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 an author and expanding the work or information in the text (ONS, 2005). In the March issue, 15 articles had 597 references, 151 of which had content-related errors, for an 18% 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 reflect the official policy or position of the Oncology Nursing Society.”

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 (Kirchoff, 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).