

# Return on Time Investment: Writing Resources

## Return on Time Investment: Writing Resources

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In the world of business, a common metric is “return on investment” (ROI). People use this to determine if their investments are yielding a return that is worthwhile and makes them happy. They also might calculate an anticipated ROI to determine whether they want to invest in something. The formula is simple:

$$\text{ROI} = \frac{\text{Current value of investment} - \text{Cost of the investment}}{\text{Cost of the investment}}$$

The result is a percentage. So, if I spent \$1000 on something, and one year later it was worth \$1200, then my ROI would be 20%. Is that acceptable? I'll leave that decision up to the financial wizards who might be reading this to determine if they want to take that risk.

I bring this up because recently a friend was musing on ROI which turned into “return on time investment” (ROTI). If you think of your time as money, then you might want to consider how long it takes you to learn or do something and if it will be worth it in terms of making a job more efficient, faster, or easier. This offhand comment got me thinking about ROTI for nurse authors.

Every manuscript I receive—whether for this publication, the other journal I edit (*CIN: Computers, Informatics, Nursing*), or from another source—has been produced using a word processor, most commonly Word (Microsoft, Inc., Redmond, WA, USA). I am regularly surprised—and dismayed—at how many people use their word processor like a typewriter—indenting paragraphs with the space bar (instead of using the tab key) or formatting references with spaces, tabs, and the enter key (instead of creating a hanging indent), to use two common examples. (Given that typewriters have not been commonly used for 30-plus years I am not sure where people are picking up these habits, but that's a different story for another day!) While it might be easy enough at the outset to create a reference list with tabs and spaces, fixing it after changes from a co-author or revisions requested by a journal is time consuming. And then, consider the number. Do you need to fix 5 references, or 50? This becomes an ROTI issue.

## RETURN ON TIME INVESTMENT

### *Learning Curve*

Using the same formula as ROI, consider this:

$$\text{ROTI} = \frac{\text{Hours Saved} - \text{Time to Learn and Use}}{\text{Time to Learn}}$$

With software or other computer applications, you need to consider the learning curve as part of the “time to learn” denominator. Some programs are intuitive upon opening while others are baffling from the get-go. Microsoft Paint (Microsoft Inc., Redmond, WA, USA), a very easy-to-use graphics program that comes packaged with Windows, has a fairly flat (small slope) and time-limited (short period) learning curve. Adobe Illustrator (Ai; Adobe Systems, San Jose, CA, USA), on the other hand, has a sharp curve (steep slope) that can go on for weeks, months, or years (long period), depending on how much you use it and how often they make upgrades, which might require new learning. In other words, you can probably be a Paint “expert” in a few hours. Ai might require a few months just get to “advanced beginner” status. See Figure 1.

