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Becoming a Published Writer

How to create a writing life and tips on getting started.

This is the first in a series of articles to help nurses share their knowledge, skills, and insight through writing for publication. Nurses have something important to contribute no matter what their nursing role. This series will help nurses develop good writing habits and sharpen their writing skills. It will take nurses step by step through the publication process, highlighting what gets published and why, how to submit articles and work with editors, and common pitfalls to avoid.

Think about all you know and all you do as a nurse. Think about the clinical expertise you bring to your practice, the insights you've gained through experience. Think about the problems you solve, improving patient care or creating systems that run more effectively and efficiently. And think about the times you've been present at life-defining moments, at moments of suffering and renewal, at beginnings and endings. You carry all of this with you—knowledge and skills, wisdom and insight. It's time to share it.

WHY WRITE?

Nursing encompasses a multitude of roles that span the many different areas of health care. For some, writing for publication is an accepted, even required, part of their role. For researchers, publication of study results is the final step of any research project. It is the cornerstone of building a body of nursing knowledge and the foundation of evidence-based practice. Nurses working in the policy arena use writing and publishing to advance local, national, and international health care agendas that are informed by nursing values. They understand the importance of bringing nurses' voices to the public dialogue on health care issues such as access to care, allocation of resources, health care disparities, reimbursement, and patient safety.

However, most nurses outside of academia and the policy arena don't think of writing for publication as part of their nursing role; their focus is on patient care. But it is this particular focus that makes nurses' voices so important. Nurse clinicians have expert clinical knowledge grounded in evidence *and* in action. As members of a practice profession providing evidence-based care, we need knowledge that is scientific, experiential, and practical. Clinical nurses who write can bring all of this to the page.

Finally, nursing is an art as well as a science. Reflective narratives, personal essays and stories, and poetry offer insight into the work we do and have an important place in the body of nursing knowledge. They get at the essence of nursing. They humanize the profound—the fortitude and hope and loss and courage we witness. They also show the humorous, mundane, and scary times of nursing. They let us shape the narrative of nursing and hence the way nurses are viewed by others in and out of health care.

Writing and getting published isn't easy. It takes time and can be fraught with frustration. But it can also be exhilarating and rewarding. You already know how rewarding it is to see a patient get better or experience less pain or fear as a result of your care. Writing and publishing gives you the opportunity to make a difference in an untold number of patients' lives

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through sharing information that can be used by nurses far afield. It can also enable you to influence policy decisions that affect populations. Or persuade people to think differently on important topics. Or have a deeper understanding of what it means to be a nurse. Your writing has the power to do all of that. So, let's get started . . .

CREATING A WRITING LIFE

Writers write; it's that simple and that difficult. The only way to get better at writing is to write frequently and to get feedback. Writing needs to become an established part of your life. That means allotting time and attention to honing your writing skills, pursuing writing opportunities, and of course, actually writing. Here are a few things you can do to achieve this.

Read. You should read well-written scholarly writing. When doing so, notice the way in which authors structure their articles. There are formal guidelines for structuring different types of journal articles (I'll discuss these in future articles in this series), but first you want to look at how the authors engage the reader, particularly in the introduction and discussion sections.

Form or join a writing group. You can't write in a vacuum—getting good feedback is essential. Find other nurses who are committed to writing. If you can't get a group together, try to at least find a writing buddy. Choose people who will create a safe environment for sharing encouragement and honest feedback. Establish goals and guidelines for the group, including the expectation that everyone will carefully read selected manuscripts and contribute meaningful feedback. For the most valuable use of your time together, focus on content and organization in your feedback. Good grammar is important, but unless a manuscript contains extensive grammatical errors, pointing out every misused comma or apostrophe is not appropriate or helpful. And as with any feedback, it's not just about what's wrong or needs improvement; let the author know what works and offer praise when it's earned.

