

Nurse Author & Editor

Volume 22 - June 2012, Issue 2

Do You Know...

How to Move a Writing Project Past Stuck? Freewrite Your Way to Discovery

Kathleen T. Heinrich

Dizzying euphoria followed by a dawning dread. That's how it felt when Editor Marilyn Oermann agreed to my writing this column. After a 5-minute victory jig, reality hit: now I had to produce. Early drafts piled up, one after another, more deletions than text. With the June deadline just 3 weeks away, all I had to show for my troubles was a title. Or so it seemed.

Until I began to notice the phrase "Writing Is An Act of Discovery" unfurling like a banner across my mind's eye whenever I sat down to draft yet another version. Taking this as a sign, I opened a fresh document, typed in "Who Is This Column Written For," and let my ideas flow unfettered for 10 minutes. The next day I asked "Why Is This Column Called Do You Know?" which led to another 10-minute writing session. A day after that, answering the question "How Can I Make This Column Your Must-Read?" took me 10 minutes. Here's what those who, why, and how freewrites revealed.

Who Is This Column Written For?

Whether you dream of seeing your name in print or you're a well-published author intent on mentoring others, it's my hope that this column will answer some of your questions about writing for publication. Just as Suzanne Hall Johnson's workshop answered my questions as an author "wannabe" in 1979. And, just as Nurse Author & Editor (NA&E) – the newsletter she started in 1991 – continues to answer questions I don't even know I have. This column is my way of repaying my debt to Suzanne Hall Johnson and her generous NA&E contributors for their knowledge and wisdom in the only way possible. By sharing what I've learned with you.

Why Is This Column Called "Do You Know...?"

In 1995, having spent several years preparing nurses to write for publication, I inquired about authoring an article for NA&E. Suzanne's response came in the form of a question, "Do you know how to write for a newsletter?" I said no and her advice was this: Readers should be able to skim the headings and know what a newsletter article is about without having to read the article. Our interaction taught me that author-mentors neither presume nor preach. They ask. Conversations begin with, "Do you know how to...?" When the answer is no, their next question is, "May I show you something that works for me?" Following Suzanne's example, this column is entitled "Do You Know?" to share the "may I show you" strategies that my workshop participants find most helpful.

How Can I Make This Column Your Must-Read?

If you yearn for a wise someone to help you meet your publishing challenges, you're not alone. Few nurses are fortunate enough to find an author-mentor because there are just too few to go around. This is why I'm hoping that the best practices and resources shared in these Do You Know... columns provide some of the sage advice you seek. To that end, each column will start with a story, share a "may I show you" tool, and finish with a take-away tip. In this first column, that tool is freewriting.

When Do Freewrites Help?

Whenever you're feeling stuck, freewrites can help you discover more about your writing project or more about yourself as an author. Remember how freewriting my responses to the who, why, and how questions, with no need to worry about grammar or pay attention to spelling, gave this column form and shape? While this was a huge step, I still felt a bit stuck. After sharing my dilemma with my author-mentor, she asked, "What about this column is making it so difficult to write?"

Realizing that I didn't have a clue, I decided to freewrite my way to an answer. Here's an excerpt: I never put the two together. Last summer's fruitless attempts to write a guest column for a nursing education journal and the trouble I'm having writing this column. Four drafts, four rejections later, that guest column was never published. No wonder I feel stuck, I'm dreading a repeat of that rejection. This self-discovery made all the difference. When the next draft wrote itself, I knew I'd have a column ready to submit by June 1.

What Is The Take-Away Tip?

The next time a project of yours get stuck, freewrite your way to discovery. Elbow (2012) describes freewriting as "speaking onto the page" (p. 101). Here's how. Find a place where you can write undisturbed. Formulate a single question. Flood the page, whether you're freewriting with pen and ink or on a computer, with your response. Allow yourself as long as it takes— anywhere from 1 minute to 20 minutes. Doodles, squiggles, bullets are all allowed; the only thing that's not is editing. Then if you're still feeling stuck, turn freewriting into an act of self-discovery. Ask what past experience is making it difficult to complete this particular project. Explorations like these, no matter how painful the remembering or how humbling the ah-hah, can move projects past stuck.

Where Will Reading This Column Take You?

Everyone's writing projects get stuck: novice, advanced beginner, intermediate and expert authors alike. Getting stuck becomes a problem only when nurse authors give up on a specific project or on writing for publication altogether. To prevent that from happening, upcoming Do You Know... columns will introduce simple and effective tools for getting projects unstuck. Drawn from my own experiences and from those of other experts in the field, tools that are new to some may be timely reminders for others. Whatever the case, after reading this column for the next year, you'll know more about moving your writing projects past stuck.

References

Elbow P (2012) *Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech can Bring to Writing*. New York, Oxford University Press.

Heinrich K T (2008) *A Nurse's Guide to Presenting and Publishing: Dare to Share*. Sudbury MA, Jones & Bartlett.

Acknowledgements: With gratitude to Marilyn Oermann for saying yes to editing NA&E and to Beverly Sastri for being my author-mentor on this first column.

Kathleen T. Heinrich, PhD, RN, is the author of *A Nurse's Guide to Presenting and Publishing: Dare to Share*. A twice-tenured professor turned consultant, her tutorials, workshop series, and multi-year consultations give individuals and faculty groups the support, skills, and self-confidence to write for publication. Contact her at drkth@att.net or visit her website www.KTH_Consulting.com.

[Print this article](#)

[Email it to a friend](#)

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