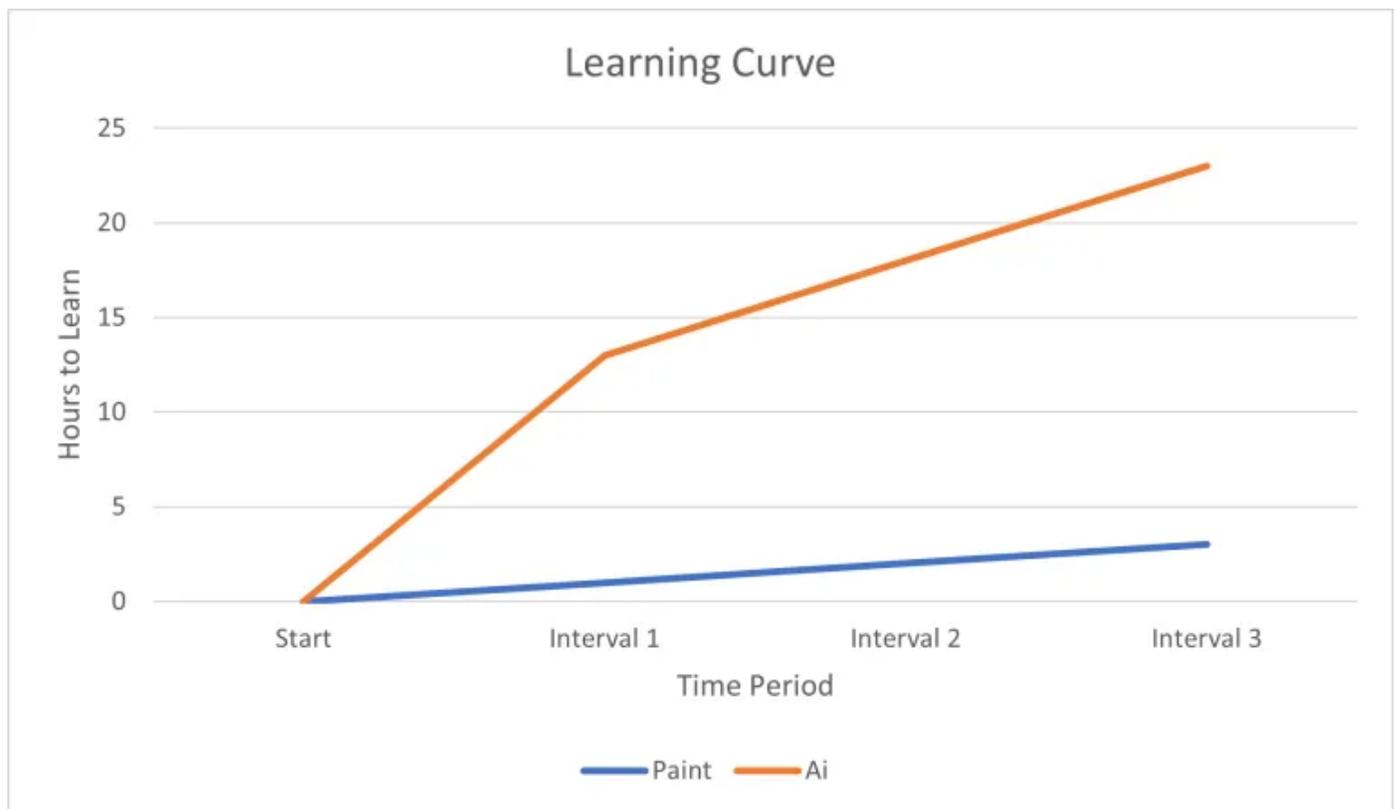


Figure 1. Learning Curve and Time Period for Paint and Ai

Continuing with this example, what do you need to do? If your project is to simply re-size a picture to post on a website or include in a manuscript, then you will probably never get a positive ROTI from spending hours learning Ai for this task. Even if you need to create a simple figure for an article, or perhaps a flowchart, I would be hard pressed to say that learning Ai would pay off, even in the long run. If you have a task that requires Ai level resources and expertise, it might be worth it to find someone who can help you—and you might need to pay for this service. When you consider this as an ROTI issue, this may be money well spent.

### ***Hours Saved***

I believe people should use a long lens to consider hours saved. Many people have said to me, “This is just a short article with only a few references, so I really don’t need to learn how to…” (insert the thing they didn’t learn to do). While that might be true for a particular project, if you are in a position where professional writing is an expectation of your job, then you need to think beyond the “short article.” Likewise, even if you are in the middle of a big project, such as a dissertation, it is worth it to learn what you didn’t learn at the beginning and make the fixes. As Benjamin Franklin said, “Don’t put off until tomorrow what you can do today.” This is always good advice!

## **PRIORITIZING WHAT TO LEARN**

We are all busy people who don’t have enough hours in the day to accomplish all we want to get done, but even so, we have lots of work to do. With that in mind, how do you prioritize what to learn and the hours to spend on that learning process? What will result in the best ROTI for you? Assuming that anyone reading this is either a nurse author or editor, I am going to make a few suggestions based on a job, position, or career where scholarly writing is an expectation.

## *Word Processing Programs*

If you are a writer, then using a word processor in your day-to-day work will be the norm. Thus knowing how to use it well and taking advantage of all its features will contribute to a positive ROTI. I believe that word processing programs have a learning curve that starts low and gradually increases (moderate slope) over a moderate to long period. In other words, you can turn the program on and immediately start typing, but there are myriad features and helpful tricks that you can be learning for years. This point is key: consider that every time you turn on your word processor is a learning opportunity. Try to learn something new every time you write something, which will likely be every day.

