

Simplifying the Writing Process for the Novice Writer

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Nurses take responsibility for reading information to update their professional knowledge and to meet relicensure requirements. However, nurses are less enthusiastic about writing for professional publication. This article explores the reluctance of nurses to write, the reasons why writing for publication is important to the nursing profession, the importance of mentoring to potential writers, and basic information about simplifying the writing process for novice writers.

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“WRITING IS EASY,” according to Gene Fowler. “All you do is stare at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead.”¹ Many people agree that writing is so difficult and painful a process that it should be avoided at all costs and left to the expertise of the professional writer. Although writing does require some talent, it is a learned process that can be challenging, intriguing, captivating, and enjoyable given the proper amount of time, effort, and practice. Writing is a means of literary composition that communicates ideas. Sharing those ideas with colleagues can be important to a profession such as nursing, as well as immensely satisfying to the author. Choosing to work under the guidance of a mentor is one of the most important decisions a novice writer can make because the mentor can help make writing for publication a reality.

Mentoring

New challenges, such as writing for publication, can be daunting and frightening for inex-

perienced writers. However, good mentors can cultivate a willingness in potential writers to take a risk, and can instill the belief in their ability to succeed at writing for publication.

Mentors can help new writers in several other ways. They can be supportive in the efforts of fledgling writers by acting as resources who encourage ideas and help in the writing process. They may provide resources for learning or improving writing techniques such as the Writers’ Workshop, offered by ASPAN, or other writing workshops or formal courses. Mentors can identify self-help journal articles that offer writing tips and can act as resources of information such as helpful librarians and good Web sites.

Mentors can also serve as conduits to publishing sources, guiding writers to level-appropriate publications. These publications include basic, general publications such as component newsletters of ASPAN or worksite publications. More advanced publications include *Breathline* (the ASPAN newsletter), specialized professional journals such as ASPAN’s *Journal of PeriAnesthesia Nursing*, other specialty journals, or general professional nursing journals such as *American Journal of Nursing* or *RN*.

It is especially important that mentors foster writing at all levels of the profession. Mentors

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can begin early by encouraging nursing students to expand and revise class papers for publication. For example, an RN in a BSN program who worked in a Neonatal ICU wrote a paper entitled, "Pediatric Pain: Myths, Assessment, and Interventions."² The revised paper, of interest to perianesthesia nurses, ultimately appeared in the Nebraska Association of PeriAnesthesia Nurses component newsletter, *Nap-pin' News*. Mentors can encourage other, more seasoned professionals to write for publication at nearly any chosen level, given the appropriate help and guidance required.

Obstacles to Writing

Although writing is important and satisfying, most nurses generally identify several obstacles to writing. These obstacles include lack of time, lack of professional credentials, lack of expertise, and lack of technical preparation in the art of writing.

Nurses are busy professionals. In this fast-paced world of mounting challenges and multiple demands, some nurses work at least part time, and many others are full-time employees. Many are raising families, some as single parents, while functioning as significant others, caregivers, teachers, domestic engineers, chauffeurs, coaches, and advisors to families, friends, and colleagues. Sometimes these same nurses are raising not only their own families, but caring for their parents, in-laws, or grandchildren at the same time. Some are continuing their own formal education with all the associated demands and strains. Finally, they experience multiple other demands and commitments to work, school, church, and community. Because of these multiple demands, is it any wonder that most nurses scramble to find time just to read information that enables them to keep abreast of care in their profession?

Another obstacle to writing for publication is that many nurses believe they do not have enough formal education or credentials to write professionally, even though no correlation has

ever been established between writing ability and education. They limit their writing skills to patient care documentation or employee evaluations; letters or e-mail to family, friends and colleagues; or patient care plans and term papers for school. However, according to American Association of Colleges of Nursing President Carolyn Williams, PhD, RN, FAAN, "We only have 10% of the nursing population with a master's or doctorate."³ The remaining 90% are diploma, associate degree, or baccalaureate degree prepared.

