“Novice Authors … What You Need to Know to Make Writing for Publication Smooth”

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DURING BASIC NURSING training, a student would not consider performing a procedure such as starting an intravenous line without first learning the basic steps. Aseptic/sterile technique, identification of a suitable vein to cannulate, setting up an infusion, and learning the motor skills involved are just some of the components of the procedure. Writing for publication also involves learning basic prerequisite information. For first time authors, there are a host of issues that should be entertained before the submission of a manuscript. Following a predetermined process of preparation should make the task easier to navigate and increase the odds of success. Without forethought and planning, the experience may be a negative one. The purpose of this column is to review some of the issues that novice authors may encounter. Related issues including the importance of writing for publication, publication process, suitable types of articles, ethical and legal aspects, the revision process, and conversion of an academic-style paper to a suitable manuscript have been covered in earlier columns. This information should be reviewed by and prove valuable to the novice author.

Barriers to Research

Research serves to provide evidence to nursing practice. Without nurse-generated research, care administered to patients would not continue to improve and evolve. There is evidence that nurses do not esteem nurse-generated research as highly as they should. In fact, nurses may rate a manuscript that is written by a physician more highly than one written by a nurse. There is also evidence that nurse-generated research does not get published. Winslow found that only 37.5% of the poster presentations at a national meeting were eventually published within a 6-year period. The phenomena of nurses not publishing their research are not limited to those in the United States. A study of nurses in England showed that that 71% of the nurses were involved with research but only 58% wrote the results up, 10% had submitted their research for publication, and 9% were accepted for publication. It has been noted that academic Australian nurses do not publish to the same degree as other disciplines. Nurses may not publish their research because of a number of reasons. Reasons reported include being insecure with their chosen research methodology, lacking confidence to write, diminished confidence in their research, and insufficient time to pursue writing activities. Editorial have been written that lament the fact that nurses do not publish research results as frequently as they should and implore nurses to consider publication as an obligation.

For those who choose to forge ahead and publish their research results, there are some obstacles that need to be navigated. A recent qualitative study involving novice researchers in medicine, nursing, and physical therapy identified four themes that occur as an author moves through the publication process. The first theme was termed “cognitive burden.” This dealt with individual perceptions of the writing process. Some perceived it as difficult, whereas others relished the challenge. Those who viewed it as a positive challenge generally approached writing in a systematic and planned manner. “Group support and

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mentoring” was a second theme. Working with coauthors strengthened bonds with colleagues, cultivated a sense of responsibility, and aided in encouragement and motivation to complete the task. Mentors made significant contributions through support, encouragement, and experience.8 Formalized mentoring programs have been found to enhance the process through the acquisition of the knowledge, skills, and support required to write for publication among academic medical faculty.9 Differentiating between content and structure of the manuscript may be difficult for novice researchers to elucidate as they write their results. This important step is essential to logically disseminate information in an accepted format. The ability to differentiate between the two distinct but interrelated concepts is progressive as the writer begins to understand his or her role, draws on past personal experience, or reviews examples of similar articles to help guide him or her. A clear vision of the manuscript’s goal was termed “backward design.” Individual researchers experienced this differently. Some lost their focus as they started the writing process. Others, who had a clear vision of the goal found it easy to work backward and craft their paper in a focused manner.8 As nursing scholarship continues to advance, it is hoped that nurses gain confidence in their research activities and attempt to publish their findings with the eventual goal of improving the care provided to patients.

Barriers to Writing for Publication

Writing for publication is not limited to dissemination of research findings. Nurse authors can disseminate valuable information through reviews of the literature, case reports, quality improvement articles, clinical articles, and evidence-based research papers.10 However, there are a number of reasons why nurses do not write. Barriers to writing for publication include a lack of motivation and time, self-confidence, inexperience, and finding a suitable topic.11,12 It should be noted that such barriers are not unique to nurses but affect physicians as well. Barriers identified by physicians included lack of experience and/or knowledge related to writing for publication, anxiety, lack of confidence, the desire to avoid criticism, and the fact that writing was not a job requirement.9