In terms of what to learn, I would suggest looking at a journal article and noting the elements. They don't vary much from journal to journal. Analyzing an article provides a road map of what you should be able to do with your word processor. Consider:

- Setting up a page, with margins, fonts, and line spacing. Most journals want manuscripts to be double spaced for submission, so you should know how to do that from the outset—it's easier than fixing line spacing later on.
- Creating and format a bulleted list (like this one) as well as a numbered list.
- Creating a table. Know how to format that table to meet APA or AMA requirements—that is: changing borders, width of columns, and spacing. Know how to add a table legend.
- Inserting a figure or picture (which may have been created in another program). Know how to align the figure/picture on the page and adjust margins and fonts. Add a figure legend, both above and below the figure.

- Knowing how to use tabs, whether at the beginning of a sentence or to create indented paragraphs for quotes.
- Properly formatting a reference list, using hanging tabs and indentation.

Outside of a journal article, when you are in the preparation stage, you also want to know how to:

- Edit a manuscript using track changes and then accept/reject changes to create a clean copy.
- Leave comments for a co-author (or to yourself) and then resolve/delete comments.
- Set tabs, especially “special” tabs such as those with “dot leaders” to use on a table of contents (important for dissertations).
- Create headers and footers, with page numbers.

Word (Microsoft) is the dominant word processor on the market today. If this is the program you are using then you will have lots of resources, include Microsoft support and YouTube videos to help you learn. Other popular word processors include Google Sheets (part of the Google Business family of products) and Pages (for Mac users). Given that Word is so ubiquitous, I would suggest that even if you are using another program, you should still have a general familiarity with Word.

### ***Citation Managers***

Citation managers, also called Bibliography Database Managers, are programs such as Endnote and Paperpile that have two major functions: 1) maintain a library of references; and 2) in conjunction with your word processor, create citations in the text and a reference list. I consider these programs essential for scholarly writing, but many people balk at them. Why? I suspect that all citation

managers (and there are many on the market) require time to learn and from an ROTI perspective, authors aren't convinced that time investment will be worth it. I beg to differ. This is a perfect example of why investing in yourself to master something will have long-term benefits. Furthermore, all citation managers work more or less the same way, just like word processors. Once you get the hang of one program, you will be able to transfer that knowledge to another program you may opt to use.

What are the advantages? There are many. Consider:

- Styling references is tedious. Making sure the right elements are italicized, capitalization is correct, you have periods and commas in the right places—all of this takes time and is boring. Why not let your computer do the work?
- Every time you re-key (re-type) a reference, you increase the probability that an error will be made. An incorrect page number or year, or misspelled author name, can make a citation irretrievable. You want to avoid these types of mistakes. Having an accurate library where citations are simply inputted, not re-typed, dramatically reduces the error rate.
- Changing reference style, from APA to AMA, for example, is relatively quick and easy to do when using a citation manager.
- Most journal sites, as well as databases such as MEDLINE and Scopus, are optimized for citation managers. That means if you are reading an article and you want to save the citation in your library, doing so can be as simple as clicking a button or two. Figure 2 shows how a citation from the *Journal of Nursing Scholarship* would be imported into a number of programs, including Paperpile.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with a citation page. The page title is "Cite the following article". The article title is "Analysis of Citation Patterns and Impact of Predatory Sources in the Nursing Literature". The authors listed are Marilyn H. Dermann PhD, RN, ANEF, FAAN, Leslie H. Nicoll PhD, MBA, RN, FAAN, Kathleen S. Ashton PhD, RN, CNE, Alison H. Edie DNP, APRN, FNP-BC, Sathya Amarasekara MS, Peggy L. Chinn RN, PhD, FAAN, Heather Carter-Templeton PhD, RN-BC, and Leila S. Ledbetter MLIS, AHIP. The page includes sections for "How to cite", "Download Citation", and "Format". The "Format" section has radio buttons for Plain Text (selected), RIS (ProCite, Reference Manager), EndNote, BibTex, Medlars, and RefWorks. A Paperpile overlay is visible in the top right corner, displaying "Successfully added to your library" and a "View in Paperpile" button.

