Evidence Matters

Sharing the Wisdom of Nursing by Writing for Publication

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All sorrows can be borne, if you put them into a story. —Isak Dinesen

As nurses, we love to tell stories. Every progress note in a chart, every shift report, every conversation in the cafeteria or nurse’s lounge discussing a special clinical case provides the chance to develop and share a special story. The human encounters of nursing care produce ample dramatic material. When clinical nurses chart their nursing actions or pass this information along in rounds, they tell a story that provides crucial information. If they then describe the details of a certain clinical encounter or event in an article for publication, they broaden the reach of their nursing wisdom and practice (Heinrich, 2009). Similarly, advanced practice nurses and nurse researchers write for publication so that they can communicate to the outside world any new knowledge gained through an innovation on the hospital unit or in the research lab. These are noteworthy advances, and telling these stories

Abstract  Nurses share their experiences, wisdom and insights through storytelling. Writing these stories for publication can serve to extend the reach of nursing practice. Writing for publication is a skill that all nurses can develop. It could be considered a professional obligation, as well as an act of generosity. The process of writing involves selecting a topic, working through an initial draft, reviewing, revising and finally submitting for publication. For the nursing profession to contribute fully to the advancement of health care, nurses need to present themselves as competent, thoughtful leaders able to express themselves clearly and effectively. Writing for publication helps accomplish this goal. DOI: 10.1111/j.1751-486X.12166

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allows this information to reach others who may also benefit.

This article is a complement to an earlier article on sharing knowledge through the development of abstracts and posters (Bingham, 2013); it explores ways to communicate in writing, primarily through publication in peer-reviewed journals or other professional outlets. Writing for publication may sound like a daunting task, but once you start I believe you’ll find it an exciting and rewarding endeavor. And it’s a simple extension of what you do as a nurse every day—share stories.

Why Write?

I have a special fondness for the stories of nurses, as they are what drew me to the profession. While working as a hospital attendant in college, I learned the roles that nurses play when I perused the nursing journals lying around the different units and read narratives and case studies that caught my eye. On the job, I began to observe what nurses do in a different light. I thought I enjoyed science, but I learned that I was attracted to the idea of applying the concepts of chemistry, physics, physiology, psychology and biology through the knowledge and art of nursing, helping people in need.

Venetta Masson (2005), a nursing and writing colleague, tells of how the everyday stories of nurses helped her to “understand how other nurses thought about their work and developed professionally … nurse writers use poetry, essay, and memoir to … enlarge our understanding of the work we have chosen—and of ourselves” (p. 78).

You likely learned the basic principles of language by studying the mechanics of writing and communication in school; preparing a publishable manuscript builds on this skill set. It requires a willingness to dig deeper, to explore yourself and express what you believe is novel and noteworthy. According to Morton (2013a), nurses have an obligation to convey the knowledge and expertise we gain through our nursing experiences, in order to share insights, disseminate solutions to clinical problems and advance patient care. In this vein, writing and publishing serve as acts of professional responsibility and generosity (Heinrich, 2009).

How to Write

I enjoy writing. I can’t tell you how to write. I don’t know anyone who can. I’ve read books,
articles and essays on writing by successful authors, attended workshops and taken graduate classes. They've deepened my understanding and broadened my knowledge of writing as a process and a discipline, and they have improved me as a writer. But nothing could tell me how to write. Writing is a uniquely personal process and individual experience. How you write is who you are.

So I compare writing to another personal and individual endeavor that I enjoy—running. Both running and writing have a deceptively simple premise, namely to run, to just keep putting one foot in front of the other. To write you need to keep putting one word in front of the other.

When I started running in high school I didn’t like it at first, and I contemplated quitting over and over. But, once I started, I had the support of my teammates and coach, and I discovered a willfulness I didn’t know I had. So, I kept going. What started out as a teenage experiment has become a life-long expedition.