Getting Started

Just by reading this column and contemplating writing, you have breached the first barrier. Each nurse has experience, knowledge, and insight that can be disseminated to others.13 Assuming that you already have a topic, the first step is to identify which journal you would like to submit to. It is important to ensure that your proposed manuscript is aligned with the specific purpose of the journal. Within the first few pages of the Journal of PeriAnesthesia Nursing, there is a succinct description of the journal’s purpose, target audience, philosophy, and editorial content. You would not want to submit a manuscript that does not fit with the journal’s mission. It may reduce time and effort to send a query letter to the editor detailing your proposed manuscript and get their input on its suitability. Review an article that closely resembles the “type” of article you wish to write. Example articles should be closely scrutinized for content, format, and logical progression. It is important to carefully tailor your manuscript as you write to the format and overall goal of the journal. Ignoring this can lead to frustration on the editor’s part. Journal guidelines are meant to guide the author in the correct format for references, preferred structure, length requirements or restrictions, and submission procedures.14 The “information for contributors” page for the Journal of PeriAnesthesia Nursing has detailed information on manuscript preparation, citations within the text, references, the use of illustrations and tables, how to submit the manuscript, peer-review process, proofreading, reprints, and a policy on conflict of interest. The author can decrease barriers to the publication process by simply selecting the correct journal and following the journal guidelines as she or he writes her or his paper.15

As manuscript preparation begins, focus on basic writing skills such as sentence structure, grammar, and writing concisely and succinctly. These have been identified as barriers to the revision process and a common frustration among editors.15,16 Simple steps such as ensuring that spelling, syntax, grammar, and sentence structure are correct will be appreciated by the editor.14 Communication is of paramount importance. Novice authors may view writing a journal article as requiring sophisticated language and overuse
catch phrases that they feel emulates what an academic would write. On the contrary, to effectively communicate information, sentences should be kept short and simple. Language should also convey meaning without getting bogged down in complicated prose. If writing is not your strong point, seek the assistance of a nursing colleague or an individual who is not in the medical profession to read your manuscript. This individual should have a strong background in English. Their assistance in identifying poor grammar, sentence structure, redundancy, and a confusing presentation of information may prove to be invaluable. Advanced writing skills such as organization of the manuscript, synthesis of literature, and writing evidence-based literature should be focused on reducing barriers. Often nurses are not taught how to write for publication and are not formally prepared to navigate the process. One important component is to make your manuscript apply to the clinical arena. Research is important, but the demonstration of relevance to the reader is even more valuable. 

Mentorship is extremely valuable in this process. If possible, select a trusted colleague with experience in writing for publication to assist you. The relationship with an experienced mentor will help the novice navigate the writing process. Editors feel that mentoring novice authors is an important activity and responsibility. However, the author must realize that editors often have a number of responsibilities and limited time. The novice author should first seek help within her or his institution or through networking, and in the final phases, the editor may be instrumental in her or his mentorship. The ability of mentoring authors varies from journal to journal. Some journals may have editorial advisory board members or associate editors who informally agree to take on the role of a mentor, whereas other journals may have a formal mentorship program. Writer’s workshops may be a source of information to help mentor a potential author. Whatever form mentorship takes, it not only helps a potential author navigate the process, but also increases the likelihood of manuscript acceptance.

Time has been noted to be a barrier to writing for publication. Set aside time in your busy schedule to sit down and write. Remove all distractions so that you can clearly focus on what you are writing. Closely related to time is motivation. It is important to choose a subject that you are interested in and remain focused on your ultimate goal. Seeing the process through should remain a priority.

**Academic Integrity**

Novice authors should be well informed of the ethical issues associated with writing for publication. Issues such as authorship, copyrights, permission, plagiarism, references, and secondary sources should be reviewed. Each of these issues can impact the values of honesty, fairness, trust, respect, and responsibility in the area of academic integrity. Although the author should be attentive and informed about these breaches of academic integrity, he or she should not serve as an impediment to writing for publication. Reviewing earlier columns on these subjects, as well as other resources, will inform the novice author and allow him or her to avoid such issues.

