

# Nurse Author & Editor

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## Publish or Perish?

### **Publish or Perish?**

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**NURSE AUTHOR & EDITOR, 2016, 26(1), 3**

Those of us who work in academe are often required to maintain a program of scholarship with the goal of publication in peer reviewed journals. This is easier said than done and can be an intimidating process if you don't have a plan. Once you, as a new author, conquer the fear, the process becomes easier and the rewards and satisfaction increase exponentially.

### **HOW DO I FIND THE TIME?**

When confronted with the challenges of publication, most new authors respond "How do I find the time?" Nurse educators and researchers work long hours just to stay current with

their clinical practice, teaching, and committee work. Our clinical colleagues also struggle with all of the expectations of their jobs and find it difficult to make time for publication. While there is no way to lengthen the hours in the day, there are ways to plan time to accommodate writing.

Some authors discipline themselves to write a few paragraphs each day. Key to making this work is picking a time when the environment is quiet without distractions and you are able to think. Others block out one day per week or part of a day and keep it sacrosanct. I have personally found the latter to work best for me. The key is to maintain that day on the calendar and only give it up for urgent business. It is too easy to find an excuse not to write by saying that you have to be somewhere else. Naturally, the demands of one's full time job take precedence but if your supervisor is aware of your goal, they will do what they can to respect your need to have this day for writing. If, however, you do not produce deliverables, such as publications, then it is not likely that you will continue to be granted this day for writing.

New authors especially, often get caught up in correcting spelling and grammatical errors while thoughts are flowing. I have found that to do so, stifles creativity. I prefer to write in a free flowing manner and then go back and correct mistakes and even out transitions—but I will be honest, it has taken time for me to learn that this style works for me. Others write and edit concurrently (Nicoll, 2015). The point is, it is important to keep your scholarly writing on your “to do” list, no matter what your personal style.

These same principles apply to writing citations, references, the abstract, tables and figures. While it is necessary to develop your own system for noting from which reference your content derives, it is not immediately necessary to write the citation and reference in the official format you will use before you submit for publication. Figure out what notations will make the most sense to you and then convert them to the official format later. I find that this

is especially necessary for a journal that requires numbering of citations. These numbers inevitably change several times before the manuscript is ready to publish. So, keep your own list of which number correlates with which reference or source and amend it as you edit. However, it is extremely important to pay careful attention to references and make sure they are cited correctly. Not documenting sources or citing them inaccurately is a form of plagiarism (iThenticate, 2013)!

## **A PROGRAM OF SCHOLARSHIP**

Developing a plan for publication begins with a program of scholarship. While there are occasions for publishing about a topic outside of your program of scholarship such as perceptions of or experience with a hot issue, typically if you are working toward rank and tenure and national visibility, it is best to publish within the realm of your area of interest. Nurses who publish clinical articles such as case studies or tips might have expertise in a variety of clinical topics and may publish on a broad range of clinically relevant subjects but it is still desirable to become known for your particular expertise.

So, take some time to really think about what you are passionate about. There is no need to narrow the field. In fact, it is preferable to pick a broad subject area such as diabetes, nurse workforce, women's health, and so on. Picking a broad subject area gives the you latitude to branch out while developing recognition for expertise in a defined area. Passion about the program of scholarship is vitally important because, with few exceptions, you will be researching and writing about it for years to come. Determining what this program of scholarship will be early in your career is ideal but it's not too late to develop the program mid-career if there is determination to stick with an organized plan. Reviewing the literature is a great way to refine your program of scholarship. Think about the areas that interest you and then review the literature to see where the gaps are. Where can you find your niche? Can you write about a well-known topic from a completely different perspective? During the

course of my career, I have frequently been surprised to learn that no one has published about a particular topic, such as the rehabilitation nurse in home health care and registered nurses with physical disabilities. I took it for granted that someone had. Why not be the first or one of the chosen few?

Before you settle on your area of interest, make sure you not only have the passion but the expertise to ensure that you will be credible when you write about it. When others read your work, will they believe what you say because you have education, certification, or experience in that area?

## **DEVELOPING A PLAN**

So, step one is determining your passion. Step two is determining what you want to write about within your area of interest. If you have identified a gap in the literature, then a research study is the next logical step toward discovering something previously unknown about that topic. Another approach is to look at the research and writing others have done and see if you can approach the topic from a different perspective based on your expertise and experience.

Consider those around you whether you work in academe or a clinical setting. Do they share any of your interests? Have you always wondered why nurses perform a procedure a certain way? Is the procedure evidence based? If not, perhaps a study is in order. Similarly, have you wondered how effective a particular teaching technique might be with students? Why not design a study to measure its effectiveness? There are myriad topics and topics within topics that require exploration or expansion of our knowledge about them. Sometimes working in a team can make this process less intimidating.

