

Nurse Author & Editor

Volume 23 - March 2013, Issue 1

Four Rules of Writing

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There are many sets of 'rules' for writing, as a cursory search of Google will show. The sets of rules vary in number, commonly between three to five, and some are called rules for 'effective' writing. While the description of 'rules' may be misleading, as everyone has their own way of writing, it is common that the part of writing that people find hardest is actually writing, in other words, getting words down on the page that they can use to craft the final article, chapter, or book. In the article I present four rules that I have found effective in over 20 years of writing for publication. None of these rules is, strictly speaking, mine; I have gleaned them from the many seminars by editorial and writing colleagues that I have attended and also from articles and books about writing. My only claim is bringing these particular four 'rules' together (Holland & Watson 2012). I also know that others have found them effective. My four rules are:

- Read the guidelines
- Set targets and count words
- Seek criticism
- Treat a rejection as the start of the next submission

Read the Guidelines

This seems obvious; however, as an editor it is clear that many people simply do not do this. This is grounds for immediate rejection. Therefore, do ensure the basics are adhered to: length, organisation (headings and sub-headings), and referencing. Reading the guidelines at the start of the writing process is also important as it helps to guide you in writing your manuscript. The sooner you know what the conventions of the journal are and, especially, what the maximum permitted length of a manuscript is, the more able you are to prepare a manuscript that suits the journal you are targeting. You should always target a journal at the start of the process. Furthermore, by reading the guidelines, which should always be read with the aims and scope of the journal, you will get into the "mindset of the editors" and understand the expectations of the journal.

In terms of helping the process of your writing, reading the guidelines gives you the headings and subheadings by which the journal organises its manuscripts. One 'trick' I find useful at the start of the writing process is to create a file for your manuscript, clearly and unambiguously labelled and dated, and in the file—using page breaks (CTRL and Enter in Microsoft Word)—create a series of pages with those headings and sub-headings in them, eg, Title/page break, Abstract/page break, down to References. Then close and save the file and copy it to some safe place in case you need to retrieve it. Thereafter, during the writing process, save and copy your work regularly. My advice is to do no more at this stage; leave the work for the next day and recognise that you have made a significant start to your manuscript. From a blank screen you will have written about ten words, and you'll know that by counting them once you've completed the above task. This brings me to the next 'rule.'

Set Targets and Count Words

You will find if you ask that most writers write to targets. In other words, they have a fixed number of words they achieve before they stop. For full time professional writers, their daily targets are often enormous, but achieved over a relatively short time. It is not possible to write all day, and for those of us in busy clinical and academic jobs, it is sometimes not possible to write every day—although we should make the effort. Therefore, our targets need to be achievable and, of necessity, quite small. I find a daily target of 500 words is sufficient to make significant progress on my own writing projects. On days when it is not possible to find time to write, then I ensure that the target applies each time I sit down to write.

Regularly counting your words helps you see that you are making progress, and if you become "stuck" on one section of an article, for example, then you can move to another section and get your ideas into writing as soon as possible. It is not important to write the same section all at once, but it is important to keep writing, and the strategy described above of inserting a series of headings and subheadings into a manuscript helps you to keep going. Do not try to edit as you go along; don't worry how it reads or if the grammar is perfect. If you reach your target and still have ideas, then jot them down as bullet points at the end of the relevant section, and this will give you a starting point next time you return to your writing. When you have reached your target, it is important to stop. You are unlikely to write the same amount again and may become disappointed if, for example, you decide to double your target. Using the bullet point strategy ensures that you don't lose the ideas in your head.

If you learn to write as described above, then you do not need lengthy periods to write. You can make use of short periods: before the day starts, at the end of the day, on the train, or waiting in an airport lounge. This way the work remains with you, you make progress, and the task does not seem overwhelming. I strongly advise heading for your maximum target, ie, the entire manuscript, before you begin to edit; do not review what you have written each day or your progress will be lost. You will have to edit, and you may need to revise the manuscript several times before it is ready to show to others. The "enemy" of the writer is the blank computer screen; at least with some writing, even if poor, you can edit and improve it.

The next stage is obligatory, although many try to avoid it. However, before you reach the point of showing your manuscript to someone, you need to decide when it is ready. My advice here is not to seek perfection, but make sure it reads well, the spelling and grammar are good, and you have said what you want. In showing your manuscript to someone else, expect revisions, and there is no point, therefore, is trying to perfect it at this stage.

Seek Criticism

It is essential to seek some criticism of your writing. This is never easy because we may not always receive the criticism we want; mostly we seek affirmation that what we have written is acceptable. However, we are the worst critics of our own writing, and, hard as it may be, we need to become used to letting someone else review our writing and comment on it, and be willing to make changes they suggest before submitting the paper for scrutiny by an editor.

The best people to whom you should show your early drafts are 'critical friends.' You should not involve people who are always negative or always tell you that your writing is good (usually these people have not read the paper in sufficient detail). There is no such thing as a perfect piece of writing. If you understand that, then you are more able to 'let it go' and realise that another pair of eyes will almost inevitably lead to improvement. It is ideal if you have an experienced writer with whom to consult; however, do not eschew the less experienced writers or even people who may not

understand your subject matter. You should try to make everything you write readable by as wide an audience as possible.

Treat Rejection as the Start of the Next Submission

Finally, as anyone who has tried to publish will know, rejection is common. It probably happens more frequently to less experienced writers, but it also happens to experienced writers. The reasons for rejection and the best ways to avoid it – in addition to these four rules – are beyond this short article. However, the important point about rejection is not to take it personally, accept it as part of the writing for publication process, and make an immediate decision to submit your work elsewhere. Experienced writers learn to deal with rejection, and most ask themselves the question 'where next?' If you do not submit your work to another journal, then you have wasted the effort up to that point, and your ideas will never be published.

Of course, in re-submitting your work, the 'four rules' apply again: you need to check the guidelines of your new target journal; you will have to do some re-writing; you should still seek criticism of your work; and you may still be rejected. In addition, you may have the benefit of some comments from the editor of the rejecting journal and possibly reviewers' comments to take into account. These are always useful, even for another journal.

Conclusion

I hope that this article has given you some ideas of how you can apply the 'four rules' to your own writing. Try them, adapt them, and apply them as you wish.

Reference

Holland K, Watson R (2012) Writing for Publication in Nursing and Healthcare: Getting It Right. Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford

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