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Let's Talk about Getting Students to Write

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Schools of nursing have long required senior students to write capstone or thesis papers, but in recent years, many are now requiring that the students submit the papers for publication. At the *American Journal of Nursing (AJN)*, we've also seen an increase in student submissions as Letters to the Editor and query letters. It's wonderful that faculty are encouraging students to write; writing and submitting for publication is an involved process and novices need guidance. However, it's apparent that many are not getting the correct guidance or if they are, they are not heeding it. In conversations with editor colleagues who are also seeing the swell in student papers, it's apparent that the majority of these submissions are flawed and should never have been submitted. I'm hoping faculty who are involved in teaching students to write and budding authors will find the following information useful.

THE PROBLEMS

When students write to fulfill an assignment, most do so from a framework of demonstrating to the professor that they know how to search and review the literature and have an in-depth understanding of a problem or issue. The purpose is to show what the student has learned about a topic and is able to present it in a logical way, with reasonable writing skill and according to the professor's instructions for formatting the paper. However, from an editorial standpoint, these papers fall below what most journals would publish.

The papers tend to be wordy and provide a superficial and general overview of what most practicing nurses already know. Often there is no clear purpose statement and so the paper rambles on in many directions with no logical flow or transition between thoughts.

Sourcing is a huge problem, and it is clear that many students do not know how or when to provide support from the literature. Papers often contain too few or too many references, many of which are not primary sources. Sponsored Web sites, consumer publications and newsletters, and textbooks are popular sources for "evidence." Sometimes student authors rely heavily on only one or two sources. We see literature reviews with no details about the methodology for searching and little synthesis; most are little more than a listing of key findings without any additional analysis or perspective. Reports of quality improvement projects often lack data, yet authors claim improvements in outcomes. The students seem stymied when we ask them how did they measure improvement when there were no baseline data for comparison.

Letters to the Editor

AJN also receives many letters submitted to the "Letters to the Editor" column from undergraduate students as part of class assignments. Most of them lack any originality; usually the letter just says that the student read the article and found it interesting. It goes on to restate the major conclusion of the article, and then provides a reference or two in support of their support of the article's conclusion. Few offer anything of substance to add context or to refute a point or even just relate it

to their own experience.

Query Letters

We've come to realize that a few schools are teaching students about the publishing process by having them submit a query letter to a journal. However, the exercise ends there—there is no manuscript that will be developed. This is, in my view, unethical in that it enlists editorial staff in class exercises without their knowledge and consent. Editors review query letters in good faith. At *AJN*, query letters are circulated among three editors, and we all voice our opinions as to the “fit” of the content, the approach the author is taking, and the author's expertise in the subject, and then write back to the author of the query. In several instances, after receiving a positive response from us, the author responded that the query was just part of a class assignment and a submission would not be forthcoming. This is inconsiderate of others' time, and schools should not condone or allow this practice.

GETTING STUDENTS ON TRACK TO WRITE FOR A PROFESSIONAL JOURNAL

An article written for a professional journal has a different purpose than a class assignment: it's not about what the writer knows, it's about what the reader needs to know. Readers of professional journals, especially clinical journals like *AJN*, need to know the “what's new”—new research or new treatment approaches, a change in thinking about a problem or issue, an emerging trend that's different from what we've known, and new controversies and how they will have an effect on practice or the profession. Students need to review the content they developed for the class paper, and rewrite it with the reader in mind and according to the format and author guidelines of the targeted journal. Cutting and pasting sections of the paper is rarely effective and usually results in an article with poor transitions and tone.

Faculty most definitely should encourage students to write. More nurses need to be able to document their work in a scholarly way and to be able to communicate their successes to colleagues and the public. If done correctly, many papers written for class assignments can serve as the basis for writing a professional article, but it's a rare student paper that can be submitted as is. Faculty need to be selective when suggesting that students submit papers for publication. A blanket class requirement to do so, regardless of the quality of the paper, is not a good idea.

Writing is a skill and like other skills, requires coaching and guidance in the correct techniques, and some learn more quickly than others. Too many papers fall short in any number of ways and encouraging these fledgling authors to submit a flawed paper is only setting them up to fail; it may discourage them from future attempts.

In a **post** I wrote in February 2013 for *AJN's* blog, *AJN Off the Charts* on this topic, I included a list of suggestions for what faculty might tell students to do to be successful. Here's an excerpt that might be helpful:

1. **Go to the journal's Web site** and review several articles similar to what you want to write. Note the tone, level of detail, sourcing. Search the journal to see if it recently published articles on a topic similar to what you want to write. Send a query letter to determine whether your topic is of interest.
2. **Review the submission guidelines.** Pay special attention to the instructions for authors and how to format the paper and the references. This isn't just an academic exercise but is necessary so that references appear correctly and are verifiable in online databases. Also keep in mind that many journals run software to detect plagiarism, and the results can be inaccurate if the software reads the

references as part of the body of the manuscript because they are improperly formatted.

3. **Write the manuscript using** the information you learned when preparing your capstone paper or thesis as a starting point. Be specific about the purpose of the paper. All information is not equal. Be selective. Perhaps include a case study, and focus on what's new or important for nurses to know. In addition, write to the audience that comprises the readership of the journal. Use active voice; avoid jargon. If there's a word limit, honor it.

4. **Be sure to use primary sources** when providing citations to support facts. Ask the librarian to help you find the correct sources.

5. **Spell-check your article** before you send it. Read it aloud. Ask a colleague to read it. (Kennedy 2013)

REFERENCE

Kennedy, M. (2013, February 22). My professor said to 'submit my paper' (We hope they also told you this). <http://ajnofthecharts.com/2013/02/22/my-professor-said-to-submit-my-paper-they-should-have-also-told-you-this/>. Copyright *American Journal of Nursing*. Used with permission.

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