

Nurse Author & Editor

Leslie H. Nicoll, PhD, MBA, RN, FAAN Editor-in-Chief

☰ Menu

MAY 20, 2015 EDIT

Scholarly Discourse

Reflections on Scholarly Discourse

NURSE AUTHOR & EDITOR, 2015, 25(1), 4

Peggy L. Chinn

Good ideas do not happen in a vacuum. In the academic community, scholarly discourse, both verbal and written, provides the context from which good ideas grow. The most fundamental skill required to participate in scholarly discourse is the ability to express your own ideas, including not just the idea itself, but your explanation, justification, and the background on which your idea is built. When your ideas are just emerging your discourse is exploratory and not fully developed, but it is essential to jump in and try out your ideas in forums that are relatively safe – places where the people around you will give you honest, constructive and supportive

feedback. When you are first starting an academic career, this may feel intimidating but your capabilities can only grow by jumping in!

In my recent experience, the ability to enter into this kind of discourse has been seriously hampered by an increasing, almost paranoid emphasis on the dangers of plagiarism. In addition, many in the academic community have also embraced the now outdated idea that the use of first person pronouns is forbidden in scholarly discourse. It seems that the academic community, in its eagerness to wipe out these dreaded offenses, has hampered the development of the skills of scholarly discourse – we have told people what not to do, but have failed to help them know what to do instead. The paralysis that these negative admonitions have created amplifies the challenges of learning to express one’s own ideas, knowing how to build on the ideas of others in an effective way, and developing the skills involved in both verbal and written communication that contribute to effective discourse.

This essay is intended to provide some guidelines and hints for expressing your own ideas, while placing those ideas in the context of the work of other scholars. It begins with the matter of active voice and agency, which is purely a matter of grammar, form and style, but this is the gateway to clear communication of your own ideas. The remaining sections address conceptual strategies that can guide the processes of clarifying and expressing your own ideas, and placing them in the context of existing literature and the ideas of other scholars.

ACTIVE VOICE AND AGENCY

Active voice and agency comes more easily in verbal communication, but in written work using these stylistic tools greatly improves the quality of your work. Current best practices for writing and publishing call for the use of the active voice in order to clearly designate agency, or who is involved with an action, a thought, an idea, or a process. Grammatically, the “agent” is the subject of a sentence, the person or thing that activates the verb, and the verb is expressed in an active form, as in “I ate the apple.” When the passive voice is used, the subject is acted upon and the verb is in passive tense, as in “The apple was eaten.”

If you are the agent, the first person pronoun is far preferable to referring to yourself in the third person. For example, use “I found that . . . “ instead of “This author found that . . . “ It is still prudent to be cautious about using first person pronouns, not because they are bad, but because overuse of the first person can result in an overly egotistical presentation. You will quickly learn that most of the time when you use “I” or “my” or “me” you can easily edit the sentence to either delete the pronoun, or adjust the sentence to state the idea as your own without using the pronoun.

Table 1 shows examples that contrast the use agency in active and passive voice along with best practices related to each situation.

Table 1. Examples of Agency in Voice

Active Voice	Passive Voice	Best Practice
Many studies support the new	The new procedure is supported by	Use active voice

procedure.	many studies.	
Jane, Tim and Sally proposed the new procedure.	The new procedure was proposed by Jane, Tim and Sally.	Use active voice
I found that handwashing is effective.	Handwashing was found to be effective.	In the context of reporting your study findings, it is implied that you are the agent, so revise the active voice sentence to read: "The study findings show that handwashing is effective."
I believe that people have free will.	People are believed to have free will.	Use active voice, particularly when referring to a personal belief.
I recommend that you use the first person freely in your early drafts, then revise to remove as many as possible.	It is recommended that you use the first person freely in your early drafts, then revise to remove as many as possible.	Active voice is okay, but since you are speaking/writing directly to the listener/reader, your own agency is clear so you can simply eliminate the first person pronoun as follows: "Use first person pronouns freely in your early drafts, then revise to remove as many as you can."
In my view, the author's argument has	A number of flaws were found in the	Use the active voice but drop "In my view..." The sentence "The author's argument has a number of flaws" is adequate, and it would be followed by your explanation of the inadequacies in the argument. If you want to emphasize that this is your own opinion

a number of flaws.	author's argument	with which others might take issue, you can explain this in your narrative without drawing attention to yourself by stating "In my view..."
--------------------	-------------------	---

