

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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Digital Object Identifier: 10.1188/05.ONF.734-736