**Submission**

Before officially submitting your manuscript, review it one final time. At this point, you may be experiencing fatigue, which makes this difficult. Ensure your manuscript is still aligned with the journal’s purpose. Review what has been written in the journal since you started the project. If there have been similar articles published on your subject, ensure that it is sufficiently different to still be of interest. At this point, it may be a good idea to send another query letter. Review all of the author guidelines and ensure that you are compliant with them, including length and general structure. At this point, you have most likely written and rewritten your manuscript several times. Perform a final proofreading and encourage a trusted colleague to review it for any final comments. Attention to these final steps should help improve your odds of success as you submit your first manuscript (Table 1).

**Revision Process**

The novice author may encounter several barriers during the revision process. These issues include not fully comprehending the entire publication
process, not being adequately prepared or educated on how to write for publication, and how to convert an academic paper into a suitable manuscript for publication. It should be noted that only 8% of manuscripts are originally accepted as submitted. The first step is to realize that a revision request is not a rejection. A revision request means that the information is deemed valuable by the journal and comments are given to strengthen the submission. It is not meant to be a personal affront. Some authors will stop with the revision request and not resubmit the manuscript. The second step is to set the manuscript revision request aside for a few days. Read the comments carefully and think of them in objective terms. There may be several comments; do not get overwhelmed as this is part of the process. Break the comments down into manageable segments. Be sure to make inquiries about comments that are not clear. Although you are a novice, there may be some comments that are inappropriate. It is acceptable to justify why you did not address a comment. Remember that you are the originator of your paper. Just because you make "suggested" changes to your manuscript does not mean you lose ownership of it. You are working with the editor and reviewers to ensure that your

### Table 1. Tips for the Novice Authors

- You have an obligation to the profession and patients to disseminate well-conducted research.
- Do not entertain negative thoughts. You have valuable information that can be disseminated. Take the plunge, and give it a go.
- Find a subject that you have a keen interest in. Writing can become tedious very quickly if it is on a subject that you are not passionate about.
- Identification of an appropriate journal is an important step. Knowing your audience will help you to address their needs.
- Follow all of the author guidelines. This includes format, citations, references, length, and preferred submission routes.
- Avoid breaches in academic integrity.
- Focus on basic writing skills such as spelling, grammar, syntax, and sentence structure. You may have mastered the subject, but poor writing will reflect negatively on the author.
- Focus on advanced writing skills that include organization, synthesis, and evidence-based writing.
- Seek help in the form of books, articles, and mentors. There is information available to those who look for it. Careful preparation can reduce frustration and increase the likelihood of success.
- Set aside specific time to write. Remove all distractions.
- Write and rewrite the manuscript several times until you feel that it is ready for submission.
- Review the manuscript for one final time before submission. Follow the journal's instructions for organization of the manuscript and preferred submission process.

### Table 2. Tips for the Novice During Revision

- Manuscript submission does not end the writing process. Expect to get comments back to strengthen and enhance your manuscript.
- Using reviewer and editor comments do not result in you losing ownership of the manuscript. You are the originator of the manuscript.
- Do not stop at this point. You are very close to a publishable manuscript. Manuscripts are lost if the final steps of the publication process are not followed through.
- Take your time and think about the comments. Do not take comments personally. The goal is to disseminate information to the readership.
- You can justify why you have not addressed a concern.
- Editors, reviewers, and authors have the same goal … to disseminate knowledge.

### Table 3. Useful Resources

contribution to the scientific literature is valuable (Tables 2 and 3).15

Conclusion

I believe that a quote from Thomas A. Edison is warranted, “If we all did the things we are capable of doing, we would literally astound ourselves.”25 This is true for those who wish to write for publication and have not taken the plunge. For those involved in quality research, publish your results! Your colleagues and patients should benefit from your scholarly work. If you are not involved in actual research but have an interest in a subject, write about it. There is knowledge that needs to be disseminated to colleagues. Writing for publication takes time, preparation, motivation, and courage. Each of us has something to contribute. It simply requires us to be well informed of potential issues; be attentive to the details and have the fortitude to press on.

References


Erratum

In the continuing education article, “Blood Products and the Phases of Perianesthesia Care—Reviewing the Implications” by Heather Ead (2011;26:262-276), there is an error under the Patient Blood Group column in Table 2, Compatibility for Red Blood Cell Transfusion. O negative is known as the universal donor blood type, not O positive.