Similarly, I started out as a writer when I wanted to express who I had become as a nurse. The mental exercise was exhausting and fraught with the fear of the unknown. I started and stopped, and everything I wrote looked foolish and awkward. But I had enough drive and support, and kept going until I was confident enough to share some of my writings with fellow nurses, and then to submit them to newspapers and journals. When my first manuscript was accepted for publication, I was filled with doubt, then exhilaration once I saw my words in print. I have made writing into a central part of my career.

Still, after all this time, I can stare blankly at an empty page with no idea how to fill it, so I go back to the analogy with running. I stare at a trail, not knowing where it goes or what challenges I may confront. The ground may be soft and the terrain gently rolling, but more likely the path forward will be filled with rocks and roots and fallen trees and deep streams and steep climbs and descents. I may fall. That's OK. A lot of what I write is crap. That's OK too. I get back up and keep going, and when I finish I've accomplished something in a way that no one else has, and that no one can take away.

The only way I can tell you how to write is to encourage you to start, and to keep going, and to work through the obstacles, and to finish.

Pitfalls to Avoid

While I can't tell you exactly how to write, I share some common writing pitfalls to avoid. These suggestions will make your writing stronger:

- **Avoid the passive voice; use the active voice instead.** As a reviewer and editor, I become turned off toward a manuscript when I start reading sentences like, “The patient was assessed and oxygen was administered.” This sentence is written in the passive voice, which is much less engaging for the reader than the active voice. For example, did you discover Baby Arriza having an apnea and bradycardia spell, with cyanosis to his nails and lips and retractions to his spine, and administer blow-by oxygen until his color improved, allowing you to complete a more thorough examination and call for a chest x-ray? Then write it that way. That’s the active voice and it will instantly engage your reader.

- **Avoid overuse of jargon.** Health care professionals are notorious for using a lot of words with loaded meanings, like “cyanosis” and “retractions.” Is your audience fellow neonatal nurses or is it health care consumers? If it's nurses, then you might get away with those terms. Otherwise, cyanosis is a bluish discoloration, and retractions means that the skin around and beneath

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The Writing Process
As nurses, we translate complex concepts into terms that are easy for our patients and their family members and caregivers to understand. A good storyteller does the same thing. Good writing is an extension of this basic skill of clinical communication.

Writing isn’t an isolated action but a process. Box 1 lists the fundamental steps in that process.

Select a Topic
The first step is to select a topic. You don’t need to hold an advanced degree or be regarded as the top clinical expert in the area you want to explore. We all have a unique background and knowledge base to offer. Editors of journals want authors who can bring their training and experiences to an interesting and compelling clinical topic, and communicate information clearly. Readers will come from all backgrounds, and what may seem mundane to you can offer new information or a deeper revelation to a nurse or clinician from a different clinical area (Morton, 2013a).

You may want to write a personal narrative about a clinical scenario that touched you in an unexpected way. You may want to present a case study about challenging health condition or a complex family situation you faced, reviewing what interventions worked well and what didn’t. You may have the opportunity to describe a new procedure or technique that was introduced on your unit, or a new drug for patients in your clinical field. You may want to write about how your hospital or unit addressed an emerging problem in your community. If a topic grabs your interest but you have trouble finding relevant information, that could indicate a gap in the literature that you can address through a literature review. Or you may want to write an opinion piece or commentary on a current clinical controversy (Morton, 2013a).

Because of its brevity, a journal article needs to have a sharp focus. If you’re writing about the care of patients with hypertension, you won’t have time or space to review the entire history of sphygmomanometry. Instead, give a brief overview of the definition of hypertension and how it’s measured, but keep the emphasis on what’s new in the area of assessment and diagnosis, or on a new intervention to treat this patient population.

The most important thing is to choose a topic you’re passionate about, and let that passion come through as you think about what to write (Fraser, 2014).

Prepare an Outline
Most writers need to plan what they’re going to write before they write it. As the author, you must think through about what drew you to the topic and what makes it new or interesting or relevant. This is the start of your outline.

