

Nurse Author & Editor

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☰ Menu

1 MIN AGO EDIT

Writing with English as Your Second Language

The Process of Writing When English is Your Second Language

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When participating in developing and shaping the nursing profession, you need to be able to write about issues that nurses deal with on a daily basis, such as describing specific clinical cases, reporting research findings, and presenting systematic literature reviews or evidence based practice (EBP) projects. Writing should not only be the responsibility of faculty in academic settings but should also be the responsibility of clinicians and administrators. By communicating innovations in our clinical practice, we contribute to the future development of our nursing practice and advance the profession. Nevertheless, clinical nurses,

nursing students, and faculty often find it difficult to write about their research or clinical issues, especially when they need to write in English when English is their second language.

English has become the standard language that is used in international journals that publish scholarly articles. Numerous books and manuscripts have also been published regarding the writing and the publication process, where it is explained in detail how to write a scientific paper in a constructive way where the argumentation is clear and the focus of the manuscript is logically developed. Still it remains a challenging process of writing clearly and in a logical way about our own practice or the clinical issues that shape our nursing profession. But how can that be? When you are writing, you are explaining your own thinking and understanding of phenomena that are often very complex. Needing to do that in another language has often resulted in a lack of vocabulary to describe your meaning or understanding of the phenomenon. Therefore, nurses sometimes choose to write in their own mother language and then to have it translated into English. In my experience, that is not a good way to express what I am writing about because through the translation process meanings of words are often lost or changed. I have been teaching family nursing within the University of Iceland and teaching nursing research and methodological courses for close to two decades—writing has always been and still is a huge challenge for my students, no matter how many books or manuscripts they have read. One of the reasons is a language barrier or a lack of having in-depth and good knowledge about the language in which they are writing. Also, writing is challenging both for beginners and even more advanced writers—adding a language barrier is yet another challenge. But by constantly practicing, writing becomes easier over time.

Writing is a time consuming process and you may be frustrated because of how slowly you progress when preparing a manuscript, but you need to be patient with

yourself. According to Oermann and Hays (2016) writing improves with practice; some of the barriers they identify are a lack of understanding of the writing process, writer's block, lack of time, and fear of rejection. Being confident in your own writing skills and understanding the writing process is crucial in order to be successful in writing and publishing reports on innovative nursing phenomena. See further information on this in Becker and Denicolo (2012) and in Oermann and Hays (2016).

Writing a manuscript when English is your second language requires the same preparation as if you were writing in your native language. I have always encouraged my graduate students (Master's and doctoral level) to write in English even though the grammar and editing will need to be specifically taken care of after the first draft of the manuscript has been written. Most students and faculty that I work with find it difficult to develop the ideas under study but having a clear picture in your mind of the type and the focus of the manuscript is critical. When the type of the manuscript has been decided on (e.g., research report, case study, systematic literature review or EBP report) you, as the author, need to take a close look at your personal strategies to meet the deadline of having the manuscript ready at a specific time. You also need to identify your prime time for writing, when you are most productive and creative, and protect that time. You should avoid interruptions and distractions during the time allowed for writing. Every writer should begin with a planning phase which progresses into writing a draft, revising it, and submitting the final copy to a journal which concludes with publication. For an author not writing in his/her native language, additional time needs to be added for language editing, revision, and review.

To begin with you need to identify the topic and purpose of the manuscript; the purpose needs to be clear and compelling. Questions that might be of help you in the beginning phase are: Is the manuscript presenting new ideas? What

differences will the content of the manuscript make? Why is it important to write about this topic? If you are presenting research findings, the IMRAD format (Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion) needs to be followed. If the purpose is to present a clinical case, EBP project or a systematic review of the literature other formats need to be followed, as discussed in Oermann and Hayes (2016) or Becker and Denicolo (2012).

One important thing is to enjoy the writing process. That is, how your are shaping your manuscript little by little by adding new paragraphs, new arguments, new critiques, or new findings or evidence into the main body of the article. It takes time to develop each part of the manuscript, to write the first draft and then to re-write, revise, and re-write, always with a goal to make the argumentation clearer. Additionally, you need to constantly keep in mind the need to have the content presented in a well defined way in every element of the manuscript: the title, purpose, research questions (if appropriate) and the focus in the introduction, background, methods, results, discussion, and conclusion.

The same principles apply for authors who have English as their second language as well as for authors who have English as their native language. That is, the focus, the clarity and the logic of the argumentation that is raised within the manuscript need to be well presented. Authors who have English as their second language need to have, in addition to the good argumentation presented in their manuscript, a good mentor or a co-worker that you trust, who can read over the draft of your manuscript with that in mind to give honest feedback regarding the quality of the content of the manuscript. It is even more critical for an author who has English as a second language to receive critical and honest feedback when the manuscript is at the developmental stage as well as to have a good editor to read over the manuscript when it is in its final form or before the manuscript will be submitted to a scientific journal. Nowadays, most nursing journals offer editorial

services or make recommendations; I suggest that all authors should use such a service, especially if English is your second language. Never the less, even the most excellent editor cannot be responsible for the quality of the science—that is your responsibility as an author. But by having developed good research questions or hypotheses and a well grounded purpose for your work, you will increase the clarity and the focus of your manuscript. That is the most important piece, no matter what language you are writing in.

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