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Abstract

Developing an abstract for presentation at a professional meeting is an important means for pediatric hematology/oncology nurses to disseminate results of research and scholarly projects. Although the process for developing a successful abstract may be viewed as challenging, attention to directions for composing the abstract as well as seeking mentorship can result in a submission that is accepted for presentation.

Keywords

abstract, research dissemination, professional presentations, scholarly projects, authorship

Introduction

A growing number of pediatric hematology/oncology nurses are becoming actively engaged in the conduct of research and evidence-based practice projects as well as other scholarly clinical and educational projects. Participating in the development, conduct, and evaluation of research and scholarly projects allows nurses the opportunity to disseminate the findings to audiences beyond their own institutions. Disseminating the results of research studies and scholarly projects is a key aspect of advancing nursing science. Communicating the outcomes of these projects allows others to critique and evaluate them as well as consider how the project outcomes could be implemented in future clinical practice.

Developing an abstract of study or project findings for presentation at a professional meeting is one means of disseminating research and scholarship. Although the process for developing a successful abstract may be viewed as challenging, careful attention to the directions as well as seeking mentorship from experienced authors can result in a submission that is accepted for presentation.

Identifying the Opportunity to Submit an Abstract

Identifying Calls for Abstracts

Professional organizations issue calls for abstracts for podium or poster presentations several months in advance

of the actual meeting. The call for abstracts usually addresses the overall purpose and goals for the meeting as well as the types of abstracts that will be accepted, such as those addressing research projects or ones addressing clinical practice and education projects. The call for abstracts may identify specific topics for which presentations are sought.

Calls for abstracts often are communicated through professional membership organizations. Other opportunities for learning of calls for abstracts may come through an institutional office of research and evidence-based practice or affiliation with an academic institution that communicates calls for abstracts on a regular basis.

Reviewing Calls for Abstracts

Prior to responding to a call for abstracts, potential authors should first review the call. Areas to consider include determining whether the authors' proposed topic is consistent with the overarching goals and objectives of the meeting or topics requested within the call for abstracts. Authors also need to consider the types of abstracts that will be considered. If proposing a research-based abstract,

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Table 1. Common Abstract Types

Research-related abstracts
Completed research
Research in progress
Issues in research (eg, methods, analytic approaches)
Theoretical abstracts (eg, theory review, concept analysis)
Systematic reviews of the literature
Clinical practice projects
Education projects (staff or patient/family)
Quality improvement projects

authors should identify whether only completed research projects will be accepted or whether research in progress will be accepted. If considering an abstract of a clinical practice or education project, authors should review the call for abstracts to determine whether these submissions will be considered. Common types of abstracts that may be considered for submission are listed in Table 1.

Authors also should consider their own goals for dissemination in relation to their proposed topic when reviewing calls for abstracts. For example: Is the topic one that is best suited for a nursing audience or is it one that is likely to be of interest to a multidisciplinary audience? If selecting a nursing audience, would the topic be of greater interest to a specialty group of nurses or to a wider, general nursing audience? Additionally, is the topic one that is likely to appeal to a national or international audience?

Authors should identify the deadlines stated within the call for abstracts and consider whether the deadline is realistic. If a study or project must be completed, will the authors have adequate time to complete the analyses and evaluation prior to the submission deadline? If not, the authors may opt to wait until the organization's next call for abstracts or select another call for abstracts for their proposed submission. For "in progress" work, authors may wish to consider presenting an abstract pertaining to the methods implemented in the study or project if results will not be available at the time of the submission deadline.

Authors also need to review the call for abstracts carefully to determine whether previously presented work may be submitted. For example, a national or international meeting may allow submission of work that was previously presented at a local or regional meeting. Additionally, the call for abstracts may provide specific details about the nature of the audience to whom the presentation was made, such as to a national specialty nursing audience.

