

# Nurse Author & Editor

## Volume 24 - March 2014, Issue 1

### On Typewriters

Leslie H. Nicoll

There was a time when every desk in every office had a typewriter upon it. Students carried typewriters from home, to school, to the library, and beyond. A typewriter was a machine for life as illustrated in Figure 1 (at the end of the article). Then word processors came along (and eventually computers) and typewriters moved, first to a typewriter stand in the corner of the room, then to storage, and, in the saddest case of all, to the trash.

I think we threw the baby out with the bathwater.

I have been thinking about typewriters quite a bit lately and in fact, have even acquired a few new (old) ones for my home and office. Tom Hanks is partly to blame. His recent article in the *New York Times* entitled, "I Am TOM. I Like to TYPE. Hear That?" (Hanks 2013) reminded me how much I like to type.

But it is not just about liking to type. Hanks (2013) suggests there are three reasons to own a vintage manual typewriter: 1) the sound of typing, 2) the physical pleasure of typing, and 3) permanence. While those are good reasons, I am not sure they would be at the top of my list. Rather, I'll take a cue from Dean Jones of Writertypes who says, "Word processors are made for processing words. Typewriters are made for processing ideas" (Jones 2013).

I lead writing retreats for the National League for Nursing and also do one-to-one coaching for aspiring authors. Lately, when I receive a manuscript that is a jumble of words and ideas, I think that I should offer the "manual typewriter prescription," that is, go out and get an old typewriter and use that to write the first draft. Of course, you'll need to move to a word processed version eventually (likely draft 2) but starting slow forces you to think about your words and what you are trying to say. True confession time: I typed the first draft of this article on an Olympia DeLuxe, a fine little machine from 1963, built in West Germany and sold in Hong Kong in 1964. It has an absolutely lovely cursive font! I provided an illustration from the first draft in Figure 2 at the end of this article.

Perhaps this notion parallels the permanence that Hanks (2013) suggests. Typing, as he notes, puts ink into the fibers of the paper on which words are typed. It is an act that requires thought and even a little reverence. Jones similarly notes, "I've learned, both in my own development and through observation, that writing in type fosters the disciplined thinking valued by, and admired in, the best writers."

Another reason why manual typing might be a good prescription: it forces you to acknowledge your limitations. As I said earlier, I have always liked to type. I taught myself to type on my father's 1959 Silent-Super Smith Corona. "Typing for the College Bound Student" (one of my favorite courses in high school, taken my senior year) polished the rough edges of my technique. I toted my dad's Smith Corona to college. Then in graduate school, I discovered the IBM Selectric, which eventually made manual typewriters obsolete. (The Selectric, which dominated the market in the 1970s and early 80s, was sent to the dustbin by the computer. Guess what? I recently bought a refurbished one off eBay. It's as good as I remember.)

I loved typing on the Selectric, so much so that in my master's program, I took on the task of typing my own thesis. I was told that this was not a good idea—I did not have the requisite skills and knowledge to type this ultimate document myself. I was strongly counseled to hire a typist. But I was stubborn and cheap—not willing to pay someone else 50 cents a page to do a job that I knew I could do myself. And I was right.

By the time my dissertation rolled around, six years later (and all the drafts and papers that preceded it), word processors were in vogue and typewriters (and typists) were rapidly disappearing. I like computers, and gadgets in general, so I had no trouble adjusting. But I think it is an interesting paradox that in 1979, I was told that I didn't have the skill to use a typewriter to meet the exacting standards of the university for my thesis, but six years later, everyone was expected to be able to use a word processor (a far more complex endeavor, combining both a software interface and hardware) to do exactly this.

So what does this have to do with today? As an editor, I am surprised (dismayed) at how many manuscripts I receive wherein the author does not have even the most basic grasp of how to use the software on their computer to prepare a manuscript. Common errors that I see repeatedly: using the space bar to indent a paragraph or pressing return at the end of every line. Don't even get me started on tables! These mistakes are time consuming to fix and for me as an editor, frustrating to deal with.

Based on this, what is my advice to authors?

1. Think about buying or borrowing an old typewriter, just to experience the joy of a manually typed first draft. Believe me, it is fun! You may have an old typewriter in your attic (these are machines that were built to last) or can find a bargain at a yard sale or on eBay. As you re-type the draft using a word processor, you can focus on editing, which is a very different process from writing.
2. Do an honest assessment of yourself and your typing/word processing skills. If you are a "hunt and peck typer" and don't enjoy the experience, consider finding a typist (to do the job) or a co-author who likes to type. If you have marginal skills, think about taking a word processing course to learn the basics. If you plan to produce your own manuscripts, I consider basic knowledge to consist of:

- a. Setting margins and tabs (and using them); this includes hanging indents on reference lists.
- b. Setting line spacing.
- c. Knowing how to create and properly format a table.
- d. Knowing the basics of style (went to use italics, setting up headings).
- e. Knowing how to properly format page numbers, headers, and footers.

3. Even if you believe your skills are adequate, consider taking an intermediate or advanced level course as a refresher. There are courses available online, and they are worth the time and effort you invest in them.

4. I tell new authors that the best way to learn to write is to write – something – every day. As part of that process, set a goal to learn one new feature of your word processor on a daily basis, too.

I believe that it was Mark Twain who said that writing is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration. He's right—and part of that perspiration is knowing how to use the equipment at hand. You need to decide where you fall on the writing/typing continuum and build on your strengths. Where you have weaknesses, look for help or increase your own knowledge. This simple act will make you a better writer and make the writing process a more positive experience for you, and for those who receive and review your manuscripts.

## REFERENCES

Hanks T (2013) I Am TOM. I Like to TYPE. Hear That? *New York Times* August 3, Sunday Review, Opinion Section.

Jones D (2013) On writing & typewriters. Retrieved from <http://tiny.cc/p3sf4w>.

## AUTHOR

Leslie H. Nicoll is the Editor-in-Chief of CIN: Computers, Informatics, Nursing. She is also the author of four Kindle for Dummies books, published by John Wiley & Sons. Leslie is the owner of Maine Desk, LLC. Her email is [Leslie@medesk.com](mailto:Leslie@medesk.com).

## IMAGES

Figure 1. Smith Corona Ad from 1956.



Figure 2. Fragment of the First Draft.

I have been thinking about typewriters quite a bit lately in fact have even acquired a few new (old) ones for my home and office. Tom Hanks is partly to blame. His recent article in the New York Times (Hanks, 2013) entitled "I am TOM. I Like to TYPE. Hear that?" reminded \*me\* how much I like to type.

HANKS (2013)

But it is not just about liking to type. Tom suggests there are three reasons to own a vintage manual typewriter: 1) the sound of typing; 2) the physical pleasure; and 3) permanence. While those are valid reasons, I am not sure they would be at the top of my list. However, I'll take a page from my friend Dean<sup>5</sup> at Writertypes who says, "Word processors are made for processing words. Typewriters are made for processing thoughts."

I lead writing ~~or~~ retreats for the National League for Nursing <sup>Lately,</sup> and also do one-on-one coaching for aspiring authors. ~~Sometimes,~~

Copyright 2014: The Author

Journal Complication Copyright 2013: John Wiley and Sons Ltd

[Print this article](#) [Email it to a friend](#)

[Back to Table of contents](#) | [View all articles in this issue](#)