



# How to Phrase Feedback in Peer Reviews for Nurse Authors?

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## ABSTRACT

Peer review is a standing tradition for the validation of scholarly work. Nursing journals that utilize peer review need expert reviewers to provide feedback to the editors to make publication decisions. The authors also benefit from the peer reviewers' feedback. However, the tone and wording of the critique should be honest and compassionate. Authors need to be guided and encouraged to improve their writing. Peer reviewers have a unique position to provide for the sustained addition of scholarly works and develop the authors who provide this content to the profession of nursing. This article seeks to convey these themes to the reader. **Key words:** author, peer review, profession, reviewer

**P**EER REVIEW in scholarly nursing journals is a tradition used to provide feedback to both the author and editor. The author is to receive guidance to develop or refine the manuscript in preparation for publication. The editor receives counsel to make rational publication decisions. This article will focus on how to frame and phrase feedback to authors. Scholarly works in nursing publication are relatively new with the books on nursing and nursing journals that have been recently created within the last 50 years. Therefore, guidance on writing and the publishing process for nurses is sparse. Many new authors submit manuscripts and are generally less satisfied with the peer review process than experienced authors (Shattell, Chinn, Thomas, & Cowling, 2010). Heinrich (2008) supports that nurse authors should receive compassionate critique from peer reviewers that explain the reason for the editors'

publication decision regarding the submitted manuscript.

## PEER REVIEW FOR NURSING PUBLICATIONS

As with any novice, authors need support and encouragement to develop confidence in their craft, a sense of group belonging, and to foster their professional self-esteem. That being said, the peer review process is a system by which scholarly rigor and scientific questioning is used to advance the profession and add to nursing knowledge. Peer reviewers also help to guide authors and editors by identifying manuscripts that do not meet the scope of the journal or the needs of the audience. In these cases, the peer reviewers should recommend that the manuscript not be published and refer the author to journals that would be more suitable for the manuscript. Peer reviewers make specific suggestions for material changes, address the manuscript's clinical relevance, provide expert opinion, and critique the manuscript's structure (Foster, 2002). Thus, the peer reviewer serves a pivotal role in nursing and affects our professional discourse.

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There are many different styles, scopes, traditions, emphasis, and expectations for the variety of nursing journals that exist currently. These scholarly journals rely on the process of honest peer review to meet the journals' aims and the needs of the contributing authors (Wurzbach, 2007). There are many publications that explain how to complete a quality professional peer review (Alexander, 2005; Benos, Kirk, & Hall, 2003; Griffin-Soble, 2004; Heinrich, 2008; Hoyt & Proehl, 2007; Oman, 2009; Pierson, 2007). However, authors, especially those new to writing, need the tone of the review to be encouraging, nonjudgmental, and constructive. Reviews provide an objective critique of the author's work with practical suggestions for improvement, which can be an excellent teaching tool and opportunity for self-reflection for the author.

#### **PROFESSIONAL COLLEGIALLY AND COMPASSION**

Peer reviews written in a manner that is seemingly unbiased, thoughtful, and useful to the author will lead to publishable works and as such is a service to the profession. When reviews are written in such a way as to provoke the author to feel disrespected, harshly criticized, inconsistently evaluated by journal peer reviewers, or reluctant to ask questions or seek validation, then the purpose of peer review is not met. If this negative tone is conveyed, the review becomes another form of lateral violence within the nursing profession (Griffin, 2004). The American Nurses Association's *Code of Ethics for Nurses with Interpretive Statements* (2001) provides a framework for the professional nurse's responsibilities to uphold and foster relationships with colleagues, collaboration, mentoring, confidentiality, standards and review mechanisms, accountability, integrity, character, professional growth, responsibilities to the public, and advancing the profession. The American Nurses Association's *Nursing: Scope and Standards of Practice* (2004) also beckons through the Standards of Professional Performance for the registered nurse in Standard 10: Collegiality

to provide feedback to peers while maintaining compassionate, caring relationships and contributes to an environment conducive to education.

