

# Nurse Author & Editor

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3 DAYS AGO EDIT

## Finding Your Voice and Writing Well, Part I

### Finding Your Voice and Writing Well: Situating Yourself within Your Text

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One of the biggest challenges for any writer concerns the matter of “voice”—metaphorically, the ability to “imprint” your writing with your own unique style. This article addresses the first challenge of “voice”—making your own thoughts, ideas and opinions explicit in what you write. The next issue of *Nurse Author & Editor* will continue with the second challenge—how others are situated in your text.

The written word has no physical vocal chords creating a recognizable sound, and yet as the person originating the words, the writer’s personality and unique composition habits can come through. In fact, even though most scholarly journals require a certain level of professionalism in the composition of articles submitted for publication, they also seek articles that are interesting to read and that convey

the particular message and perspective of the author. In other words, journals seek to publish articles that maintain a style of relative formality, but they have abandoned strict traditional norms of style that are dry, uninteresting, and bland.

Admittedly, “style” is an elusive concept. The strict traditional norms of scientific and scholarly writing were designed to mask individual perspectives and in so doing maintain the impression of objectivity. These styles yielded texts that were highly structured according to predetermined content sections, and limited, if any interpretation. These are, in fact, desirable traits for certain written work, but not all. On the opposite end of the writing style spectrum is an abandonment of traditional style conventions to emphasize your own creativity. This kind of style can be interesting, and often captures reader interest in ways that most written words do not. This too is a desirable style for certain written work, but not all.

The principles and guidelines that I offer come from my own immersion in feminist thought— perspectives that evolved as women scholars began to not only challenge patriarchal norms that prevailed in science and the humanities, but that also produced a significant body of scholarship that originated from their own experience, research, and philosophic foundations. When feminist scholars began to examine traditional writing norms, they uncovered a number of problematic issues, one of the most important being the obfuscation of agency, meaning that the person who is speaking or acting remains hidden. This creates a number of problems from a feminist perspective: the reader cannot ascertain the biases or prejudices that might have shaped the words or actions, the agent (the one speaking or acting) cannot be held responsible for any outcomes of their words or actions, and there is no avenue for questioning or challenging the words or actions. Just as the traditional conventions sustained the mistaken assumption that male nouns and pronouns referred to all people, these conventions also

perpetrated long-standing prejudices and stereotypes of “the other” based on traits such as race, ethnicity, religion, geographic location, and so on (Chinn, 2003).

The sections that follow explore certain principles of writing that can guide making decisions about your style for any particular written work, and how these principles can be used to develop styles that reflect your own “voice,” that remain true to certain ethical responsibilities of authorship, and that speak directly to the audience you intend to reach.

## **KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE**

Each journal reaches a certain audience of readers. Sometimes the audience is clearly defined (e.g. nurses who care for children, or who care for people with cancer). In other cases the audience is less well defined (all nurses interested in public policy). Regardless, your ability to reach your audience depends on your ability to speak directly to that audience, avoiding the hazards of either speaking down to them (mistakenly assuming they are altogether ignorant), or assuming that they have a level of understanding that you yourself have. Here are questions to ask as you consider who the people are who comprise your audience:

***Who do I assume my audience to be?*** Picture your audience in your mind’s eye. Notice the traits of the audience. Notice how your mental image reveals pre-conceived notions that might leave some readers out. For example, how many of your mind’s eye audience are male? Female? Black? Asian? Gender queer? Heterosexual? Liberal or conservative? Do you imagine them to be sympathetic to your message, or resistant to it? Do you imagine them to already have background knowledge that is required to understand your message?

***Given the lens of a particular person in the audience, does my intended message alienate, or does it draw the reader closer to my message?*** Focus

on the omissions in the mental image of your audience, and examine how the people you omitted might perceive your message. What bridges of understanding do you need to build into your text? What alienating terms or stereotypes have you included, unintentionally, and how can you revise your words to omit those? Will your language come across as pretentious? Will people read your message as “talking down?”

***Do I assume a social and political context that is alien to some of my audience?*** Most United States authors assume that their audience resides within their home country. However, even if the journal you are writing for is published in the US, your audience is likely to include people who reside in other countries, with different social and political environments. If your work is situated within a certain country, clearly identify this context. Consider what contextual interpretations, descriptions, or language can be included to address readers in other countries, to bring them closer to your work rather than alienating them.

## **USING YOUR OWN VOICE AND AGENCY**

Voice and agency are central to good writing. Voice and agency are also among of the most perplexing dilemmas in writing. Traditional scholarship assumed a voice of authority, leaving unquestioned the ground from which the authority rose. The “voice,” presumed to be that of the author, was hidden in mystifying “objectivity,” confusing the author’s own perspectives with the perspectives of others who the author claimed to represent.

Good writing calls for explicit accountability and responsibility, demystification of who is speaking or whose voice is represented, and of the frame of reference from which the voice arises. If the author presumes to speak on behalf of others, the basis upon which the author speaks, and for whom, must be stated explicitly.

As a writer, you have an ethical responsibility to be accountable for your own views and to be clear when you are speaking on behalf of others. There are instances when you will need to include a brief statement that describes who you are and what life experiences have influenced the ideas that you present. If you are a white middle-class male who makes a statement about the Black community, your words have a vastly different meaning and influence than the same words written by a Black woman. Your audience deserves to know who is speaking, particularly when you speak about or on behalf of someone else.

