

Form and Function

When writing for a professional audience, references are simultaneously a joy and a curse. With today's technology and the availability of specialty libraries, our access to information resources is virtually unlimited. It is a boon to researchers and writers that a vast trove of help and support is often just fingertips away. Information archives, whether in hard copy or electronic format, provide us with a huge pool of data to comb through in our effort to find just the right nuggets of information to support and expand our individual work. With access to this rich environment comes our responsibility to attribute correctly, giving credit where due, and extending and sharing the work of others through our own efforts.

Acknowledging the work and thoughts of others is when the tediousness of correct referencing—the curse of the writing process—sets in. Accuracy and, consequently, the point at which errors occur are important on a number of levels. We must give credit for the original thinking and findings of others and help readers to find the references we are citing should they need the information themselves.

First and foremost in this process is ensuring the accuracy of the information that is being cited. Citations should be primary—that is, straight from the original reference. Citing work secondarily is risky and often a source of errors that is perpetuated over the years. As one can imagine, checking this aspect of referencing is prohibitive. In addition to having access to the full text of each reference, this level of checking requires the ability to understand and interpret content. Reviewers help us in this regard, but because of the sheer volume and variety of information cited, they usually end up relying on the author's skill and attention to detail.

The next level of accuracy is ensuring correctness of the information about references that are being cited. Names need to be spelled correctly; initials must be correct; book, chapter, and article titles need to be complete; and volume, issue, and page numbers must be accurate. Mistakes at this level are easy to make. A typographical error, a dropped name, or typing the wrong numeral can happen quickly and will not be displayed as an error on the computer screen. Reference-formatting software does not help


with this type of error because even the most sophisticated formatting software requires that someone input the information into the system. Here is yet another area in which primary referencing is important. If one merely picks up a citation from a secondary source without checking the primary article, incorrect information provided in the secondary source will be passed along. I know of cases where original authors have struggled for years to correct citations of their work, simply because an incorrect reference was repeatedly passed along. With Internet access to large indexing services, such as PubMed and *Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature*, checking the accuracy of this information becomes easier—time consuming, but easier. This level of checking does not require understanding of the content or appropriateness of the reference.

The third point at which we find errors is in the formatting of the citation. *Oncology Nursing Forum* uses APA reference style, as do most nursing journals. A few nursing journals and most biomedical journals use the *Index Medicus* style. Formatting software can be a huge help in getting it right. Competent and knowledgeable clerical help also can be invaluable. This aspect of referencing is purely mechanical, yet virtually every manuscript that crosses my desk contains errors to some extent. To date, we have been quite tolerant of these problems, correcting the deficiencies ourselves. We check and correct the formatting painstakingly. I am finding that it takes an extraordinary amount of time to correct even simple errors, such as changing semicolons to commas, changing uppercase to lowercase, asking authors to supply page numbers for chapters cited, and the list goes on. These types of errors can be found in manuscripts written by first-time authors as well as those with long lists of publication credits. Reference errors come from diploma nurses, those with PhDs, the lone author typing out his or her own manuscript, and authors who use the services of secretaries and editorial companies.

Just how widespread are these problems? Virtually every manuscript requires some correction of reference formatting. If references are not formatted according to APA style, then they are returned to the author

for correction. A manuscript that I edited recently was formatted according to APA, but 100% of the references needed something changed. One of our copy editors checks every reference for accuracy against one of the indexing services. A recent manuscript contained approximately 20% errors—that is, one out of every five references provided incorrect information. Other journals have cited error rates of up to 40%.

These last two types of errors are detectable and correctable, and we are putting strategies in place to see if we can fix the problems. Beginning with the January 2005 issue, every copy editor will check the accuracy of each reference's information. We will keep track of the types of errors that occur as well as their frequency so that we can accurately judge the impact of corrective action. Authors with manuscripts accepted for publication in the May 2005 issue and later will receive a letter giving them the opportunity to check the accuracy of the references themselves. New, revised reference lists can be submitted to me prior to production if changes need to be made. We will make it clear to authors completing the review process that careful attention must be paid to the accuracy of their reference lists. The policy also will be described in the Information for Authors.

Beginning with the May 2005 issue, any manuscript found to contain more than 5% of errors in the formatting of or information in the reference list at the time of copyediting will be removed from production. The author will receive a request to correct the problems and resubmit the manuscript. Once the errors are corrected, the manuscript will be rescheduled for publication based on availability at that time. In other words, the manuscript will need to go to the end of the line. Although this may seem a bit draconian, our hope is that our reference problems will be corrected quickly and the quality of what we publish will be protected. This is a problem that we can fix. It will require a bit more time and diligence on the part of each author but will result in more manuscripts being published without unfortunate delays and help to ensure the integrity of our literature base. 

Digital Object Identifier: 10.1188/04.ONF.1035