Writing for Publication: You Can Do It

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Pam, a nurse at a local hospital, was discussing with her colleague the evidence-based practice project that she had recently finished. Pam’s colleague looked at her and said, “You need to publish this evidence. This information is not only useful to you, but to fellow nurses and other health care providers as well.” Pam replied, “I couldn’t do that. No one would ever publish anything I wrote, and besides, I don’t know where to begin to publish this evidence.”

Every day, hundreds if not thousands of nurses have an idea of something relevant to nursing about which they could write. Some of the reasons nurses do not write for publication are publishing is not part of their “job,” lack of motivation, lack of time, low self-confidence in writing talent, inexperience in writing for publication, and finding a suitable topic (Driscoll & Aquilina, 2011; Moos, 2011). Even some nurses who have presented at a national conference do not go on to publish their findings of the evidence-based practice project, research project, or innovative teaching strategy (Moos, 2011).

A fair amount of nurses believe that nursing journals contain only research articles. This is not true. Some nursing journals publish only research articles, but many journals publish other categories and topics, as well. Examples of short articles are book reviews, short opinion pieces, an overview of a conference the nurse attended, or the abstract for a podium or poster presentation. Longer articles include quality improvement, evidence-based practice, clinical articles, and literature reviews (Driscoll & Aquilina, 2011; Happell, 2008).

Where to Begin

Generating an Idea

Once a nurse makes a decision to write, where should he or she begin? Writing begins with an idea. Most likely you have already had a thought about something that would be great for other nurses to know. To decide on a topic, think about what things you like to read, your area of nursing expertise, or a project or initiative in which you have recently been involved (Wachs, Williamson, Moore, Roy, & Childre, 2010).

Identifying an Appropriate Journal

Once you have an idea, the next step is to identify an appropriate journal and then begin to write (Driscoll & Aquilina, 2011). Some authors will write the article first and then identify the appropriate journal for the article’s submission. You may do this, but all journals have unique publishing requirements, so, to decrease rewriting an article to match the journal requirements, identify the journal first and then begin to write (Driscoll & Aquilina, 2011). To identify the required format, access the journal’s Web site and review the author guidelines.

To identify a journal, start by looking at the journals that are specific to your area of nursing expertise. Two examples for pediatric nursing are the Journal of Pediatric Nursing and the Journal of Pediatric Health Care. These journals, even though they are both pediatric nursing, have slightly different audiences. Identifying the audience will help you determine which journal is the most appropriate for your idea (Oermann...
Writing the Article

Identify the Time to Write

One of the largest deterrents to writing is time. Nurses are multi-taskers and typically have many daily and weekly tasks that must be completed. To ensure that you have adequate time to complete the project, it is imperative that you identify a block of time in your day or week that you are able to write and then set this time aside (Wachs et al., 2010). Add writing to your calendar, like any other task, and complete the obligation.

Where to write is also important. Most nurse authors write wherever they can—on airplanes or in the kitchen with children playing around them (Wachs et al., 2010). What works for one nurse writer may not work for another. The key factor is that you must find a place that works for you.

Use Journal to Structure Your Writing

Anytime we do anything for the first time, it is always easier if we have a pattern to follow. Writing is no different. Find a few articles in the journal to which you plan to submit that seem most compatible to yours. These “sample” articles will assist you with identifying the main headings and possible subheadings for your journal article (Driscoll & Aquilina, 2011). These articles should be used to assist you with identifying the structure of your article only; make sure you do not plagiarize. Remember that plagiarism is when you state that someone else’s work is your own, or as is occasionally the case with students, not including the citation for the original author of the work that the student included in their paper. As a nurse, you must ensure that this does not occur.

Begin With an Outline

You have identified your idea, bounced it off some colleagues to determine if they think the topic is important, and identified an appropriate journal. The next step is to outline the article. An outline allows you to identify the important pieces of the topic and organize them in a logical pattern so the information is clear to the reader (Oermann & Hays, 2011). An outline may be a formal process, what you learned in your high school or college English course, or an informal process, writing one-sentence ideas for each paragraph you will be writing (Oermann & Hays, 2011). Some great information on outlining, including examples, can be found at Purdue Owl (http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/544/03/). A book that includes information on outlining specific to nursing is Writing for Publication in Nursing by Oermann and Hays (2011).

Introduction, Body, and Conclusion

An article always includes three sections: the introduction, the body of the paper, and the conclusion. Typically, authors want to write the paper from beginning to end, but one piece of advice that I received early in my career was to write the conclusion first (C. Deets, personal communication, October 2000). You want to start at the end and then work your way backward. This method is especially helpful when writing a short article or an article where the headings are not dictated by the journal’s author guidelines.