Podium or Poster Presentations

Once potential authors decide to respond to a call for abstracts, they need to make a decision regarding the

preferred format of the potential presentation. Most calls for abstracts include both podium and poster presentations and allow authors to select the preferred format for their presentation. Because opportunities for podium presentations are often very limited, many calls for abstracts allow the authors to select to have their submission considered for a poster presentation if it is not selected for a podium presentation. Calls for abstracts often require that abstracts submitted for podium presentations address a study or project that has been completed. An exception may be longitudinal studies for which a specified percentage of the target sample size has been accrued (Oncology Nursing Society, 2012).

Determining Authors

Discussion regarding potential dissemination of study or project findings through professional presentations and publications should occur early in the project's development. These discussions also should address authorship. Individuals named as authors should have made a substantial contribution to the study or project and accept responsibility for the findings to be presented and have reviewed the abstract prior to its submission (Alexandrov & Hennerici, 2007; International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, 2009). Each author should also be able to identify other authors' responsibilities for the components of the study or project and be confident of the coauthors' ability and integrity. The presenting author is listed first in the list of authors. As authors are identified, expectations should be set in relation to the timeline for the development and editing of the abstract prior to its submission as well as expectations of each author if the abstract is accepted for presentation.

Preparing to Write the Abstract

Dr. Martha Lentz (2005) provides 3 key instructions when preparing an abstract for submission:

1. Read the directions
2. Believe the directions
3. Follow the directions

Because directions for submissions vary from one call for abstracts to another, these instructions are crucial to ensure that an abstract is submitted correctly and to increase its likelihood of receiving a favorable review. Failing to follow directions may result in the abstract being rejected and never undergoing review.

Although the general format typically is similar among calls for abstracts, each organization provides its own specific instructions. These instructions may pertain to the format and the overall length of an abstract.

Calls for abstracts often specify whether to submit a structured or nonstructured abstract. With a structured abstract, specific subheadings are provided for the author to address. These subheadings may vary based on the type of submission. For example, the subheadings for a research abstract are likely to differ from those for a clinical practice project. With a nonstructured abstract, the abstract is written as one continuous paragraph without specific headings.

Specifications for the abstract length also vary from one call for abstracts to another. The most common specification for length is a word count, which may vary from 150 to 500 words. Other specifications may include a page limit or even a character limit.

Most organizations use an online submission system for abstracts. These systems also vary from one organization to another. Some provide text entry fields which include either specified subsections for each portion or a single text field for entering the entire abstract. Other submission systems provide a mechanism for uploading a document file containing the abstract.

Writing the Abstract Sections

Regardless of the prescribed format, writing a successful abstract requires solid technical writing skills. Use active voice rather than passive voice to communicate a more convincing statement about the significance of the study or project. Use consistent terminology throughout the text of the abstract, and avoid using unnecessary modifiers and adjectives. These practices create a clearer, more concise abstract and avoid “wasting” the limited number of words available to describe the study or project.

When developing drafts of a nonstructured abstract, consider using subheadings as a guide to ensure that all sections specified in the call for abstracts are addressed. Remove the subheadings prior to submitting the final draft.

If a call for abstracts allows the submission of a previously presented study or project, be careful to revise and reformat the abstract to address the objectives and instructions provided in the current call for abstracts. Do not merely resubmit a previously submitted abstract.

Title

A well-written title is an “abstract of the abstract,” (Waller & Ropka, 1993) and informs the audience of the focus of the abstract. The title should include the key variables, the population, and the context for the study or project. Avoid catchy phrases, jargon, or unfamiliar acronyms as these often do not provide key information as to the content of the abstract and may trivialize the overall quality of the work (Pierson, 2004). Some calls for abstracts specify a

word or character limit for the title, which may further direct the selection of terms used in the title.

Background/Statement of the Problem

The background/statement of the problem section provides the intended audience with sufficient context to understand basis for the specific study or project described in the abstract. A common tendency for novice authors is to include general background information in this section that may not be essential to the description of the study or project (Happell, 2007). This section should be concisely written and emphasize the specific problem being addressed by the study or project or how the problem is being addressed in a new and innovative manner.