It is impossible to situate yourself within your writing without referring to yourself in some way. By today's standards of good writing, first person pronouns are necessary and widely accepted, even in the most traditional journals. Traditional standards of writing that resist or reject the use of personal pronouns would call for you to refer to yourself in the third person (as in "the present author grew up in a multi-cultural environment . . ." or "the researcher invited the participants to share their stories . . ."). Use of the third person to refer to yourself has come to be recognized as stilted and annoying, leading to an ever-increasing acceptance of the use of personal pronouns.

However, the use of first person pronouns can yield an overly self-absorbed and egocentric text that not only offends the traditional reader, but interferes with meaningful communication with readers who seek a broader foundation and connection with the work at hand than that afforded by the author's views alone. The pronoun can often be omitted or edited out of the text, but beware of the temptation to use a passive voice to edit out personal pronouns. Instead, use a different active noun for the sentence. For example, instead of "My analysis revealed that women experienced ambivalence. . ." use "Women who participated the study experienced ambivalence . . ." Because you are reporting your research, the phrase "my analysis" is already implied and does not need to be stated. The

revision makes the women in your study active in the sentence and brings them to the foreground, leaving the author/researcher in the background of the text, but still there as the person who conducted the study.

Sometimes you need to use personal pronouns, particularly when you are giving your audience information that explains your own perspective on your topic. As you will see in the example below, my background has a significant influence on the content of this paper—an influence that you, as the reader, deserve to know. The example also illustrates how you can reduce the frequency of personal pronouns to avoid a self-indulgent and egocentric text, and actually improves the writing. The first paragraph illustrates an exaggerated use of personal pronouns, and the second shows a revision to reduce personal pronouns while retaining my voice.

*I am an Anglo female educated in a Euro-centric tradition. I grew up on the Big Island of Hawaii in a multi-cultural environment as one of two blond children in a predominantly Asian community. This childhood experience gave me a keen sense of what it is like to be different. Nevertheless, my childhood friendships instilled in me an appreciation of the common ground that I shared with my Asian and Pacific-Islander classmates and neighbors. At the same time, my religion, family traditions and schooling taught me that to be “haole” (Hawaiian for Caucasian) was the ideal, and the privilege that my white skin and blond hair implied was never far from my awareness. [10 instances of personal pronouns in a 114 word passage]*

Edited, this passage would read:

*I grew up in the predominantly Asian community of Hilo on the Big Island of Hawaii as one of two blond Anglo children. While feeling a keen sense of being different, I also experienced common ground and friendship with*

*Asian and Pacific-Islander classmates and neighbors. Schooling in this multi-cultural environment derived solely from a Eurocentric, US tradition, one that erased the reality of our diverse cultures, and conveyed to all that to be “haole” (Hawaiian for Caucasian) was a privilege. [2 instances of personal pronouns in a 80 word passage]*

In the second example, the text is not only edited to reduce the frequency of the use of personal pronouns, but to also acknowledge shared influences that were more pervasive than simply a personal circumstance. The fact is that if I was in a Eurocentric school, then so were my classmates; we all experienced the effect of such schooling. All of us learned that to be *haole* was to be privileged, including the children whose ancestry was Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Portuguese, Hawaiian or mixed.

## **WRITING IS RE-WRITING**

The well-known adage that “writing is re-writing” is a hidden truth—readers only notice flaws in a text, and never see evidence of the many drafts that preceded the published work. I suspect that the feeling that writing is difficult derives from the fact that many new authors expect to be able to produce a finished product on the first go-round! The fact is that the first draft of any writing produces not a finished, polished product, but it can produce a text that is rich with the underlying feelings and beliefs that energize your work, and that give it an element of appeal that is all-too-often missing in the final product! For this reason, I encourage authors to write their first draft with their own ideas—their own voice—expressed as freely as possible. Abandon any concern for length, or style, or proper formatting—all of this can come later! Use all the first-person pronouns that flow from your thoughts and ideas to be sure that you are inserting your own voice into your work. Depending on the length of your project and the timeline for it to be a finished product, set the work aside for a while. Then begin what I think of as the “easy” part of writing—

going back through the text to situate yourself appropriately in the text, removing overuse of first person pronouns but while speaking directly to the reader. Finally, make the changes that are needed for length, style and formatting.

## CONCLUSION

In this article I have addressed the first challenge of “voice” and “style”—ways to situate yourself in your writing to give yourself agency and credit for the ideas you are contributing to the literature. But this challenge also involves situating others within a text in ways that respect and acknowledge the contributions of others, and that respect the diverse positions from which your readers will approach your work. The next article: “Finding Your Voice and Writing Well: Situating Others within Your Text” will appear in the next issue of *Nurse Author & Editor*!

*Author’s Note: Portions of this article have been revised based on this previously published chapter: Chinn, P. L. (2003). Feminist Approaches. In J. Clare & H. Hamilton (Eds.), Writing Research: Transforming Data into Written Forms (pp. 61–84). Elsevier Science Limited.*

## REFERENCE

1. Chinn, P. L. (2003). Feminist Approaches. In J. Clare & H. Hamilton (Eds.), *Writing Research: Transforming Data into Written Forms* (pp. 61–84). Edinburgh, Scotland: Churchill Livingstone, an imprint of Elsevier Science Limited.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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