



Editorial

Why was my paper rejected? Editors' reflections on common issues which influence decisions to reject papers submitted for publication in academic nursing journals



Papers are rarely rejected for publication for a single simple reason. Neither decision letters nor reviews can list all the issues that have influenced the final decision. However, in our experience as editors, as reviewers and also as authors (who have had many papers rejected), there are a number of issues or characteristics of papers which make it more likely that a paper will not be accepted for publication. In this editorial, we discuss these issues in the hope that prospective authors find them of use when considering ways in which their papers might be improved to increase the chance of success of publication in the *International Journal of Nursing Studies (IJNS)* and other academic journals.

Different issues are likely to be spotted by editors and reviewers at different stages of the editorial and peer review process. A majority of submissions to leading academic journals in all fields are not accepted, many being rejected prior to being sent for peer review simply because leading journals receive many more papers than they can possibly publish and editors must decide which papers would not be priority for publication irrespective of review comments. Around 70% of submissions to the IJNS are rejected prior to being sent for peer review. In this editorial, we draw a distinction between those factors that are likely to lead to papers being rejected prior to peer review and some of the more common reasons that reviewers may give when recommending rejection for publication.

1. Issues leading to papers being screened out prior to peer review

1.1. Out of scope

We frequently receive papers that simply do not match the journal's aims and scope. Our experience is that the number of such papers increases as the impact factor of a journal rises and authors in related fields of study with papers rejected by other journals are looking for an outlet for their work. The aims and scope of the IJNS, which are discussed in [Griffiths and Norman \(2011\)](#), are reproduced below:

The International Journal of Nursing Studies (IJNS) provides a forum for original research and scholarship about health care delivery, organisation, management, workforce, policy and research methods relevant to nursing, midwifery and other health related professions. The IJNS aims to support evidence informed policy and practice by publishing research, systematic and other scholarly reviews, critical discussion, and commentary of the highest standard. The journal particularly welcomes studies that aim to evaluate and understand complex health care interventions and health policies and which employ the most rigorous designs and methods appropriate for the research question of interest. The journal also seeks to advance the quality of research by publishing methodological papers introducing or elaborating on analytic techniques, measures, and research methods.

We suggest all potential authors look closely at the aims and scope of any journal they consider submitting a paper to. The guide to authors gives further details on the type of papers the journal considers. Over and above that though, they should also familiarise themselves with some of the content of the journal, so they have an idea if their paper is on the sort of topic that the journal covers. We certainly receive many submissions that simply do not fit the journal because they are not a relevant topic or simply do not match the type of papers we publish. If in doubt, we suggest the following – look at the reference list – does it cite any papers from this journal or from similar journals? For the IJNS these are likely to be general nursing, medical or health services research journals. If not, your paper is unlikely to match the journal's scope.

1.2. Unconvincing abstract and contribution statements

When editors look at a paper, they usually begin with the abstract and summary statements of 'what is known and what the paper adds'. Failure to give a clear and concise message, which highlights the contribution of the paper, can strongly influence its fate, particularly with

finely balanced decisions. This may seem unfair to authors but these are important aspects of the article. Editors may read these parts first but many readers will never get past the abstract, especially if it does not give them a reason to read on. Although it may seem contradictory, an abstract that gives a concise summary of the message of the paper is more likely to attract a reader than one that merely hints at the content but does not give detail.

So what are we, as editors, looking for in a paper submitted to the IJNS? From time to time a paper brings some excitement into our lives, such papers have a 'wow' factor – for example they may provide high quality evidence to challenge the status quo, add an important new dimension to a field of study or contribute data to a disputed topic which could be definitive. Whilst few papers are like this we would expect most papers to have implications for the policy and/or practice of professional nursing and/or midwifery.

1.3. Failure to set the study clearly in the context of what is already known

There are some types of papers which may be perfectly good and certainly well worth publishing, but simply are not a priority for this journal. We often receive papers where the main point of relevance to a nursing is simply that the sample was nurses. In other respects, the contribution seems to be mainly to another discipline, often occupational psychology. This does not necessarily make it of particular interest to nursing scholars or practitioners and the fact that a well-known phenomenon is demonstrated for the first time in nurses is not a major contribution unless there was good reason to think it might not apply.

The contribution of a paper is always judged by what it adds to what is already known and the importance of that contribution. Some papers only give very general indications – saying that little is known about a topic – while others highlight points of difference from previous studies without ever clearly indicating what is known about a topic or why the points of difference matter. Editors look for genuine novelty and contribution, rather than yet another paper on a well-studied topic that confirms what is already known, but appears to offer little that is new.

1.4. First study in country X

The IJNS is an international journal. This means that we are addressing a wide international readership and want to ensure that we publish papers that are of relevance and interest to readers in many countries. If the main novel contribution of a paper is that it is the first study of its type in a particular country this, in itself, is unlikely to make it interesting to readers in other countries. It may be that there are good reasons to think that a widely studied phenomenon might not apply in very different health care contexts or indeed that there is significant uncertainty in existing evidence. These are the reasons readers in other countries are likely to be interested in the study.

Similarly, editors need to consider the value of publishing evaluations of unique health related interventions which would be almost impossible to replicate in another culture.

Where papers do focus on topics of particular relevance in one country it is important that they relate this to developments internationally. Otherwise, such papers may be best placed in a purely national journal.

1.5. Common limitations of different types of study

There are common features of papers reporting different types of study which make them less likely to progress through the peer review process.

1.5.1. Concept analyses

Concept analyses are often undertaken as part of Doctoral studies. They can be very useful exercises for students to clarify and understand some of the basic foundations of their work. Papers based on concept analyses can be very useful when they offer a truly critical analysis of concepts that are often unquestioned (for example, compassion or empathy). However, many concept analyses do not necessarily add new understanding to the field but rather demonstrate the basic intellectual work required of any scholar. Consequently, they tend not to be a priority for publication in the IJNS unless they offer new insights into important concepts.

1.5.2. Evaluations of educational interventions v. no education where change of knowledge and attitude are the primary outcomes

We know education works, at least in the short term, so some education is likely to improve knowledge and attitudes more than no education. Such knowledge is a useful check for a local evaluation but not the highest priority for a leading journal. Moreover, a common limitation of many educational studies is that they are situation and time dependent; care practices differ across settings and required knowledge changes over time and can quickly become out of date. Thus the contribution of such studies is often slight. A study addressing behavioural outcomes, where standard educational practice is compared with an educational intervention that has a clear theoretical basis, and which is comprehensively described, is more likely to find support from editors.

1.5.3. Weak research designs

Studies with weak research designs relative to the research question being addressed are more likely to be rejected early on. For example, before and after evaluation studies of interventions in the absence of a control or comparison group are unlikely to progress to publication in leading journals, which have pressure for publication from elsewhere. Similarly some studies are simply too small or selective in their samples to generate a publishable inference.

1.5.4. Pilot and feasibility studies

Studies with weak designs or small samples are often described in their reports as pilot or feasibility studies. Pilot and feasibility studies are important precursors to full studies but, in general, they are not designed to provide generalisable answers to the main research questions. The terms 'pilot study' or 'feasibility study' should certainly not

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