Guest Series: Writing for Publication

Reap the benefits of writing for publication

Editor's note: This is the first in a series of articles on writing for publication. The author has more than 30 years' experience in nursing and 15 years' experience in the publishing industry as a writer, editor, and executive. She has worked with hundreds of aspiring nurse writers across the country through writing workshops and one-on-one mentoring.

Can you operate a laparoscopic insufflator? Can you set up an electrosurgical unit? Do you know how to prep a patient’s skin for surgery? If you answered yes—and if you work in the OR, you should have—you also can write for publication. You may think writing an article will be too hard or take too much time. You may think articles should be written by educators, managers, or advance practice nurses—in other words, anyone but you. You are not alone with these thoughts. Most nurses are not comfortable with their writing skills, but writing is just that, a skill. You do not need to become the next Ernest Hemingway or F. Scott Fitzgerald, you simply need to become competent in the skill of writing, just as you did with nursing skills.

This article is the first in a series that will take you through the writing process, including how to find a topic, research it, write effectively, identify and target a journal for your submission, revise the article based on input from peer reviewers, and more. The goal is to take the mystery out of the writing and publishing process and make it accessible to you.

Reasons to Write
A profession must constantly build on its knowledge base. Public speaking is one way to disseminate knowledge, but the audience is limited to those who can attend the presentation. A health care professional can reach a wider audience by publishing articles in professional journals. Articles can help your colleagues gain new ideas and sharpen their current skills. An article can even change how others think. For example, when AIDS first became a prominent health concern, health care providers knew little about its transmission. It was up to nurses and other professionals to write articles that dispelled the myths of the disease (eg, that it could be spread through casual contact).

Share information. The information a nurse writer provides others can help make his or her colleagues’ working lives easier. You count on others to share their knowledge; have you considered that they also may be counting on you? Nurses in all roles can be authors. Whether you are a manager, staff nurse, educator, executive, or specialist, you have ideas and experiences that others can benefit from. A staff nurse can identify and develop solutions for the patient care problems he or she encounters in everyday practice. An executive might share ways to develop a strategic vision that everyone can live by. Articles on both topics are needed, but the best author for each would not necessarily be the same person.

Improve patient care. The most important reason you should write, however, is to improve patient care. The AORN Journal’s author guidelines

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state that the publication aims “to provide . . . practical and theoretical information that ultimately will result in better patient care.”

Think about preparing to circulate for a new procedure in your OR. Would you feel more comfortable with your ability to contribute to a positive outcome if you could read an article about the procedure beforehand? Perhaps you have completed a quality improvement or research study that found a way to improve care. You owe it to patients everywhere to spread the word beyond your institution by writing an article for a professional journal. By publishing, more nurses will know what to do, or not to do, to achieve better patient outcomes.

Promote yourself. Writing also can enhance your career. Many clinical ladders grant points for publishing articles, allowing you to increase your job level and salary. Many faculty members must publish to meet tenure requirements, but it also allows them to establish their reputation in the profession. No matter where you practice, having a published article on your resume sets you apart from other candidates for a job, scholarship, or a committee appointment.

Enhance knowledge. Writing also helps you to enhance your own knowledge. Like teaching, writing forces you to clearly understand a subject so that you can communicate it to others.

GETTING STARTED
The hardest part of writing an article is getting started. You must first overcome barriers, including negative attitudes about writing and lack of time.

Do not think of writing as a chore or duty, but as an opportunity to learn and even a source of pleasure. Think back to when you first became a perioperative nurse. You had to concentrate on every task, from attaching the electrosurgical unit dispersive pads to setting up a room for repair of a ruptured aortic aneurysm. As you gained experience, the tasks came more naturally. You felt comfortable, and you began to enjoy your work. It is the same with writing. Your first awkwardness will subside as you write more. Although you may always have some trepidation when you start a new project, you will have the confidence to take it in stride.

Finding time to write is another issue because time is a precious commodity. We are all busy, rushing from work to home, to a child’s soccer games, to meetings, and we feel we cannot find another minute in the day. Fortunately, this barrier is easier to breach than you might think. Here are some tactics.

Think before you write. There is nothing more time consuming than staring at a blank computer screen or sheet of paper. Avoid that problem by mulling over your topic in the shower or on your drive to work. Consider how you want to approach it and the points you want to make. For example, what are the most important actions a nurse needs to take when caring for a patient undergoing a computer-assisted total knee replacement procedure? What takes place during the preoperative, intraoperative, and postoperative phases? Now when you face that blank screen or paper, you will be ready to go.

Negotiate. Talk with your family members, significant others, and friends. Explain what you are trying to accomplish and ask for their support. Remember that you do not have to do it all. What duties can be delegated to
someone else? Are there tasks you do that you can do less often? After all, how clean does a house really need to be? Talk with your manager at work too. Some organizations offer project time for nurses as a way to improve employee retention.

Do not forget to negotiate with yourself. If you are a morning person, set the alarm a bit earlier so you have a few minutes to write.

Divide and conquer. Do not try to write for hours at a time. You can accomplish a lot in just 15 minutes. Keep adding up those 15-minute blocks, and you will have a completed article. If you look for these minutes, you will find them in many places: before a meeting starts, in line at your bank’s drive-through, or waiting to mail a package at the post office.

Another way to divide and conquer is to work with a coauthor. When working with another person, you can divide the research and writing responsibilities and support each other. Just be sure to agree at the start on areas of responsibility and order of authorship. Three authors can work well together too, but when you start adding more authors, it becomes more difficult to coordinate meetings and resolve differences of opinion.

Find a space. If possible, establish a space where you can write. It is helpful to have an environment in which you can be comfortable and not be interrupted. Your materials will always be ready to go when you return, which will save time. You do not need an entire room; even a small corner will work. A separate space is not a requirement, however. You can write on an airplane, train, or even on a boat. It is not the location, it is the mindset.

Do not begin at the beginning. The beginning of the article usually is the hardest to write, so you may not want to waste time struggling with it. After you have a plan for the article, start writing at whatever point you find is easiest. You might write about the nursing care of the patient undergoing a new type of hip replacement before you talk about pathophysiology. Put together a few paragraphs, then a few more, and tie them together.

Words of Wisdom

Ray Bradbury, a prolific science fiction writer, once said “You can’t try to do things. You simply must do [them].” Instead of getting bogged down in all the reasons why you cannot write, think about why you want to write and then get started.

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