The manner in which nurses perceive themselves is yet another obstacle to writing. Many nurses tend to underestimate their expertise and abilities, identifying themselves as "just staff nurses." They fail to realize that the manner in which they function might be different, interesting, or helpful to others in similar practice. It seems easier for these nurses to read what experienced professional authors have to say than to take the initiative to write about one's own new and innovative practice.

Finally, most nurses lack proper training in writing for publication. Even if they have an idea for a manuscript, they might imagine the process to be difficult and time consuming, have no idea how to proceed, or where to turn for help. Therefore, their great ideas never reach print and are never shared with colleagues.

Acknowledging obstacles to writing is the first challenge. Understanding the importance of writing for our profession is the next challenge.

Why Write for Publication

There are several elements common to any profession. These elements include the study of a unique body of knowledge, standard educational requirements (usually a minimum baccalaureate degree), standards for its own members, and self-governance.⁴ In addition, research and specialization within a profession, such as perianesthesia nursing, elevate the level of that profession.

“Professions have a responsibility to define their practice and to protect consumers by assuring the delivery of quality service.”⁴ Perianesthesia nursing, as a developing professional specialty, requires astute nursing care and specific knowledge of the nature and needs of patients. Nurses in our specialty need to draw from physiologic, medical, surgical, and anesthetic information; set appropriate patient care priorities; and recognize and intervene to prevent potential problems and treat actual problems.⁵

Perianesthesia nurses care for a broad spectrum of patients. Perianesthesia patients include children and the elderly, low-acuity patients with relatively simple needs, and high-acuity patients with complex medical problems. Procedures can be simple and elective, or complex surgical emergencies. Settings include both ambulatory and acute care. Nurses provide care that is a unique blend of loving touch and high technology in this rapidly evolving specialty.

It is important that nurses publish to support nursing as a profession, to expand the literature, and to communicate information to colleagues. “Knowledge is no good . . . unless what is learned is shared with others. Facts are of no benefit if they are isolated. Sharing with others is the key to education.”⁶ Nurses must draw from experience, science, research, and practice to contribute to nursing’s body of specialized knowledge. Learning from the past, nurses must provide information to each other for the future, addressing the following issues: new technology and equipment, new procedures, new medications and anesthetic agents, community health care, admission and discharge planning, patient and family teaching, regulating agency issues, government regulations and reimbursement, staffing and management, legal issues, performance improvement and risk management, ethical issues, best practice issues, and research findings.⁷ Such efforts will enable nurses, as individual practitioners who work collaboratively and as a profession, to meet changes and challenges proactively and to rec-

Table 1. Writing Process Follows Nursing Process

Assessment
Timeliness
Single idea
Slant
Target audience
Self-interest
Diagnosis
Planning
Best format
Publisher selection
Implementation
Query letter
Target date
Literature search
Organizing the manuscript
Writing the manuscript
Evaluation
Reviewing, revising, proofreading
Manuscript preparation
Manuscript submission
Acceptance and publication

Data from Redmond.⁸

ognize their unique contribution to the nursing profession.

Although nurses must understand the importance of writing for the nursing profession, it is important to acknowledge the obstacles to writing. However, knowing that writing can be challenging, time consuming, and sometimes frustrating need not deter the potential writer. Writing can also be an opportunity to stretch, to try something new, and to dare to succeed.