Figure 2. Importing a Citation from the Journal of Nursing Scholarship

I also think that it is not possible anymore for one person to memorize all the citation styles that exist. Back in the day, things that got cited were fairly limited: journal articles (which were all in print), books, edited books, and theses and dissertations. While there might be the occasional oddball citation, such as a public law or government document, an author wasn't spending hours looking up every single citation in a style manual. That's not the case anymore. Given this, it again makes sense to let the computer do the work which increases the accuracy of the citations and saves you time.

Which program should you choose? That's a good question and a full evaluation of every citation manager that is available is beyond the scope of this article. If you are just getting started, then it is worth it to do your research and select a program that is right for you. [This table from Wikipedia](#) is a good starting point to learn names and some basic features. As you think about citation managers, also keep the following in mind:

- EndNote (Clarivate Analytics, Philadelphia, PA, USA) is a legacy program, founded in 1988 and regularly updated. EndNote is expensive and they charge for updates—usually annually. However, lots of schools and colleges of nursing buy institutional licenses and make the program available to their faculty and students. If that is the case for you and EndNote is what everyone around you is using, then you should probably jump on the bandwagon. Decision made!
- I like Paperpile (Paperpile LLC, Cambridge, MA, USA) and have been using it for 8 years. They recently came out with a Word plug-in which eliminates one of the previous drawbacks of the program—that it only worked with Google Docs. They have also come out with a mobile version that will work on a tablet. Chinn<sup>1</sup> wrote a review which has more detail about the program. It has a 30-day free trial period and the annual cost is a modest \$39/year.
- PERRLA (PERRLA, LLC, Murfreesboro, TN, USA) is an affordable program (\$49.95/annual subscription) that is popular with students. Oddly, it is not included on the Wikipedia list. The biggest drawback of PERRLA is that it only formats in APA and MLA, so it doesn't have the versatility that an author who is submitting to journals (not writing student papers) might need. It has an interesting development history which you can read at the website: <https://www.perrla.com/#/about>
- Mendeley (Elsevier, Amsterdam, Netherlands) and Zotero (RRCHNM, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, USA) have both been around for about 15 years, are popular, and free. If you are completely starting cold with a citation manager, looking at these two programs might be a good place to begin.

### ***Graphics Programs***

As you look at a journal article, you may see figures, illustrations, tables, and charts. Does that mean you need to learn to use a graphics program to create these elements? Perhaps. As noted earlier, MS Paint is a very easy-to-use but

surprisingly robust graphics application. It's been around since 1985. A few years ago, there was a scare that it would be discontinued,<sup>2</sup> but to everyone's great relief, including mine, that didn't happen. MS Paint is my "go-to" program for simple graphics and resizing and fixing photos. I created Figure 2 in this article using "print screen" to capture the image, resized it in MS Paint, and saved it as a .png file. The whole process took about 90 seconds.

Word also has very good graphics capabilities. Using resources such as "shapes" and "Smart Art" you can create flowcharts, such as a PRISMA diagram or an illustration of a conceptual model. I would suggest that you create your chart or illustration as its own file and save it, then insert into your document at the appropriate point (either within the text or at the end of the document). Many journals want figures submitted as separate files, anyway, so this is another good reason to create them this way.

Word works with Excel to create charts so again, you may be able to do everything you need to do right within the program. That is how I created Figure 1, which took about 5 minutes. To get the chart to look the way you want it to may take some time—but that's the whole point. Invest in the time to learn how to create the chart the first time and with each subsequent use the process will be quicker and easier.

Speaking of Excel, many people are tempted to use that program to create tables, but I advise against that. Even though Excel looks like a table, it's not—it's a spreadsheet. A "table" created in Excel is not going to have the properties that will allow you to format it easily and correctly to meet APA or AMA guidelines. You can make fantastic, complicated tables right in Word. Read a few help files, watch a few YouTube videos and get to work. It will be worth your time!

## CONCLUSION

Your time is valuable, and you want to use it to your best advantage. As an author, you need to decide the best way to produce manuscripts that meet journal guidelines and reduce time and effort making corrections and revisions at the later stages of the submission process. Using ROTI as a metric, you will be well served by comprehensively learning and using your word processor of choice and a citation manager. Having a basic knowledge of a simple graphics program will also come in handy. In subsequent articles, determining ROTI for research resources, as well as time management and organization will be discussed.

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