Before publication, authors are sent galley or page proofs to review changes made in copy editing or detect any errors introduced in the typesetting process. Copy editors at the publishing house edit all manuscripts to comply with journal style and to improve the presentation of the paper. Copy editors are journalists, not nurses, and they will note any changes made in the manuscript, usually in the form of author queries. Author queries can also be directed to anything that the copy editor deemed vague or questionable or any information that might appear to be missing (for example, information missing from a reference). If a copy editor makes extensive changes to the author’s paper, the author is generally queried as to whether the revisions are acceptable. Unless the changes substantially alter the author’s intended meaning, the author is asked to let such changes stand. It is not appropriate for authors to make extensive revisions to the galley or page proofs. Light revisions and any errors made during the typesetting process should be marked on the proofs. The

Table 5
Criteria Checklist to Use in Writing for a Clinical Journal

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Selecting Topics</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Consider frequently encountered clinical issues</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review relevant journals for gaps in the literature</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ask colleagues their opinions about topics</td>
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</table>
publishing company can charge for excessive revisions that should have been made before this point.

Authors are asked to attend to galley or page proofs in a short time (usually 48 to 72 hours). It is appropriate to speak directly with the copy editor to address any major changes or concerns. Publishing houses generally request authors to return proofs via overnight or 2-day mail. Table 5 provides a checklist to use in developing and refining manuscripts for clinical journals.

**Summary and Conclusion**

Manuscript development is dependent upon selecting pertinent topics, developing content, adhering to appropriate format and style, and using pre- and postsubmission critiques to your advantage. Potential authors can apply many strategies to develop the first draft, write subsequent revisions, and increase their chances of having a manuscript accepted for publication. When developing manuscripts for clinical journals, implications for practice must be emphasized.

The greatest motivation for publishing manuscripts comes from seeing the first manuscript in print. Inexperienced and experienced authors alike see exhilaration and excitement over communicating their ideas to other healthcare professionals and contributing to a sound knowledge base for nursing practice. Beyerman (1987) stated that writing is empowering. It is the painstaking but rewarding process of writing that enables other nurses to add to their repertoire of ideas and subsequently refine clinical practice. Nurses advance the skills and knowledge of practitioners through the wisdom they share in writing.

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**REFERENCES**