Simplifying the Writing Process

Deciding to write is a big decision and a commitment of time and energy. Once made, the rest of the process is as logical, systematic, and precise as the nursing process: assessment, nursing diagnosis, planning, implementation, and evaluation (Table 1).⁸

Assessment

Author and editor, Suzanne Hall Johnson,⁹ offers some specific “how to” information that simplifies the writing process and increases the probability of having a manuscript accepted for publication. A writer needs to spend most of his or her effort developing a unique idea, for it

Table 2. Top Reasons for Manuscript Rejection

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- Manuscript is sent to wrong journal.
 - Content does not provide new information.
 - Information is too old or out of date.
 - Topic is too narrow or appeals to narrow segment of audience.
 - Important contributions to the topic are missing or out-of-date references used.
 - Author has relied too heavily on the literature.
 - Manuscript was a class paper or speech.
 - Too little information about methods given or methodology is flawed (research papers).
 - Manuscript does not make a point.
 - Manuscript is poorly written.
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Data from Sullivan.¹⁰

may actually determine the editor's acceptance or rejection of a manuscript. Eleanor J. Sullivan, editor of the *Journal of Professional Nursing*, cites the top 10 reasons that a manuscript is rejected (Table 2).¹⁰ To improve the likelihood of a manuscript's acceptance for publication, it is helpful to consider criteria outlined by Hall Johnson⁹:

Timeliness. Information must be timely and relevant, not only for the present, but also for the future. Old or redundant information is hardly useful or interesting enough for publication.

Single idea. The idea can be based on a new or unusual activity done at work, newly learned information or a new application of information, new procedures and associated patient care considerations, easier and more efficient ways of performing activities, helpful ideas that patients appreciate most, clinical questions that have been investigated or research that has been completed, solutions to recent problems that have occurred, or group projects. Other sources of ideas may come from reading material or from observing others.

Slant. It is important to avoid writing "all about . . ." Instead, the writer should develop one unique slant on which to focus. As a result, interested readers should learn at least one specific point from the manuscript or be

able to do one thing differently when they have finished reading the manuscript.¹¹

Target audience. A successful writer understands the reading audience and writes to their interests. He or she is able to convince the editor, and ultimately the readers, that they should read the manuscript, for example, to improve patient care; save time or money; increase satisfaction, retention, or recruitment; decrease stress; increase self-esteem; or solve a professional problem.¹²

It is helpful to identify who within the nursing profession would be interested in the idea, who within other health professions would be interested in the idea, and who within the public would be interested in the idea. Hall Johnson advises that the manuscript should potentially interest 80% of a publication's readers.⁹

Self-interest. Finally, the idea has to interest the writer. Good writers rarely find it worth their time or effort to write on a topic in which they have little interest, no knowledge, or no desire to learn.⁸

Diagnosis

Once the assessment phase is complete, the writer has reached the diagnosis phase. Having developed and sorted all of the ideas, the writer can identify and select the one idea that is potentially most publishable and develop it into an appealing manuscript.⁸

Planning

After completing the assessment and diagnosis, the next phase is planning. There are several aspects to consider.

Best format. The format which best suits and conveys the idea should be selected. Manuscript formats may include case study, discussion of a patient or professional problem, presentation of a technique, how-to-do. . . , project process and outcome, opinion format, letter to the editor, new concept presentation, or research presentation. Other,

more advanced formats include modules, audio-visual programs, computer programs, chapters, and books.

Publisher selection. Several criteria should be considered when selecting the best journal or publisher for a manuscript, including the following: the desired reading audience one wishes to reach, the size and extent of the publication's circulation, chances of manuscript acceptance (generally better in a new or specialty publication), the publisher's likely interest in the manuscript material, whether the submissions are refereed (ie, subject to peer review before acceptance, which can be especially important to faculty members), and payment for published manuscripts.¹² Because a general idea can correspond to many publications, the writer must decide which one publication is best suited to his or her one specific idea, unique slant, target audience, and specific format.⁸

Implementation

Having made all of the preceding important decisions, the groundwork has been laid for a good manuscript. Now the writer is ready to begin the implementation phase.

Query letter. In the query letter to the editor, the writer should describe his or her expertise without self-underestimation. In this situation, professional expertise is every bit as important as academic credentials. Editors look for good balance among their contributors to appeal to a variety of readers.