GETTING READY TO WRITE

Before getting started, there are a number of things you can do to ensure your writing will go smoothly and efficiently. I'll address deciding what to write about and the different types of articles in a future installment in the series; here we'll focus on logistics.

As members of a practice profession providing evidence-based care, nurses need knowledge that is scientific, experiential, and practical. Clinical nurses who write can bring all of this to the page.

Reading different genres—literature, poetry, opinion pieces, and personal essays—can help you develop an ear for how language is used. Good writing should flow—no matter whether it is a research report or a lyrical essay. As you read more good writing, it will begin to inform the rhythm and voice in your own work.

Write regularly. Establish a writing routine. Try starting or ending your day with 15 minutes of personal writing to develop your writing "muscles." When you're working on a particular manuscript, make a writing schedule. If you're a faculty member, set aside a regular time for scholarly writing throughout the year since this is an integral part of your role. Either way, make sure the schedule is realistic so you stick to it. Some people write first thing in the morning before their minds become cluttered with the demands of the day. Block out protected time in your calendar. For more on this, see Getting Ready to Write, below.

Set aside space and time. Block out a period of time for writing and create a space where your writing tools and resources are always ready. Yes, you can make some progress in small stints at the kitchen table, but you will work most efficiently if you can spend hours, not minutes, on your writing. Setting aside adequate time allows you to get to that mental place where you can concentrate deeply on the actual writing. This starts with getting your head into writing mode, reviewing any notes you've made, and gathering pertinent articles, such as those included in a literature review. Or, if you're working on a paper in progress, setting aside time enables you to reorient yourself by reading over what you've written in previous sessions.

There are two important advantages to having a dedicated writing space. First, you won't have to

waste time pulling out materials and setting up your workspace each time; everything is right there as you left it, ready to begin again. Second, you're more likely to sit down and write. It's easy to avoid writing, and the hassle of setting up a space can make the difference between sitting down to write that day or giving in to the natural inclination to procrastinate.

Minimize distractions. Once you start writing, you want to do so without interruption. Try to control environmental distractions such as noise, discomfort (the right chair is important!), family members, calls and text messages, and that greatest of all distractions—the Internet.

Get offline. The most effective way to do this is to simply turn off your Internet connection. Try to search for and download the articles you need ahead of time. When doing a literature search, it's too easy to end up down the rabbit hole, becoming distracted by every fascinating tidbit of information you come across. That article listed under the one you need is just too interesting to resist, and before you know it you've lost an hour or more on something that won't advance your writing. Instead of reading those tempting articles, download them into a folder on your desktop or into a bibliographic software program (more about this later) to read another time. During your designated writing time, stay focused on the writing at hand.

There are software programs that can help you control the amount of time you spend on the Internet. Some (Freedom, for example) completely block the Internet for a set period of time, while others, like Cold Turkey, block the specific Web sites you choose. These programs are ideal if you have a hard time ignoring e-mails or social media, but still need to access online data, work collaboratively on cloud services, or access databases or other information sites while you work.

Turn off your phone. Don't just put your cell phone on silent or vibrate—even a phone vibrating against a table might be enough to break your concentration. And although you may intend not to answer it, once you hear your phone you might start to wonder who's calling and why.

Create privacy. Let anyone sharing the area in which you are writing know that you are off limits during designated writing hours. If you continue to be interrupted, consider escaping to the library or to an empty office or classroom where you can work undisturbed. If you have young children and write at home, schedule your writing time before they get up in the morning or after they're in bed at night.