This section can be tailored to the audience described in the call for abstracts (Haigh, 2006). For example, when describing a study or project involving patients and families with acute lymphoblastic leukemia for a predominantly pediatric hematology/oncology audience, authors do not need to provide extensive content pertaining to the diagnosis in this section. If preparing the abstract for a general nursing audience who is likely to be unfamiliar with the diagnosis, communicating that acute lymphoblastic leukemia is the most common type of childhood cancer would be appropriate. In both cases, the greater emphasis of the background/statement of the problem section will be the specific issue leading to the development of the study or project.

Purpose/Objective

This section identifies the purpose or objective of the study or project described in the abstract. The purpose/objective should be clearly stated and address the scope of the study or project. A common critique of individuals who review abstracts is that the purpose was not clear. A single sentence beginning with, “The purpose of this study/project was to . . .,” often communicates the purpose adequately and ensures that the reviewer will take notice of this section.

Methods

The methods section provides a detailed description of the procedural steps that were undertaken in the conduct of the study or project. For research abstracts, this section addresses the conceptual framework guiding the study as well as the study design. (In some cases, the conceptual framework may be described in its own separate section.) For research abstracts, identify the study sample, key variables, measures, and analysis. For project abstracts, identify the target population and the processes used in the development and implementation of the project.

Findings/Results

This section often is the most overlooked portion of the abstract. Failing to address the findings or results of the study or project in the abstract can significantly lower its score and cause it to be rejected.

If reporting the results of a study, focus on the key findings in relation to the stated purpose. For quantitative studies, include relevant statistical values along with *p* values (Wood & Morrison, 2011). State the direction of the statistical analyses to provide interpretation of the findings, for example, “less fatigue,” “positively correlated,” and so on. For qualitative studies, describe the key findings in a manner consistent with the methodology guiding the study. For studies that are in progress, state the preliminary results or plans for analysis at the completion of the study.

For projects, describe the outcomes of the project and how the outcomes were evaluated. As applicable, identify, using measurable terms, how practice has been affected following implementation of the project. Avoid using anecdotal reports of project outcomes or vague terms such as “improved satisfaction” or “improved knowledge.”

Conclusions/Implications for Practice

This closing section of the abstract provides concluding statements of the importance or significance of the study or project. This section identifies clinical implications and also future implications, which may include the need for additional research. Statements in this section should be aligned with the overarching goals and objectives stated in the organization’s call for abstracts.

Seeking Feedback and Mentorship

For any author, seeking and responding to feedback on an abstract prior to its submission increases its likelihood of acceptance. Abstracts that are accepted for presentation often undergo multiple drafts and revisions prior to their submission. Setting personal deadlines in advance of the submission deadline facilitates opportunities to seek and respond to feedback.

New or less experienced authors often benefit from seeking mentorship from a previously successful author. Mentorship may come from an individual within the author’s institution or from someone outside of the institution such as an experienced author from a local school of nursing. A good mentor can support the novice author in reviewing the call for abstracts, organizing and constructing the abstract, and providing consistent feedback.

Another tip for preparing a successful abstract is to seek feedback from someone who is relatively unfamiliar with the study or project. This individual will be able to provide feedback specific to the overall clarity and

completeness of the abstract that might be missed by someone familiar with the study or project.

Before submitting the abstract, carefully review it one final time for any grammatical and typographical errors. With multiple drafts and revisions, these errors are easy to occur and are easily overlooked. Once the abstract has been submitted, celebrate the submission and wait for communication from the organization.

Conclusion

Developing a successful abstract is a challenging, but rewarding, effort. By attending to the goals of the call for abstracts, following directions carefully, and seeking mentorship and feedback, pediatric hematology/oncology nurses can be successful in writing abstracts that will allow them to disseminate the research and projects in which they are engaging. Through communication of these studies and projects, pediatric hematology/oncology nurses will have a powerful role in advancing the science of pediatric hematology/oncology nursing.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Bio

Lauri Linder, PhD, APRN, CPON, holds a joint appointment as an Assistant Professor with the University of Utah College of Nursing and as a clinical nurse specialist with the Hematology/Oncology/Transplant Service Line at Primary Children's Medical Center. Her research emphasis is in symptom management for children and adolescents with cancer.