Next, the writer should describe what is unique about his or her particular idea, and include an abstract or one-page outline for the editor's consideration. It is important to describe how readers will benefit from the article, and to ask if the editor is interested in the idea presented.

The query may be sent to the editor by mail or e-mail. It should include the writer's name and mailing address or e-mail address so the

editor can respond, usually within 4 to 6 weeks. If interested in the idea, the editor will offer guidelines and suggestions as appropriate to develop the idea for possible publication.

Target dates. While waiting for the editor's response, the writer can set some target dates (eg, dates for completing a literature review, writing the manuscript, planning illustrations, and submitting the manuscript). Dates help keep the workload in perspective and mark milestones toward the writer's goal.

Literature search. Because it is easy to become overwhelmed or sidetracked, good writers concentrate on what information needs to be obtained based on the specific idea for the manuscript. Only the best and most applicable references should be selected.¹³ The search begins with the most recent material and goes back no more than 5 years for an overview. However, material older than 5 years may be used if no new information has been published. The writer may also wish to incorporate and build on older information considered classic to show an evolution (eg, in thought, treatment, or procedure), or for comparison and contrast.

Organizing the manuscript. A fairly simple way to begin is by listing general ideas, then reordering the ideas several times so that information flows logically and makes good sense. Some writers prefer to write outlines. Others put information on note cards for easy rearrangement. Still others write, then cut and paste. The best method is the one that works best for the individual writer. Once organized, the information can be broken down into headings or subtopics for easy management.

Writing the manuscript. Once the assessment, diagnosis, planning, and preparation are complete, the actual writing can begin. Although ideal, one can rarely set aside 8-hour days for writing. Instead, the average writer

generally needs to use available time to complete various segments or subtopics of the manuscript. It may be best to schedule time to write several times a week if possible. The best arrangement is the one that suits the writer's work style.

When writing the first draft, it is best to write down the important ideas and information without regard to form. When the manuscript is completed the information can then be edited over time. Good form means one idea per paragraph, with the main idea stated in the first sentence of the paragraph. Transitional paragraphs should be placed after all headings listing the main points to be covered. Good form also means avoiding long run-on sentences and varying sentence length. Active, rather than passive voice is more powerful. Words should be clear and appropriate to the technical and educational level of the anticipated reading audience. Needless words should be omitted. Finally, correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation are essential.^{10,14-18}

To enhance the visual appearance of the manuscript, to highlight important information, or to summarize lengthy information, the writer can add illustrations to the manuscript. These illustrations may include charts for work or number content, drawings for concepts or techniques, or pictures for people or action.⁷

Evaluation

After completion of the manuscript, it is best set aside for a short period. This allows the writer time to refresh the mind and renew the energy level before beginning the final phase of the writing process.

Reviewing, revising, and proofreading. The writer must review the manuscript for accuracy and clarity, and revise it as necessary. Conducting a final review of the literature for any new articles on the topic will enable the writer to incorporate the most

current information available. Taking time to proofread the manuscript can save costly or embarrassing mistakes.

Manuscript preparation. When the manuscript is complete, the writer needs to follow the publisher's guidelines for submission. These guidelines usually can be found in the front or back of the selected publication or on the publisher's Web site. Guidelines usually ask for a cover letter. Next, the author's credit line should include any degrees and certification and the author's current employer and position. There should be a title page. Then the body of the manuscript, any tables, and references should be typed according to guidelines. Drawings of any figures and pictures should also be submitted according to guidelines. A signed copyright release will likely be required.

