

# Nurse Author & Editor

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### We're Sorry But . . . Redux

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In March of 1973, Edith Patton Lewis, editor of *Nursing Outlook*, wrote an editorial entitled "We're Sorry, But . . .". I have read and re-read that piece over the years, as I struggled first to be an author who succeeded occasionally in getting published, and then as an editor. When Pat retired as editor of *Nursing Outlook* in 1980, her colleague and boss Philip E. Day, RN, President and Publisher of the American Journal of Nursing Company, published a collection of her editorials. I was fortunate to have Pat as my mentor, first in her role of editor as I began submitting manuscripts in the early 1970s, and then as I assumed the role of editor of a journal. Faced with writing my first editorial, I immediately turned to this collection.

For several years beginning in 1996, I visited Pat every few months with my friend and former student, Carol Day Kelly, daughter of Philip Day. We had the privilege of enjoying Pat's keen mind, her wisdom, and her analysis of current nursing issues. She was, by that time, legally blind from macular degeneration, but worked every day at her desk, using a special reader. She continued to write for nurses and was the editor for the in-house newsletter at the assisted living facility where she spent her last years.

In her editorials, Pat's gift was expressing the sentiments of most of us who have been editors or reviewers. Indeed, it is an unhappy job for a reviewer to submit an unfavorable evaluation or for an editor to send an author a letter of rejection. I recently read Pat's editorial again and was struck by how true her words still are in 2009. She pointed out that authors often fail to achieve clarity of expression in whatever they want to say. Pat noted that content is often obscured by what the author apparently perceives to be fancy or clever writing. Perhaps, as she suggested, authors still believe they are to write in a stiff, formal way using passive voice.

My experiences as an editor, reviewer, and mentor these 36 years later are much like Pat described. Authors persist in using passive voice, anthropomorphisms, pretentious prose -- the subject of yet another Pat Lewis editorial in July of 1974 -- and ignore clearly stated guidelines for format and style. I can only conclude from the many grammatical errors appearing in almost every manuscript that I read that elementary schools and high schools are no longer teaching English grammar. Common errors authors make include failing to match subject and verb, wandering all over the verb declensions from past to present to future tense even in the same sentence, and total disregard for the correct use of punctuation.

I am amazed and mystified by authors' seemingly egregious disregard for the very basics of text and reference list citations. To be sure, authors are honestly confused by the array of options for style—it reads like alphabet soup: American Medical Association (AMA), American Psychological Association (APA), Turabian and colleagues' *The Chicago Manual of Style* (2007), Council of Science Editors (2009) (CSE), Index Medicus abbreviations of journal titles (2009), Gibaldi (2009) for the Modern

Language Association (MLA), and numerous hybrids of any or all of these that are unique to disciplines, journals, and/or publishers, as well as colleges and universities. Even more confusing are the ludicrous decisions by sado-masochistic committees to combine the styles, seemingly choosing randomly among the options. I recently encountered a university's guidelines for doctoral dissertations that is a bastardization of AMA and APA with a little bit of who-knows-what thrown in. If I had been a doctoral student at that institution, I might have ended up as an ABD (all but dissertation)!

Companies marketing software with claims that their products will take all the work out of creating correct citations should include a warning label: user beware! I have yet to find a piece of software that accurately produces both in-text citations and a reference list, endnotes, or bibliography that conforms to a particular style manual. Much of my editing time is spent correcting errors created by such software. Some of the programs are fairly useful and accurate, but do not replace the human brain and eye.

Editors are not blameless in this style alphabet soup. I have had the experience of following APA to the letter and then having an editor inform me that for that particular journal or publisher, using issue numbers for all journal citations is the preferred style, even though this practice contradicts the stated style manual in the journal's instructions to authors. Novice authors often give up in the face of such contradictions.

So what is my message for all of us—nurse authors, reviewers, and editors? First of all, create author guidelines that even a novice author can understand. Be consistent, be compassionate, be caring, be clear, and keep on writing, reviewing, and editing. Try to be a good mentor, as was Pat Lewis. For nurse authors experienced or neophyte, I have a special plea to continue writing. We need your wisdom as clinicians, faculty members, administrators, mentors, or whatever nursing roles you represent, to guide us as our profession grows and matures in ever-changing health care environments. Someday, an editor will send you a card as Pat Lewis did to me in 1980—"you sure do write good."

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