PLACING YOUR IDEAS IN THE CONTEXT OF OTHER SCHOLARS

If your ideas are to ever gain significance, they must be placed in the context of other scholars. This is the only way to assure yourself and others that your ideas are unique and significant. It is your responsibility to demonstrate this by showing how you are building on the work of others, explaining how your ideas are different and similar to theirs, and providing detailed logic and evidence that supports the development of your ideas. The "background" of your work should never consist of a laundry list of "related literature." Rather, an adequate background integrates your own logic and ideas with what has come before, resulting in a conceptual path that conveys to your audience the basis on which your ideas are built. Here are critical questions to consider in building a structure that places your ideas in the context of others.

Are another author's ideas plausible, in light of your own experience?

As you read the work of others, keep track of ideas that make sense or do not make sense to you, and why. You may or may not ever articulate your specific responses to each and every article or author you read, but gradually you will gain a much deeper understanding of not only what others have said and done, but of your own perspectives from which your ideas grow.

What inspires you and what connects my ideas with that of another scholar?

Is there something in what you read that you find particularly inspiring? Examine your own experience, and explain in as much detail as possible why someone else's ideas inspire you. If you are building on another scholar's work, give an explicit explanation of the points on which you are building, and if you are adapting or departing from the other scholar's work, explain not only what you are adapting or changing, but also why.

Are there points of disagreement?

Make explicit the points on which you disagree, and develop detailed explanations that explain the basis of your disagreement. If the author's ideas are plausible, acknowledge the context within which they are plausible, showing why, in the context in which you are working, they are not applicable or useful. For example, you consider an approach that another author recommends in caring for elderly people, but you recognize that this approach was developed and designed to care for people in an all-white community, and you are working in African-American communities. In your judgment, the approach would not be culturally appropriate for your population; explain the basis on which your judgment is based.

Is something missing?

What has the author left out of their work, and why is this important? Explain not only what could be included, but how including this element could change what the author has reported.

What are the limitations of the author's point of view?

How does the author's point of view reveal the limits of that point of view? For example, most nurse authors are white middle class women. If you have different cultural experiences, surely your perspectives will be at least a bit different; explain any difference that you see in what you read, and what your own experience would reveal. If you are also a middle class white woman, imagine placing yourself in another socio-economic position and consider the limitations of your point of view.

How does this author's work differ from that of other authors in the field?

Does one author's work present information or ideas that are quite different from what you have read in other literature? If so, what are the differences, and in your judgment, what are the strengths and limitations of each? Be explicit about what you see as unique in another person's work, and provide that rationale on which you have concluded that this is unique. If you recognize that one author has expressed an idea that is essentially similar to that of another, explain the similarity. For example, you might notice that two different authors use two different words that you believe are pointing the same or similar concepts.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

If you do the homework required in addressing these kinds of questions as you read the scientific literature, you will have the tools you need to avoid a laundry list of literature citations without any synthesis, and you will be very well prepared to engage in lively conversation with your colleagues about

your topic of interest. For your literature review, consider organizing your review in terms of the major themes or ideas that emerged as you considered questions like those in the above section. By doing this, you can write as if you are telling a story, or giving a tour of the territory! Your review will result not only in a comprehensive reference list, but also an interesting and informative account that reveals not only the substance of the existing literature, but even more importantly, the ideas and insights that you are bringing to the discussion.

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!”

Copyright 2015: The Author

Journal Complication Copyright 2015: John Wiley and Son Ltd

Share this:



Related

[A New NA&E!](#)

October 5, 2015

In "Announcements"

[Student Assignments](#)

September 20, 2014

In "Student Authorship"

[Compassionate Critique](#)

June 20, 2014

In "Peer Review"