

# Nurse Author & Editor

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### Do You Know...

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#### **How to Move High Stakes Writing Projects Past Paralysis? *Dare to Share.***

"High stakes writing needs to float on a deep sea of low stakes writing."  
(Elbow 2012)

What makes a writing project high stakes for you? In 25 years of turning nurses into authors, I've noticed that everyone has their own definition. For some, high stakes writing is going public with an idea that colleagues can criticize. Others say deadlines scare them word-less. For still others, it's finding language to describe something they care deeply about.

When in high stakes territory, writing guru Peter Elbow (2012) recommends lowering the stakes. If you're like many nurse authors, you're probably wondering:

1. How can I tell when a writing project is high stakes?
2. Why is knowing a project is high stakes so important?
3. What can I do to lower the stakes on my next writing project?

This column, the third in a series on moving writing projects past stuck, shares a simple way to measure the stakes; explains the import of writing stakes being high; and shows how to lower the writing stakes enough to take projects public.

#### **1. How To Tell If Your Writing Project is High Stakes**

When your writing progress gets paralyzed, it's time to tune into that inner voice that's wheedling and whining you into believing you don't have what it takes to succeed. This nag of a voice is a sure sign you're suffering from the Impostor Syndrome: that troubling combination of feeling like an intellectual fraud coupled with the fear of being found out (Heinrich 2008). The more insistent the voice of this inner critic, the greater your fear, the higher the writing stakes.

The best way to measure the stakes on a writing project is to assign your impostor fears a number. Take my situation as a for instance. Every time I try translating a recent conference presentation into a ready-to-submit manuscript, my best attempts go no-where. This to and fro has been happening for a year. When I plotted my impostor fears on the Stakes Scale below, they registered a **10/10** ~ the highest stakes possible for a writing project. Keeping your paralyzed project in mind, what's your score?

## Writing Project Stakes Scale

No Fear	Fear-Full
<hr/>	
0	<u>Kathy's X</u> 10
Low Stakes	High Stakes

### 2. Why It's Important To Know If Your Project Is High Stakes

The higher your score on the Stakes Scale, the more likely it is that impostor fears are whittling away at your self-confidence. Peternj-Taylor (2010), the editor of the *Journal of Forensic Nursing*, writes that fears of being exposed as an impostor can so "debilitate" nurses that they don't act on opportunities (p 58). A new ~ or a next ~ writing challenge, whether it's completing a first academic paper after returning to school or giving memoir writing a spin, can call up impostor fears. My next challenge is writing a second book. Seeing that 10/10 score on the Stakes Scale made me get real. Until I face my impostor fears about writing that high-stakes article, my book will stay a pipe dream. This motivated me to lower my writing stakes in a way that may surprise you.

### 3. What You Can Do To Lower The Stakes On Your Next Writing Project

As convincing as impostor voices can be, fears are not facts. The fact is that you can overcome your fears by shifting how you think about writing. All writing, even when the intent is to go public, is private at the start (Elbow 2012). Think of all the free writes (Heinrich 2012) and rough drafts that no one ever sees. Whenever you want to lower the stakes, Elbow suggests turning *private writing* that's "just for me" into *personal writing* that's "just for you and me" (p. 52). This happens when, for example, teachers challenge students to take the dare to share their drafts with a partner or a small group of students.

Free-writing my answers to 3 questions called me to take a risky dare-to-share:

*What's paralyzing my progress?* My fear of reprisal from the scholars and researchers whose ideas my article calls into question.

*What would make this writing project less fear-full?* Invite a few of these scholars and researchers to poke holes in my ideas before I go public with them.

*How can I make this happen?* Email 3 of these scholar-researchers and ask them to challenge and critique my rough draft.

Lucky for me, the 3 scholar/researchers I contacted are dear colleague-friends. Far from the reprisals I feared, each is eager to engage in a dialogue in which disagreements are welcome. Crafting a "just for my colleague-friends and me" draft makes going public with a controversial premise feel much less daunting. Which colleague(s), whether or not they share your views, can help you lower your writing stakes?

### Conclusion

The next time your writing progress gets paralyzed, use these 3 Cs to determine the stakes and to decide on a dare-to-share strategy. BE:

- **Curious:** Assign your impostor fears a number.
- **Courageous:** Face the fact that your project is high stakes.
- **Creative:** Make *private* writing *personal* to take your project *public*.

Then you'll see how lowering the stakes can float your writing projects to success.

## References

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