You can prepare a written outline like most of us learned in freshman English, with brief titles and bullet points, etc. Or you can do something in a more casual, longhand style. Do whatever works for you. I don’t start with a written outline—my mind just doesn’t work that way. But I develop a structure in my mind, with items to cover, to serve as a starting point—and then often, as for this article, I sketch a skeletal outline after I get going that helps me stay on track. Whatever the form, an outline serves to break down the writing project into more manageable sections, so that it doesn’t feel overwhelming (Fraser, 2014).

Draft the Manuscript
Drafting the manuscript means you actually begin writing. This is often the point where many new, and even experienced, writers can get stuck. In your education and your nursing career, you will have read many journal articles. Have the confidence in yourself to see that authors find a way to get through this phase.

Realize that writing takes time and effort. You will need to set aside time, and make sure you have the energy to get to work. If possible, find a quiet work environment away from

Box 1.
Steps to Writing for Publication

1. Select a topic
2. Prepare an outline
3. Draft the manuscript
4. Review and edit the draft
5. Have a mentor, colleague or peer review the draft
6. Revise
7. Submit to a publication
It's the rare piece that comes out right the first or even the fourth or fifth time. Be aware of the need for these multiple drafts; this will take the pressure off and prevent you from trying to make the first draft too pristine. The process of writing develops your thoughts, so remain open to new insights and changing perspectives and use them to enrich your manuscript.

Review and Edit the Draft
When the initial draft is complete you must review it and make initial changes, revisions and edits. What works for me and many writers is to set the manuscript aside for at least a day or two. When deeply involved in writing, your thought processes tend to get stuck in a particular groove. Once the draft is done, take some time away from it and let your mind think about other things. When you get back to your draft, you can read it with "new" eyes. See if the flow of logic still makes sense, if there are sections that are repetitive or information that seems to be missing. Look at your word choices and see if they will make sense to the reader.

Reviewing and editing takes time, focus and energy. This process shapes your manuscript.

The most important thing is to choose a topic you’re passionate about, and let that passion come through as you think about what to write.
as possible and that they’re aware of any deadlines you face. Make it clear that you appreciate their input. If possible, you can also volunteer to serve as a reviewer for their work.

Revise
Once your reviewers return their feedback to you, you’re ready to work on a final revision. Thoughtful review and revision is the best way to improve your writing and increase the chance of publication. Read over all comments thoroughly. They provide valuable insight into how others will interpret what you’ve written. If you have a question about a particular comment, talk with that reviewer for clarification, but remain open to constructive criticism of your work (Morton, 2013b). Make the edits to your manuscript that you’re comfortable with and that are appropriate to your intent.

Submission and Editorial Process
Select a Journal
First, a brief word about selecting which journal or publication to submit your work to. You may have a particular publication in mind from the beginning as you write. This can help you focus and shape your work. On the other hand, you may want to write what interests you, and then see how the final piece turns out before deciding on a publication venue.

Most likely, you’re familiar with at least some of the nursing and health care publications in your field of practice. Each publication has its own mission, audience of readers and area of focus. Once you have a publication in mind, make sure your manuscript is appropriate. To do so, review back issues of the publication to get a feel for the style and tone of the pieces it publishes.

Package the Manuscript for Submission
Most journals have their own “Guidelines for Authors” for submitted manuscripts, usually available on their website (if not, contact the editorial office). These tell you exactly what the journal wants, so it pays to heed to them closely. Making sure your manuscript complies with the requirements of the publication helps to ease the review process and increases your chance of successful publication.

Once you have completed the formatting, proof the final manuscript for typos, spacing errors, missing punctuation, duplications or omissions or other obvious errors. When you think you’re ready, stop and proof again. Don’t rush this step. You’ll want your manuscript to look clean and professional. Once you’re satisfied, then you’re ready to submit.