By writing the conclusion first, you first summarize all of your key points, and then for every key point, you include a paragraph or section in the article. Typically, the introduction, even though it is the first part of the article, should be written after the conclusion and body of the paper as it introduces the topic (C. Deets, personal communication, October 2000). The last section to be written is an abstract, which is not required for all articles. An abstract is a brief, comprehensive summary of the information in the article (American Psychological Association, 2010). When writing an abstract, review the author guidelines and adhere to the word limits and required headings.

Formal and Informal Writing Style

Most articles are written in a formal writing style (Oermann & Hays, 2011). In this article I have used a more informal writing style, as I want each of you to feel like I am writing this article just for you. I want everyone who is reading this article to believe that writing for publication is something you can do. If unfamiliar with the formal writing style, as I want each of you to feel like I am writing this article just for you. I want everyone who is reading this article to believe that writing for publication is something you can do.
style, new authors may find this style difficult, but over time and with practice, this type of writing can become second nature. The difference between informal and formal writing style can be seen in Table 1.

Reference Styles

Every journal has a specific system or style for formatting the references and in-text citations. It is important for you to review the author guidelines for the journal that you have chosen and identify the required format (Oermann & Hays, 2011). The author guidelines that I received from the SPN Column editor stated that the format of the paper should follow the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA), 6th edition. The APA manual identifies how to give credit to the original author of an idea and how to construct your reference list (APA, 2010).

When creating the list of references it is important to know if you are creating a reference list or a bibliography. A reference list only includes articles that are cited within the body of the article (APA, 2010). A bibliography includes not only cited articles but also articles reviewed by the author and provides the author with background on the topic for the article (APA, 2010). For example, for this article I reviewed fifteen to twenty references before I began to write the article. For this article, the reference list only includes six references. Only the articles cited are in the reference list.

Submitting Your Article

Review Prior to Submission

Once you have written the article, review your manuscript for spelling and grammar errors, as well as sentence and paragraph structure. Errors in basic writing skills may reflect negatively on you as an author, so focus on preventing these errors (Moos, 2011). Now that you have ensured the absence of obvious basic writing errors, have the manuscript reviewed by a peer. Ask your peer to identify information that does or does not make sense, missing information, and any spelling and grammatical errors.

Submit the Article

Your paper has been written and reviewed and you are ready to submit. The first step is to review the author guidelines and identify how the article must be submitted (Driscoll & Aquilina, 2011). Some journals require that the article is submitted in pieces, such as one file for the abstract, one for the article (minus abstract and title page), and one file for each table and figure. Others instruct authors to submit articles directly to the editor of the column or the journal.

The Waiting Game

Once an article has been submitted, expect to wait a minimum of 6–8 weeks before you hear a decision regarding your article (Driscoll & Aquilina, 2011). For your article, you may receive one of three decisions: acceptance for publication, request you revise and resubmit, or rejection (Oermann & Hays, 2011). Accepted for publication means just that your article was accepted (Oermann & Hays, 2011). Your article, even though accepted, may still not be published for a few months to a year, depending on the journal. If the decision is to revise and resubmit, the editor of the journal or the peer reviewers believe that the idea had merit but some revision is required (Oermann & Hays, 2011). Review the editor or peer reviewer comments and then revise the article, making it better. Finally, resubmit your revised article.

If your article was rejected, review the reasons stated in the rejection letter and then revise the article for submission to another journal. Remember, once the initial submission is done, the hard part is over—you have written an article; it is now just a matter of finding the journal that fits your article.

Table 1  Formal Versus Informal Writing Style.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formal</th>
<th>Informal</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Passive voice (e.g., “The research study was conducted in a controlled laboratory setting”)</td>
<td>Active voice (e.g., “We conducted the research study in a controlled laboratory setting”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholarly</td>
<td>Entertaining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The author” or “The researchers”</td>
<td>“I” or “we”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use third person (he, she, they) pronouns only</td>
<td>Use first (I, me), second person (we, you, us, our), and third person pronouns</td>
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Note: Data from APA (2010) and Oermann & Hays (2011).

Conclusion

In the future, if you have a great idea, consider writing for publication. If writing is new for you, start small. Start with a book review or an article on a conference you recently attended. Your first article does not have to be twenty pages long. Remember, even though writing may be difficult, writing is a vital part of our nursing practice. Nurses who have clinical knowledge need to write up their projects and the clinical innovations that led to improved patient outcomes. All nurses have an obligation to actively
contribute to the dissemination of nursing knowledge by writing for publication (Happell, 2008). Only through the dissemination of nursing knowledge will we continue to advance the nursing profession.

References


