

# Nurse Author & Editor

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### Do You Know...

#### How to Whiz Past Your Blank Page Fears? *Structure BEFORE You Write*

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To lack confidence at the outset [of writing something] seems rational to me. It doesn't matter that something you've done before worked out well. Your last piece is never going to write your next one for you.

(McPhee, 2013)

What's more daunting than having an idea for an article and nothing to show for it? A blank page can bring up impostor doubts about writing that you never even knew you had. And it can happen to anyone. John McPhee, a world famous author, spent 2 weeks during the summer of '66 prone on the picnic table in his backyard "fighting fear and panic" because he had no idea how to begin an article for the New Yorker magazine. Sometime during McPhee's "picnic table crisis," he remembered the structure sheet his English teacher required for each assigned paper.

"It could be anything from Roman numerals I, II, III to a looping doodle with guiding arrows and stick figures" (McPhee 2013, p 46). Such a blueprint, mind map or schematic was to be crafted before any actual writing happened. After pulling an all-nighter arranging and re-arranging thoughts scribbled on note cards, McPhee's article began to take shape. This column, the last in a 4-part series on moving writing projects past stuck, introduces a structure sheet for nurse authors that can bypass your blank page fears along with 3 tips on best use.

#### **A Structure Sheet for Nurse Authors**

Suzanne Hall Johnson, nursing's writing for publication guru, says the best articles are written around a single idea, to a single readership, for a single vehicle, with a single slant (Heinrich 2008). She recommended nurse authors complete a Worksheet that incorporates these four singles after they get an idea and before they start writing. I've adapted these 4 into the Singles Sheet I teach nurses in writing for publication workshops. The next section provides 2 examples – one from a diabetes nurse named Dori, the other from a writing project of mine – to walk you through each step in clarifying your 4 singles.

**Step 1. Article-size Your Single Idea.** *What do you want to write about?* Many nurse authors start out with a writing idea that's super-sized. Think new-doc trying to squish a 120 page dissertation into a 15 page journal article. In such cases, the first step is shrinking a super-sized idea down to article size. After seeing how Dori and I did it (Table 1), try taking your single idea from super-sized to article-sized.

**Step 2. Name A Single Group of Readers.** *Who are you writing for?* Many nurse authors never ask themselves this question and, as a result, their pieces lack the tailored-to-fit message that readers crave. As you can see, Dori's writing for lay people like her patients and their families while I'm writing for educational leaders. Identify which group – lay or professional – you want to write for.

**Step 3. Choose A Single Vehicle.** *Where do you want your article published?* Many nurse authors,

once they settle on the who in step 2, enjoy searching for the vehicle best suited to their readership. Dori's vehicle is a magazine that publishes health-related articles for lay audiences; mine's a nursing magazine read by educational leaders and faculty alike. What vehicle best fits your readers?

**Step 4. Select A Single Slant.** *What's your unique take on your idea?* Many nurse authors don't realize how much their publishing success depends on standing out. A stand-out article, according to Suzanne, starts with a slant so unique readers can't wait to take a peek. Both of our slants became our titles. How about yours?

**Table 1. The Singles Structure Sheet**

IDEA	Dori's (Heinrich, 2008)	Kathy's	Yours
<b>Super-sized</b>	Diabetes	Faculty Shortage	
<b>Mid-sized</b>	Diabetic Foot care	Faculty-Scholar Shortage	
<b>Article-sized</b>	What those with diabetestoes need to know about buying shoes.	What educational leaders need to know about scholar-readying nursing faculty groups.	
<b>READERS</b>	Lay public	Educational Leaders	
<b>VEHICLE</b>	<i>Diabetes Today</i>	<i>Reflections on Nursing Leadership</i>	
<b>SLANT</b>	What You Don't Know Can Hurt You: Tips for Buying Shoes	Fast Forward Your Faculty Group's Scholar-Readiness for Promotion & Tenure	

### Three Tips for Using Single Sheets

Nurse authors agree that Singles Sheets save them from the paralysis that blank page fears so often engender. Here's their top 3 tips:

**Tip 1. Memorize the 4 Singles.** Take a moment, whenever inspiration calls, to sketch out your idea/readers/vehicle/slant. Record them on whatever's at hand—the back of a grocery list, a stick-em, or your smartphone.

**Tip 2. Add it to a Singles Sheet Folder.** Transfer your 4 singles to a Sheet you keep in a folder, virtual or hard copy, entitled Singles Sheets. Saving a Sheet for your every writing idea means never having to start from a blank sheet again.

**Tip 3. Make Your Sheet the First Page of Every Draft.** Review your Sheet before each writing session to see if your 4 singles need tweaking to align them with your current draft or if your draft needs tweaking to fit your 4 singles.

### Conclusion

Whether you're a novice or a prolific author, the secret for publishing success is the same: 1) Find a structure sheet that works for you, whether it's a blueprint, schematic, or mind map; 2) Complete a sheet after you get an idea for an article and before you write; and 3) Whiz past blank page fears as your first draft writes itself.

### References

Heinrich KT (2008) A Nurse's Guide to Presenting and Publishing: Dare to Share. Jones & Bartlett, Sudbury, MA.

McPhee J (2013) Structure. The Writing Life. The New Yorker January 14, 46-55.

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