

# Nurse Author & Editor

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## Building Blocks

### Building Blocks for Writing Success

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Writing for professional audiences is expected of faculty, professional nurses, and even graduate students and can serve to advance our profession by disseminating information and knowledge. Yet, potential authors and students often struggle with techniques that ensure successful writing. Many resources are available that provide step-by-step guidance for writing for publication (Nicoll, 2012; Oermann & Hays, 2010; Saver, 2014; Webb, 2009). These resources review the process for successful manuscript publication and discuss such issues as identification of appropriate topics, journal selection, structure and mechanics of writing, and practical tips for

having manuscripts be accepted. Other sources address barriers and fears associated with writing (Alspach, 2010; Heinrich, 2013). However, even with all this self-help information available many authors still struggle to write effectively and fail to get their work published. The purpose of this article is to provide guidance about developing the skills or building blocks of a writer, an important but often overlooked component of successful authors.

## **OBSERVATION**

Writing can be a struggle, even for those who are accomplished and successful. There are some approaches that may be helpful to you to develop habits of a good writer. One of the best ways to improve your writing is through reading, both within the nursing literature as well as outside in diverse literature and genres. Reading helps you become comfortable with language, builds vocabulary, helps you understand how topics and literary works are developed, reinforces writing styles, and demonstrates appropriate grammar and usage. It can even spark creativity and imagination. Reading broadly, including novels, newspapers, and the Internet, will show you how stories build, how details can help to illustrate topics, and how information is organized.

Reading will also help you become familiar with the literature in your areas of interest, the audience, and styles of writing. This can be helpful in identifying trending topics, important issues, as well as gaps in the literature. Reading can help you become comfortable with the approach and tone of scholarly writing as well as expose you to typical writing approaches. It can also help clarify differences between informal or

conversational writing and scholarly writing. For example, reading research articles will familiarize you with the traditional research format of introduction, methods, results, analysis, and discussion. Clinical journals typically follow a more informal style and present a problem or issue encountered in practice and may not have standard headings. These articles offer solutions and practical strategies to address the problem and do not usually report the findings of research, although the evidence base for the interventions may be clearly addressed. By reading a variety of nursing journals, you can learn the targeted audience and the focus of the journal which will assist you when determining submission options and writing approaches.

## **INFORMATION LITERACY**

One of the other essential skills for good writing is being able to search and locate relevant background, support, or reference materials. Development of information literacy skills is critical as it aids in understanding how to effectively search databases and the Internet and distinguish relevant, current, and accurate resources. Refinement of search skills is critical for obtaining the essential background material for writing. You need to know how to use Boolean phrases such as “AND” “OR” and “NOR” to refine and strengthen your searches and gather the most appropriate and specific resources. You also need to consider exploring relevant databases outside of nursing as many related disciplines provide support for nursing ideas and concepts. Consider searching related disciplines such as psychology, sociology, education, medicine, and other health professions.

Once database searches have been conducted, then gaining access to the

identified resources is necessary. With the increased availability of electronic resources, it is easier to locate and obtain relevant materials that previously were not readily available. Reference librarians are also very helpful in securing resources and can aid in the retrieval of unusual resources. Once references are obtained then you need to critically review the materials. Compare and critique what is available in the literature. Identify what is reported on the topic but pay particular attention to what is missing and what readers may still want to know about the topic. As you read the material, consider the gaps and how additional writing about the topic can add or further contribute to the literature. And although it should be common knowledge, it is worth repeating: you must read the articles you cite in their entirety, not just the abstract.

## PERCOLATE IDEAS

Writers—that is, you—need time to develop ideas, ponder the topic, and consider various viewpoints. A variety of strategies can be useful to do this. Keep a journal, notebook, or file with great topics and writing ideas that emerge and allow those topics to “percolate” a bit. Spending time thinking about the topic is useful for novice scholarly writers (Shellenbarger, Hunter, & Gazza, 2014). Sometimes brainstorming and free writing activities will engage your mind and allow you to get started by putting ideas on paper. This is the time for drafting and not the time to worry about editing.

Each author approaches this task in a different way. Some writers use concept maps, or software or computer applications such as Inspiration® (<http://www.inspiration.com/>) and Bubbl.us (<http://bubbl.us/>) to visually create a writing structure. These electronic concepts maps are advantageous

as they allow you to imbed web links to content within the concept map. Others may prefer a more structured linear approach and use outlines or headings. The Manuscript Math Outline (MMO) is a way to structure an article based on a paragraph-by-paragraph approach (Nicoll, 2012). Regardless of the approach to draft ideas, you should not get stuck in the idea phrase. You need to move beyond the idea stage and get your words on the paper.

One way to move forward with writing is to talk about your ideas with colleagues. This dialogue with others may assist in organizing ideas, clarifying the topic, or providing valuable feedback that aids in the refinement of your work. It may also provide support for the process of writing and be a confidence booster. Later, these same colleagues can serve as peer reviewers and critique a draft for you when it is finished. Seek reviewers who are content experts and can help to identify missing, unclear, or incorrect information. Reviewers who have limited topic knowledge, even those outside of nursing, are also helpful as they can provide feedback about organization, flow of information, and proofreading assistance.

## **EMBRACE THE INNER EXPERT**

Sometimes writers struggle to find their voice as an expert. Students and novice writers typically write papers that focus on works of others by rephrasing, repeating, or summarizing what is already in the literature. They use the opinions of others and don't contribute new ideas or insights. You need to take ownership of the ideas and write as an expert. Select topics that are familiar and in which you demonstrate experience. Use references to support background information but speak from authority and experience.

## MAKE WRITING A HABIT

One of the challenges that many writers face is finding the time for writing. It is easy to get immersed in other activities and not prioritize writing, finding that it always falls to the bottom of your “to-do” list. However, scheduling and engaging in regularly planned writing activities is crucial for success. Some writers prefer short daily writing sessions while others may prefer longer less frequent writing sessions. Identify the peaks and non-productive hours of your work schedule and assess your productivity. Find a writing time that meets your needs and keep that time protected for writing activities. Avoid interruptions during these writing sessions. Use that time to write something, even if it is not for the manuscript you may be working on. Even though time has been set aside to write you just may not be productive in your writing so learn to identify those struggles. When faced with these situations find other writing related activities such as brainstorming, reflective journaling, or editing written materials. Working on your reference list or formatting tables and figures are other useful tasks that can productively use your time when the writing inspiration is not there.

Another key habit of successful writers involves the writing plan. Identify goals and due dates and make them prominent. Hold yourself accountable to these writing plans. Don't expect perfection, especially with early drafts of your work. Know that it will probably take several revisions of writing to produce a quality product so write, retreat, and revise. Continue that process until the work is satisfactory. Push yourself to keep writing even when faced with obstacles. Using these activities will help to lay the foundation for writing and will help you to establish the needed structure

from which to work. These simple strategies can be incorporated as part of your routine and will help you achieve success in being a scholarly writer.

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