Therefore, we are called and obligated by our profession and professional standards to provide peer review to nurse authors that is compassionate, constructive, collaborative, and conducive to promoting our colleagues' professional growth. After the peer reviewer accepts the manuscript for review, time is required to read and think about the manuscript. Though peer review is a professional act, it is a competing priority with our precious time reserved for work, family, recreation, contemplation, and other scholarship activities. However, the words of the feedback received by the author help to shape and add to nursing's professional body of work.

#### **EXAMPLES OF PEER REVIEW CRITIQUE**

Peer reviewers should address those aspects of a manuscript that are requested by the journal editors (i.e., the journal's review criteria). With the journal's review criteria serving as a framework, the initial paragraph should acknowledge the manuscript's main points in summary. Authors want to know that the reviewer understands their work. The review should be able to convey this understanding to the author and then continue by providing positive feedback about the aspects of the manuscript that deserve encouraging remarks. Table 1 contains examples of constructive feedback from peer reviewers. Follow this introduction with general suggestions related to flow, organization, substance and application. These points can be made through actual suggested changes or by asking the author questions to consider or points to clarify. Many authors will benefit from providing specific comments related to word choice, sentence structure, terms, headings, tables, and references. Be sure to be very specific while using the identification method preferred by the journal (e.g., line number, page, and paragraph), because this will provide clarity for

**Table 1.** Examples of constructive feedback

<b>Suggested Areas for Feedback</b>	<b>Unhelpful Comments</b>	<b>Constructive Comments</b>
Summary of manuscript's main points	The thesis and body of the text do not match. This manuscript was not useful or interesting.	I think all articles on family presence during nursing or medical procedures are important. This article is interesting in that your focus seems to be on having data to support the need for a family-presence policy in your institution. Creating a survey and sharing the results are a good way to provide an introduction to the staff and physicians. Below you will find my comments and suggestions by line number.
Positive & encouraging remarks about the manuscript	I really enjoyed this manuscript. The manuscript should be well received by the reader.	The author has done a great job of presenting the clinical implementation of the PTSD screening process. The manuscript does flow well. The spelling and grammar are fine; a few suggestions are listed below. The reader does get a good sense of your work on the issue of PTSD screening at your hospital.
General Suggestions (i.e., flow, organization, substance & application)	The writing is confusing much of the time, and after it finally reaches its point it quickly veers off into tangential content. Lacks focus and clarity. The author seems confused about the topic.	There is a lot of overlap and no defined distinction between the terms. This makes the flow of your manuscript hard to follow. I would suggest refining these terms and the items that would fit into them from your literature review. All the information you need seems to be in the manuscript, you just need to reorganize it. I would suggest creating an outline of the terms with their definitions to make the adaptation into your manuscript easy for the author to accomplish and the reader to follow.
Specific suggestions (i.e., spelling, word choice, sentence structure)	Please explain this point. Tables are not clear. Rewrite the conclusion.	Paragraph–Line: 2–6: move the sentence “I kept placing . . .” before the sentence beginning “It was very difficult for me . . .” 2–10: delete “a” 3–2: “medical personal” (1) Personal should be personnel (this is true throughout the manuscript). (2) Nurses are not medical personnel.
Encouragement and gratitude	This should never be published in my journal. The authors made a poor attempt at writing for publication.	Thank you for submitting your work to (Journal). Good luck with your future-writing endeavors. Thank you for taking the time to write about your quality-improvement initiatives. Your team and patients will be well served by your commitment to providing better care. However, this article does not add to the current published body of work. I would recommend rewriting the manuscript not as a research article, but as a clinical article describing your accomplishments.

(Adapted from Pierson 2007)

*Note.* PTSD = posttraumatic stress disorder

Dear Author(s),

I enjoyed reading your manuscript. It seems that a focus on substance abuse is very necessary for the role of an advanced practice nurse in the emergency department (ED). I know that our ED is saturated regularly with patients seeking services for addictions. The public health perspective of past or present substance abuse diagnosis and injury is very interesting.