Manuscript submission. Upon completion, the writer can submit the entire package to the editor, and then sit back and relax. Often the editor will send a letter or e-mail to the author acknowledging receipt of the manuscript. The editor will then review the manuscript for general applicability for the publication's readership and make a cursory estimation of its quality. If the publication is refereed, the editor will assign blind copies of the manuscript to peer reviewers who are knowledgeable about the subject for comments and recommendations.¹⁰

When the editor responds after several weeks or months, he or she will most likely return the manuscript to the writer with multiple comments and suggestions for a revision.¹⁹ "Rarely do all reviewers recommend acceptance without some suggested changes."²⁰ Because it can be terribly disheartening after all the initial hard work to be asked to revise the manuscript, the writer should set the manuscript and comments aside for a short time, then revise the manuscript, taking the editor's and re-

viewers' suggestions into consideration, and resubmit the revised manuscript. Kathleen O'Connell advises, "Don't submit if you don't intend to resubmit."²⁰ Sullivan adds, "Authors who include explanations of how they incorporated the reviewers' recommendations into the revised paper or why certain recommendations are not appropriate in their cover letter enhance their chances at publication."¹⁰ The editor will again review the revised manuscript using some type of "criteria for publishability" (Table 3) to determine final acceptance.⁹

Acceptance and Publication

By now the writer can recall verbatim every word of the manuscript from memory. The many months of hard work are finished. The waiting period is nearly over. It is just a matter of receiving official word of acceptance before the writer can breathe a sigh of relief.

Acceptance. Once the manuscript has been accepted for publication, the editor notifies the writer and usually gives an estimated publication date. Then, shortly before publication, the publisher sends the writer the galley (ie, the typeset proof of the manuscript as it will appear in the upcoming publication). The writer is responsible for proofreading the final copy, making any corrections, and answering any questions the publisher may have.

Publication. When the manuscript finally appears in print, it is cause for the writer to celebrate! He or she has at last survived a trying 8- to 12-month process and can take pride in a job well done. Most writers feel that the entire process has been worthwhile once they see the manuscript in print.

Conclusion

Writing is hard work. Yet it offers new vistas and opportunities to try something new and dare to succeed. Ask any published writer; the outcome is worth the process. "What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure."—Samuel Johnson, 1791

Table 3. Criteria for Publishability

Accuracy
Anatomy and pathophysiology are adequately presented for baseline understanding of clinical content.
Theory is accurate.
Pertaining to research:
Research method is accurate and competent
Significant sample size is used
Reliable and valid methods are used
Statistics are reliable
Variables are controlled
Recommendations are appropriate
Statements are accurate.
Resources are used when needed.
Resources are accurate.
Resources are verifiable.
Resources are current (within 5 yr).
Resources are properly footnoted according to journal guidelines.
Indicates familiarity in context of author's practice.
Timeliness
Topic is timely.
Topic has a new slant.
Audience
Targets interested journal readers.
Avoids telling readers what they already know.
Avoids using "must" and "should" words.
Suggests implications for nursing practice.
Organization
Focuses on one main idea.
Title is consistent with the text.
Headings are used for main points.
Main points are in logical order.
Flows to logical conclusions that follow from data.
Format
Format is appropriate to the topic.
Length is appropriate to the content, journal.
Style
Paragraph level
First and last paragraphs describe the idea.
Each paragraph has one main idea.
Main idea of the paragraph is stated first/last.
Sentence level
Sentences are the appropriate length.
Sentence length varies.
Transition sentences are included.
Word level
Use active verbs.
Omit grandiose words for effect.
Omit needless words.
Is grammatically correct.
Illustrations
Uses charts for word/number content.
Uses drawings for concepts/techniques.
Uses pictures for people/action.
Recommendations
For publication
With minor revision
With major revision
Against publication

Data from Hall Johnson,⁹ and Hooper and Odom.²¹

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Other Related Web Sites

- University of Florida, College of Nursing Web site offers online resources and Internet links for nurse writers. Available at <http://con.ufl.edu/ors/writers/#1>
- The Writer's Roost offers a periodic Internet journal intended for writers and editors, featuring Sammie Justensen, RN, nurse editor, writer, and publisher, who gives tips to improve writing skills. Available at www.thewritersroost.com