

# Nurse Author & Editor

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### Hints for Writing Productivity

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There are dozens, even hundreds of articles, books, and blogs about writing. So you might wonder why I am audacious enough to write a piece on this topic for *Nurse Author & Editor*! One reason is that regardless of how many resources exist addressing the challenges of writing, there are ten-fold more declarations of despair from folks who suffer from the paradox of having a writing assignment they may actually want to write, while at the same time believing that they are simply not capable of writing, much less capable of writing well. So like many others who have built a career in part on being an author, I am constantly called upon to reveal what many consider to be secrets to achieving writing success. The truth is that there are no real secrets—all those articles and books about the writing process really do reveal just about all there is to know!

The problem is not really a lack of knowledge about the writing process, although it certainly is a fact that writing success does require an understanding of the ethics of authorship and the ability to apply the basic rules of composition, grammar, and style to your manuscripts. In addition, the more you master electronic resources for searching, producing, and documenting, the better off you will be. Anyone who is reading this article is fully capable of learning, understanding, and applying all of these essentials for writing success.

In my view the real challenge is inspiration, motivation, and dedication, and I do have a few suggestions along this line. Once you discover the inspiration that gives energy and focus to your writing project, your project “grabs” you and will not let you go. I often advise doctoral students who are agonizing over their dissertation topic to find something that makes their, or your, eyes sparkle—a focus that when mentioned, makes you smile and feel the urge to start talking! When you are inspired about the topic, you skip the floundering part. You find yourself drawn into the writing to the extent that you can hardly resist getting to it!

There is no magic wand to make this happen. Instead, learning to find and tune in to inspiration itself takes practice; this is a skill that is very difficult to describe. There are no prescriptions for doing this. I agree with the admonition that many writing resources suggest to develop a writing habit: write every day, set aside a time and place to write, and just write—fill a blank page. But this admonition is not enough, because the bottom line is that you still have that blank page staring back at you, with only a blank mind staring back!

What I suggest then is to find a kind of daily writing practice that is actually part of your life, often not related at all to those necessary writing assignments. Find something that you really want to write about. It is this process that forms the “exercise” part of writing. It nurtures the skill involved in finding the type of inspiration that won't let go. Once you learn how to do this, the search for inspiration for those necessary writing assignments becomes less arduous, even for writing tasks that are not so inspiring!

Here are some examples of things that give me practice every day, not only with writing but with tuning in to the fundamental necessity of inspiration around what I write about:

- An email arrives with a question or comment that gets me going. Instead of approaching the response as just another email, I often take time to write a thoughtful, even inspired reply. This actually happens almost daily—so there you go—I have my daily writing practice ready-made!
- My granddaughter asks me a question for which I only have superficial information. I give her the quick answer but the question starts to nag at me and I go on a hunt for the missing information—maybe something like my paternal grandmother’s name. Before you know it, I am into it and can’t let it go. I end up writing more about what I remember of my grandmother, plus stuff I find out about her from my search for more information. Voilà! A practice exercise integrating my own memories with facts and writing a story to appeal to a 10-year-old. For real-life evidence of this happening, visit my **“Mémé Stories for Sophie & Elodie”** blog.
- Somebody tells me that something can’t be done. This always hooks me! Even when I kind of agree, I take the opportunity to brainstorm how to make it happen, often starting with a list of all the things that need to happen, and writing up a plan for making it happen. This turns out to be an exercise in using my imagination, sometimes to a ridiculous extent, as well as an exercise in organizing my thoughts. The practice is not only helpful, but often fun, and once in a while, even productive.

So how do these little exercises of daily life help with those writing projects that just have to be done, with little or no inspiration? This is where some of the typical advice you see in most writing manuals becomes really useful. I do start with a blank page on the computer, but rather than also having a totally blank mind I have all these “practice” sessions to draw on and I start writing. The first few sentences are usually destined for the little trash icon in the dock! By about the fourth or fifth sentence, I am have found the inspiration and establish a reasonable flow of ideas, and now the project will not let me go until it is completed to point of only needing revisions and refinements. For short assignments I might have a first draft in one hour or so. For longer tasks that cannot be drafted in even a couple of hours—the inspiration for what I am writing has grabbed me and it is easy, even compelling, to get back to the task after taking care of the other mandatory issues of life, such as walking the dog. Sometimes going after the facts that I need to integrate with my own ideas turns out to be a bit arduous, but knowing the inspiration that now has a hold on me energizes the fact-finding task. Once I have a draft, a skeleton even, the rest is relatively easy because I am still engaged with the ideas so that re-writing, revising, and refining comes without nearly as much effort as it would have been without inspiration.

One other hint that I believe is often overlooked: the importance of presentations. Presentations of any kind, from small, local lectures for classes, organizations, clinical rounds, to larger conference addresses or poster presentations—these are all fabulous motivators! Just getting the presentation ready helps to focus, organize, and develop ideas that may not be ready for publication. People in the audience typically give feedback, which provides a sense of how your ideas are being received. It is especially helpful for me when someone is confused by my presentation, challenges my ideas, or asks a question for which I don’t immediately have a good response. The issue that emerges from my presentation keeps repeating itself like an earworm—a cognitive itch. At the first opportunity I bring up the “notes” application on my phone and type in all the questions I need to work on, some of them quite silly. When I get home, I review and usually delete the silly stuff, then begin writing responses to each of the other questions. Before I know it, I have material for at least a first draft!

To sum up my bottom line for writing productivity:

- Daily (or near-daily) writing practice is important, but it should not be contrived. Find a practice that fits with your life, but does not seem like extra work. For me, emails and interactions with friends and family provide the “stuff” and contexts for my daily practice.
- Inspiration is essential; you can invite inspiration but you cannot force it. To begin a new project, play with ideas without regard for form, style, grammar, or anything else. Draw pictures if you can draw! Consider writing in longhand, or typing on a manual typewriter! Play with the ideas for just few minutes at a time. When you think you have a seed of something to work with, set it aside and let the seed grow in your awareness before you try to write more. Inspiration cannot happen when you are caught up trying to write a perfect sentence!
- View your first efforts on a project as the first draft of many so that you can focus on you message—what you want to say instead of how to say it. Once you have a draft that reflects your message, then you can refine how to say it best.

Now for your questions and comments! Go to the contact form on my web site at <http://peggychinn.com/contact-me/>. I welcome hearing from you!

#### **About the Author:**

Peggy L. Chinn, PhD, RN, FAAN writes, “I am Editor of Advances in Nursing Science, author of a few books, and manager or co-manager of several websites/blogs including **INANE**. For fun I walk all over the San Francisco Bay area, read, knit, quilt and pursue general mischief with my grandchildren whenever possible!”

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