The manuscript needs some work to flow better. If you feel the column purpose needs to be discussed, I would suggest you to provide a separate paragraph on that topic. To introduce your manuscript topic, you should provide an introduction and abstract as necessary, discussing your adaptation of the reviewed research article.

The case presented in your manuscript does provide a good scenario for the adaptation of the research article. I would suggest three different ways to approach using your "case" in this manuscript:

- (1) Review the research article and then use 'the case' to apply the research;
- (2) Keep the case 'as is' and then review the research article, and lastly show how "the case" applies;
- (3) Delete the case.

The conclusions section needs to be addressed. I think you should break it into two paragraphs: your opinion on how the research applies to the advanced practice nurse (APN) and then what further research you think should be sought.

Some specifics:

Add the "Nursing Research" article to the "References" and use *American Psychological Association* format throughout.

The use of the term "APN" is not consistent with the American Association of Colleges of Nursing. "APN" is the umbrella term for the four categories of advanced practice nursing. You may want to either clarify NP or CNS or both.

When reviewing the research article, it is not clear what criteria you are using in your evaluation (i.e., levels, theory, etc).

Page and Line:

1, 15: APN is used, but should be spelled out then parenthetically state abbreviation (e.g., advanced practice nurse [APN])

1, 14: capitalize "... Patients.."

1, 33: add (ED) after emergency department.

1, 44: the sentence is not clear, "Secondary assessment..."

1, 49: the term "within normal limits" should be changed.

2, 4: spell out computerized tomography (CT) scan.

2, 15: suggest change to "... with the consulted orthopedic surgeon in 48 hours."

2, 35: delete sentence, "The results of this investigation..."

2, 47: suggest "This hospital's ED experiences approximately 48,000 annual visits..."

2, 55: the term "pool" is a jargon.

3, 13: how many weeks were allowed before the phone interview?

3, 44: If 71% were employed and 10% were unemployed, how were the "other" classified related to their jobs? (e.g., retired).

3, 47: "Fifty seven..." to be consistent, do not use the written percentage. Rather introduce the topic early in the sentence.

3, 49: The sentence, "Reasons for presentation..." is confusing.

4, 24: the term "what if any links" should be changed and developed. Also, explain why this is helpful to the ED APN.

I think you are on the right path with this manuscript. As you work to clarify your critique and application, I think ED APN colleagues will benefit from your writing. Keep up your efforts to add to our professional body of knowledge by writing. Thank you for submitting your manuscript to the Advanced Emergency Nursing Journal.

**Figure 1.** A Complete review.

the author. Conclude the review with encouraging remarks and gratitude. Figure 1 provides a sample of a complete review of a submitted manuscript.

The authors need clear guidelines for revision from peer reviewers. Most journal submissions are returned to authors with the opportunity to submit a revised manuscript. The peer reviewer is typically the only authority to provide guidance to the author. Substantial feedback is necessary for the author to understand how to make revisions that will meet the journal's requirements. When feedback is not sufficient to guide the author on how to proceed with a revision, this can be perceived negatively and cause frustration for the author. Many nurse authors are relatively inexperienced, which emphasizes the need for supportive, explanatory, and respectful peer reviews (Shattell et al., 2010).

## CONCLUSION

Nurse authors are the public voice of nursing. They provide documentation of patients' experiences, best practices, emerging theory, nurses' toil and grace, and scientific knowledge discovery. Each peer review is an opportunity to refine the voice of nursing to be bold, succinct, and valid. Every nurse who has the courage to write and submit his or her work needs to be encouraged to do it again. This form of sustainability is necessary to growth of the nursing profession. Our gratitude is expressed because it is the nurse authors who provide the expert content for the journals we cherish. Our thanks are also due

to nurse authors as they are the leaders who will set the path for future generations to follow in our caring traditions.

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