

How to Craft a Strong Discussion Section

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The research report's Discussion section can be the most interesting part for readers to consume but the most difficult one for authors to produce. A cleverly crafted Discussion section not only connects salient information from the Background, Method, and Results sections but also moves beyond that content to provide important insights. The Discussion section tells readers why they should care about the project. This editorial outlines some key content to enrich the contribution authors can make in their Discussion sections.

Remain results-driven: Discussion sections must be entirely consistent with the results. Resist the temptation to write a Discussion about what you hoped to find but did not.

Say's what's new: Although Discussion sections interpret findings in the context of extant knowledge, do not repeat the Background section's discussion. Instead, explicate how the study moves beyond previous research and underscore the importance of the work. Relatedly, provide plausible explanations for unexpected results, as well as their potential causes and implications for future research.

Tread lightly on theory: Many nursing research projects are based on theories or conceptual models but were not designed to test them. Authors should be cautious not to over-interpret study findings as supporting or contradicting specific theories unless the study was carefully designed to test a theory.

Deal with the magnitude of effects or relationships: For example, a correlation of .15, which may be statistically significant in a large sample, is far less important than a correlation of .75. For comparisons between groups, reporting an effect size in the Results section can set up an interesting Discussion section. Comparing effect sizes of the current study with effect sizes from extant research can add much to the Discussion by leading to interpretation of the clinical importance of the magnitude of findings. Avoid misinterpreting *p* values as indications of magnitude of effects or associations.

Speak to nurses: Some nursing journals expect explicit statements about findings' nursing implications, but authors should be cautious of overstatement in this area. Avoid the temptation to make vague statements about

nurses needing to be aware of specific problems. Instead, consider discussing your research program's ultimate implications without specifying a particular project's immediate nursing practice implications.

Know your limits: All studies have some limitations that should be acknowledged. But be concise. Authors who write more about limitations than other content may lead readers to wonder whether the study should have been conducted or reported. Report difficulties implementing the study and explain the possible influence of the variations. Address challenges with measures, which is quite valuable information for other researchers.

Suggest what's next: Offer brief and specific suggestions for future research generated by the completed project. Ban any version of the following pat phrase from your writing: "This topic is important and thus merits future research."

Leave these out: The Discussion section is not the place to restate results or to present new ones, unless they are necessary to interpret findings. Similarly, avoid using new references supporting the need for the study but instead use new references as necessary to explain unexpected or unusual findings. Save imperative language—such as "nurses must . . ."—for opinion articles. Omit general statements unless they relate to the specific project. These include statements about the importance of the health problem, which properly appear in the Background.

Cultivate the best content: Outstanding Discussion content can come from several sources. Writing other manuscript sections may generate ideas for Discussion topics. Take time to capture those ideas as they occur. Co-authors can be helpful, especially if the lead author becomes entangled in the study's details and has difficulty seeing the overall project in the context of existing knowledge. When ideas are scarce, look to Discussion sections of similar work for inspiration. Authors must arrive at the most important ideas to include in the Discussion because not all aspects can be addressed. It is important to allow ample gestation for the discussion. The practice of hastily finishing a manuscript to get it into journal review rarely leads to an insightful Discussion.

The Discussion can be the most creative section of research reports. This is where investigators productively speculate on the most important aspects of their work. A well written discussion section provides insights not found elsewhere in the paper. These astute interpretations of findings are essential as nurses develop the knowledge base to improve patient outcomes.

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