Familiarize yourself with tools and resources. There are many tools and resources that can help you

Writing Resources

WEB SITES

EQUATOR Network
An international resource center for the promotion of good reporting of health research. Contains many writing and publishing resources for authors.
www.equator-network.org

Grammar Girl
A very popular source for grammar essentials and word choice guidelines.
www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl

Nurse Author and Editor
An online publication that offers resources on writing and publishing for nurse authors, editors, and reviewers, including a comprehensive directory of peer-reviewed nursing journals.
http://naepub.com

NursingWriting
A blog on scholarly writing by Thomas Lawrence Long, a nursing professor at the University of Connecticut School of Nursing. It features links to many resources as well as calls for submissions.
http://nursingwriting.wordpress.com

Purdue Online Writing Lab
A great resource, especially the American Psychological Association and Modern Language Association formatting guides.
http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl

The Scholar's Voice
Writing resources, links, and tips from the author.
www.thescholarsvoice.com

BOOKS

AMA Manual of Style: A Guide for Authors and Editors
10th ed. JAMA and Archives Journals, Oxford University Press, 2007

Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life by Anne Lamott
Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1995

The Chicago Manual of Style
16th ed. University of Chicago Press, 2010

The Elements of Style by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White
4th ed. Pearson, 1999

On Writing Well by William K. Zinsser
Harper Perennial, 30th Anniversary Reprint edition, 2016

Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association
6th ed. American Psychological Association, 2009

work as efficiently as possible with minimal frustration. Investing time in learning about them or becoming proficient in their use will pay off in the long run.

Tools. The most important tool, of course, is the program you write in, such as Microsoft Word. Become an expert in it. You want to be able to write and maneuver through documents quickly, cutting and pasting, moving text, changing from portrait to landscape, finding and replacing words, merging documents, creating bulleted lists or tables, inserting symbols, and so on. Take advantage of courses offered by your school's library or check out the many free tutorials online (for example, see GCFLearnFree.org).

Another invaluable tool is a bibliographic software program such as EndNote (from Thomson Reuters) or RefWorks (from ProQuest). These programs save and organize articles in your literature search and format your reference list—arguably one of their most helpful features. They aren't difficult to use and can save you considerable time. If you are affiliated with a college, check with your library for access and instruction. Many large hospitals, particularly those connected to a medical school, provide staff with access to these programs.

Resources. A great one-stop online resource is the Open Education Database's "150 Resources to Help You Write Better, Faster, and More Persuasively" (http://oedb.org/ilibrarian/150-writing-resources). It includes resources on writing skills, databases, organization, references, and tools, among others.

Don't forget about librarians! If you're affiliated with a university or an academic medical center, get acquainted with the librarian. Librarians are experts at conducting literature searches, so they can be a great help in that area. For more helpful resources, see *Writing Resources*.

Get to know the guidelines. All journals have author guidelines for manuscript submission. Included in these guidelines are established publication standards they follow and the formatting style they use.

Publication standards and reporting guidelines. All biomedical and nursing journals adhere to established standards for reporting research, quality improvement (QI) projects, and systematic reviews or meta-analyses. These standards are in place to increase transparency in reporting, ensure ethical authorship and publishing practices, and enhance the ability of readers to critically appraise methodology and interpret results. See *Publication Standards and Guidelines*.

Review the guidelines before you start writing. In fact, it would be helpful to review the guidelines even before starting a research or QI project. They make excellent checklists for planning a rigorous project and include all the necessary components for publication.

Formatting and style guides. Journals use different formatting and style guidelines, such as *The Chicago Manual of Style* or the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. A style guide is not just about formatting references. It also provides guidelines on writing clearly and concisely (the hallmarks of good writing), avoiding biased language, using tables and figures, and organization, among others. Many nursing journals use American Psychological Association formatting, so buying their publication manual is a good investment.

START WRITING

Now you're ready to become a writer. The next article in this series will focus on the craft of writing—what you need to know to write well. The third article will address the different types of articles nursing journals publish, and the final article will cover the publication process. In the meantime, set up your space and start writing! ▼

Publication Standards and Guidelines

CONSORT (Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials)
www.consort-statement.org

ICMJE (International Committee of Medical Journal Editors)
www.icmje.org

PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses)
www.prisma-statement.org

SQUIRE (Standards for Quality Improvement Reporting Excellence)
www.squire-statement.org

TREND (Transparent Reporting of Evaluations with Nonrandomized Designs)
www.cdc.gov/trendstatement

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