

# Nurse Author & Editor

## Volume 17 - June 2007, Issue 2

### **Publish or Perish: Confessions of a new academic**

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My introduction into the world of “publish or perish” came a few years ago when I was interviewed as a prospective doctoral student at a large research university. A renowned scholar greeted me with a double-barreled question: “How many articles have you published, and in which journals?” This question threw me off balance. As I stammered out a description of my modest publication record, I felt both offended and relieved: offended by the implication that publications were the only measure of my academic worth, yet relieved that I had some publishing experience to cite. What is it about the notion of publishing that both fascinates and disturbs us? Although the academic expectation of regular, peer-reviewed publications undoubtedly drives much of our writing projects, it is my unabashedly idealistic belief that the best writing comes from an internal need to write rather than simply from an external need to publish. We need to engage in scholarship that is personally meaningful. So how do we nurture the writer within while keeping publish-or-perish fears at bay? Here are some unconventional tips I’ve picked up along the way.

### **Nurturing the Writer Within**

I am fascinated with the writing process and have always been drawn to “behind the scenes” stories from published authors. I have an unquenchable thirst for answers to the broad question, ‘How do professional writers nourish their writing?’ Although academics do not tend to think of themselves as professional writers, perhaps they should. After all, universities employ and reward academics based in large part on their ability to write and publish. In my own quest to learn from accomplished writers over the years, I have noticed that the most successful authors exhibit a disciplined approach to writing – intentionally incorporating writing-time into their regular schedules, regardless of whether they “feel” like writing. They seem to have a good sense of what stimulates their thinking, and incorporate this into their writing-time as well. For example, writers speak of having a favourite time of day to write, a favourite setting, chair or pen. These writing “tools” become essential to the act of writing.

Although much emphasis is placed on the need for writers to find their “voice”, I believe that new academic writers must also find their stride – that is, the pace and place at which they write best. One of my colleagues prefers to write at his favourite table in the back of a coffee shop. He has written two academic books this way. Another prefers to rent a mountain cabin for two weeks at a time, sleeping all day and writing all night. Many of my colleagues with young children write in the stillness of the night or in the early hours of the morning while their family sleeps. One of the most successful nurse authors I know works at her university office on Tuesdays to Thursdays, and then writes from Friday to Monday at home. Being intentional about the act of writing – that is, carving out a reliable place and time to write – is crucial: it is often the act of writing itself that stimulates the deeper thinking necessary for scholarly work.

I view my own regular writing-time in the same way that I view exercise: If I want to hit my stride, I must take my practice seriously. And, as with exercise, if I do not incorporate writing time into my schedule, I procrastinate. Well, even with a regular writing time, I tend to procrastinate. At the beginning of a project I find endless ways to avoid actually putting the first words on paper. In fact, I must confess that by writing this piece right now I am avoiding getting started on a new book-length manuscript: I have a filing cabinet full of data but have yet to write the first sentence. I have come to accept that a certain amount of procrastination is not only inevitable; it is somehow part of the process. Even so, at some point I have to actually put pen to paper, and I have developed some tactics that eventually get me there.

To kick start a new project, my favourite tactic is to tell myself that I am only doing this (particular project) for fun. Sitting with a journal perched on my knee as I travel by bus over the back roads of China is fun; sitting in front of my office computer with a deadline looming is not. While others write well under pressure, I do not. If I can focus on the process (creative outlet) rather than the product (manuscript), I feel less pressure. When I feel less pressure, I become more creative. And it is when I am creative that I do my best work. It is a matter of finding what works.

I often start writing projects at my kitchen table with a cup of coffee, a pad of lined paper and my favorite pen (fun). Once the ideas start flowing I switch over to a computer, where I seem to spend an inordinate amount of time coming up with a working title, framework and opening paragraph (work). Somewhere along the way I become absorbed in the writing process (fun). It is here, in this state of being lost in my thoughts that my deepest thinking seems to occur. Here I am most in love with this thing called writing, and most inclined to think of myself as a writer.

### **Keeping Publish or Perish Fears at Bay**

As I reflect on my own launch into the world of publication, I think I accidentally stumbled across a key to avoiding publication anxiety: Seek out publishing opportunities as early as possible. Having a professor encourage me to submit one of my graduate papers for publication marked a turning point for me. After seeing that paper in print, I secretly raised the bar of my own expectations. Rather than viewing my course papers as simply assignments to meet learning objectives, I started viewing them as potential manuscripts. Assignments became opportunities to hone my writing skills and potentially publish more papers, and my course professors unwittingly provided the first level of review. I would revise and submit (or not) based on the professor's feedback. Through viewing graduate studies as an opportunity to practise writing for publication, I was inadvertently introduced to the world of submissions, rejections, revisions, reviews and acceptances at a time when publishing was not crucial to my career. By the time I finished doctoral studies I had experienced my fair share of manuscript acceptance and rejection. My curriculum vitae and my skin had grown by a proportionate thickness.

Perhaps the most important skill I learned as a graduate student was the value of self-review and self-editing. With few of my classmates interested in publishing, I had to learn how to critique and evaluate my own work rather than relying on others to provide feedback. It is difficult, even now, to find colleagues who have the time and willingness to give honest, constructive feedback on a manuscript. Although some new academics get around this difficulty by submitting unfinished papers for review – that is, using the review process itself to obtain feedback on how to improve a paper – I have become uneasy about submitting a paper that I know requires revisions. Through a series of trials and errors, I've learned that it is worth taking the time to get a manuscript right before

submitting it – even if it means missing a deadline or having to submit to a different journal than the one originally intended.

Asking a colleague to critique a paper is a good idea; cultivating a circle of colleagues willing to review each others' work is an even better one. So is learning to become proficient at self-editing. Now when I complete a manuscript, I put it aside for a week or two. When I am ready to re-read the paper, I do so with fresh eyes, paying attention to matters such as how well the paper flows, whether there are glaring gaps, whether I have followed the required formatting and, perhaps most importantly, whether the paper passes the "So what?" test. Does the manuscript offer fresh and interesting insights? Does it have merit and clarity? After all, the point of all our writing is to, well, make a point.

While publication itself may seem an admirable goal, aiming for publication alone is actually rather short-sighted. Ideally we must aim to bring something of value to our readers. As aspiring professional writers, new academics can move beyond the publish-or-perish angst by looking beyond the publication process to the purpose of academic publication itself: the edification of both writer and reader. For the writer, writing is an opportunity to clarify and consolidate thinking, and to gain an understanding that did not exist pre-publication. Although it should seem self-evident, during the writing process it is easy to forget that published work is intended to be read. After all, having a manuscript accepted for publication is not the endpoint: it is just the beginning.

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