If two or more people share a common interest but have never conducted research or

published, then finding a research mentor can be very helpful. Working with the mentor in exchange for a place as an author on a future publication is usually attractive to researchers. Many researchers and experienced authors are happy to share what they know and contribute to the literature in this way. Some of the best career-long partnerships have developed from two or more people working together on a shared interest area and taking turns being the principal investigator and first author. Collaborating with professionals from other disciplines can be especially rewarding because they offer different perspectives. Also, grant funding is frequently dependent on interdisciplinary work.

## WRITING AND SUBMITTING

So let's assume that you have recognized your passion and chosen your specific topic for your planned publication. You may not yet know to which journal you will submit your article but you should have a few ideas. You can narrow it down to one choice as you complete your journal due diligence (Nicoll & Chinn, 2015a). However, having a few ideas will help you focus how you conceptualize the manuscript. If it is a research article, examine the broad range of peer-reviewed data based journals that accept research articles. What are their impact factors? Who are their readers? If you are writing about clinical research or about a clinical topic that is not based on research but based on your own experience, evaluate journals whose audience is primarily practicing nurses. In what setting do readers typically practice? The hospital? Home care? However, beware of any journal that asks you to pay to submit or publish or falls into the category of "predatory" (Owens, 2015; Nicoll & Chinn, 2015b). Be sure that the journal you choose is legitimate, reputable and peer-reviewed. Otherwise, your time, energy, and expertise will be wasted.

Set up the manuscript in the way required by the journal that you select for publication. This can be refined as you develop the paper, but you need an organizing framework with which to start.

As you prepare your manuscript, follow the author guidelines for your selected journal very carefully. Manuscripts are rejected because they are too long, do not follow journal guidelines for format, or have errors. It is important to be precise and detail oriented—if this is not your strong suit, you might consider asking your co-author to take on this responsibility.

The journal may require a cover letter—if so, see if they have guidelines for what to include. If you have nothing else to say in the cover letter beyond your contact information and the title of your article, simply thank the editor for considering your manuscript for publication; this should be said in any case.

## AUTHORSHIP

If you are working with someone else, it is very important that authorship be established early on. Most journals now have guidelines regarding the type and amount of work one has to do to be considered an author of the manuscript. In any case, a *substantial* contribution to the work and the manuscript is required to be designated as an author (COPE Council, 2014). The person who has led the research study, done most of the writing and editing or has generally led the effort to publish, typically is first author but this should be established early on so each person knows the expectations. You might consider taking turns on the next publication if your team continues to work together.

A full discussion of authorship is beyond the scope of this article, but I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to have this conversation with your colleagues early in the process and document decisions in writing. Friendships have ended over authorship disputes. Misleading or misattributed authorship is a form of plagiarism and can result in article retractions (iThenticate, 2013; Nicoll & Chinn, 2015a).

## REVISING AND REJECTION

Rejection is part of the process. As with anything else, it is hard to learn how to do something well until you have first failed and learned from your mistakes. Whether you have been asked to revise and resubmit or your manuscript has been rejected altogether, allow yourself a few moments of anger and disappointment but then read the reviews again. If you have questions about any of the comments, ask to have a conversation with the editor so you can learn from your mistakes and clarify the errors you made. Most editors are very approachable and are eager to work with potential authors. If you cannot get a response, either by phone or email from an editor and there is no apparent attempt to discuss your work with you, then think very carefully about whether to write for that journal in the future.

If, after considering the comments from the reviewers and the editor, you feel strongly that you cannot or should not make certain changes, then list the requested changes and your rationale for not revising them. I have encountered instances when reviewers who clearly lacked expertise in qualitative research requested inappropriate alterations to an article about a qualitative research study. I simply pointed out in my response to the editor that the requested changes were appropriate to a quantitative research study but not to my work. Ideally, reviewers are chosen because they have some familiarity with the subject of your manuscript but it is very possible, even likely, that they do not know as much as you do about the topic. Therefore, it is perfectly reasonable to make the case to the editor that you do not agree with particular requested changes. If you do this, be sure to also list the changes you did make or plan to make to the article and acknowledge that there is room for improvement and you appreciate the recommendations.

## HOORAY! YOU ARE PUBLISHED!

Go out and celebrate. Seeing one's name and work in print never gets old. It is the sum of your hard work and the time you devoted to making a valuable contribution to the literature.

Shout it from the rooftops. You deserve it!

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