Submission and Peer Review
These days, most journals use an online submission procedure, which can be confusing or intimidating at first. Take your time, review the instructions and proceed step by step. Often you will need to complete certain forms regarding copyright, originality of content and authorship. If you get stuck, the Guidelines for Authors will have information on who to contact for help. When done, you should receive a confirmation from the journal that your manuscript submission has been received.

Once the journal has your submission, the editor will conduct an initial review. If your manuscript is relevant to the journal and passes this initial review, the editor will send it to a panel of two or more volunteer peer reviewers, usually fellow nurses with expertise in the field and in scholarly publication. These reviewers will provide constructive criticism and make recommendations to the editor about whether or not to accept your manuscript for publication. The editor has the final say.

Your manuscript may be rejected outright. Rejection is never pleasant, but accept this decision as a lesson learned. Rejection doesn’t always have to do only with the quality of your
Journal will continue to review and edit the manuscript and the editor may still request minor revisions for style or have queries for clarification. Editors will review your references to make sure they’re used appropriately, as well as to make sure all articles in your reference list are cited in the text. Depending on the journal, you may also receive a final galley proof to review and OK. Journals are on tight publication schedules, so be prepared to resolve any issues promptly. This will help keep you in good stead with the editor, as you contemplate your next project.

Conclusion

The stories of nurses, from clinical narratives to in-depth literature reviews and research reports, are vital to the profession of nursing. Writing is a way to share experiences and enhance knowledge toward the profession’s goal of improving clinical care. The process of writing also helps us grow and learn as individuals (Morton, 2013b). In whatever form, storytelling about our practice and profession goes beyond disease process or clinical intervention to depict the intricate nuances of nursing—the assessments, observations, intuitions and many episodes of human strength and compassion that make a difference to our patients and their families (Bingham, 2002).

Like nursing, writing is an art. According to Benner (2000), “Caring practices and astute nursing judgment are called ‘arts’ because they are not predictable or perfect. Healing relationships can’t be reduced to propositional statements … Nurses must continue to tell their stories so that the hidden bedrock of caring practices for a healthy and good society will become more apparent to all” (p. 105).

Just as important, writing for publication is a skill that nurses can learn and must use. The work of nurses involves countless interventions, both obvious and subtle. We must document this work. The quality of what nurses write influences how those outside of nursing regard the profession. To participate fully in the advancement of health care through policy, practice and research, nurses need to present themselves as competent, thoughtful leaders able to express themselves clearly and effectively (Kennedy, 2014).

When you decide to become an author, you are the eyes and ears of nursing. Write what you have observed and learned. You are the expert. Allow the reader the experience of being in your thoughts as you assess, act and analyze. We all have our stories to share. What are yours? NWH

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work. It could be that the journal has recently accepted other submissions on the same topic. If you receive a rejection, you might choose to revise or rework the manuscript and submit it to another journal.

Your manuscript might be accepted right away, but this isn’t common. Most often, the recommendation is to revise. In this process, your manuscript may go through several revisions.

The recommendation for revision is a very positive step; do not take it as a rebuke. This means that the reviewers and editor see promise in the manuscript. The editor will provide a list of specific concerns that reviewers have raised or recommendations on areas to address. Read through this list with care, as it provides invaluable and objective feedback on your work.

With a decision of “revise,” you have the option to withdraw the manuscript or to complete a revision. My advice is to revise. I’ve heard of authors complaining that revisions alter the intent or content of their work. However, I’ve rarely experienced this myself. The comments I’ve received have invariably helped me to see the manuscript in a new light, allowing me to improve the writing and clarify the content, and even deepen my understanding of the topic. I have on some occasions had an objection to a specific recommendation. In response, I have clearly stated my case to the editor, and why I think the recommendation may be incorrect or alter what I want to say. Most often, the editor has agreed with me or helped to clarify the recommendation.

You are the author and have the final say as to the content of the manuscript. But the editor has the final say on publication. Be willing to be flexible.

Acceptance!

Receiving a letter of acceptance is always a thrill. It means you’ll see your name and your words in print. But keep in mind that even with an acceptance, your work may not be done. The