

The Write Time

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Abstract

For nurse leaders, professional writing is essential for career development. Writing, especially writing for publication in a peer-reviewed professional journal, establishes you as a qualified and respected authority in your field and increases your reputation both within and outside your agency. As well, professional writing by nurse leaders contributes to the advancement of the nursing discipline and provides a service to the public. Even more importantly, professional writing can be a stimulating, challenging, creative outlet and allow for personal growth and development. Many nurse leaders, however, find writing a time-consuming and, sometimes, difficult chore, and procrastinate. This article provides some timely tips to help you focus more effectively on professional writing.

The Write Time

Most nurse leaders recognize the importance of writing, especially writing for publication in professional journals. However, pressures of other daily commitments often means writing is relegated to the bottom of the list of priorities. This presentation focuses on practical tips for those who want to or who must write but are having difficulties, especially with finding time, getting started, finding a journal (or other professional outlet), and finishing up. It will also focus on timely aids to writing and on ways to make writing more enjoyable.

Finding Time

Finding time to write is a major problem for most nursing leaders – perhaps the most common problem of all. Like most nursing leaders (and most other writers), you will never “find” time, so you need to make a change in attitude. You must make a commitment to “make” time.

To begin your attitude change, spend some time considering exactly why **you** should write. It may be that you have some burning topic or message that you believe should be shared with your colleagues or with the public. It may be that you need publications for your resume to ensure academic or other promotion. It may be that you have a creative “itch” that you wish to scratch. Writing allows you to share information, make a difference in the way patient care is given, or describe advances in nursing that are going on in your agency. It also allows you to clarify your thoughts, expand your circle of colleagues (provincially, nationally, internationally), develop yourself, fulfill a creative urge, or achieve recognition from peers. Sometimes it allows you to

vent frustrations, too. As all nursing leaders recognize, the future of nursing depends upon the body of nursing knowledge, especially new knowledge, being communicated both inside and outside the profession.

Any nursing leader will find at least one of the above goals worthwhile. And, by doing some serious thinking about what is needed and what motivates you, you should recognize that you should do some writing. And you can. As a consultant to nurse authors, I have yet to meet a nursing leader who cannot write. You may need some advice, counsel, coaching, or assistance. But you can do it.

However, writing does take time, and requires hard work, so perhaps its rewards are not for you. If not, then face it, and think about what other opportunities you should take to achieve the same ends, such as motivational speaking, or by deciding to be a “back room achiever” and spend your time promoting someone else into the limelight. These ways are worthwhile – if you have really weighed all the factors; but you could be missing some great rewards.

If you decide that you are going to make a commitment to writing, how do you make time in your already busy schedule? Having decided that writing is important, you need to book appointments devoted to “writing” in your day planner. Choose a time when you are energized. Do not promise yourself that you will fit writing in at the end of the day; you will definitely find it laborious to write when you are exhausted and want to leave your desk behind you. Step one is to recognize that writing takes time, and then incorporate it into your weekly agenda.

To begin, schedule four, once-a-week, one- or two-hour appointments with yourself and call these your “write times.” This is not a lot of time to squeeze out of your schedule over the next month. Perhaps you will decide on 10 to noon on Tuesdays in your office, or Saturday mornings 7 to 9 am when you can have some time to yourself at home while your spouse takes the children to hockey practice. Consider this appointment with yourself just as important as any other appointment in your day book.

When the time comes, sit at your desk, ready to “write.” At the first appointment, you do not actually start writing out a draft; you begin the planning process for writing. This may even take a couple of your sessions, but actually setting up the time and sitting down to work on your writing is the most important first step. As American Writer Mark Twain proclaimed: “The hardest part of writing is applying the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair.”

Starting Time

A basic text on writing skills for nurses (Zilm, 1998; Zilm & Entwistle, 2002) emphasizes that to write like a “pro” (professional writer), you need to spend considerable time on the first three steps of a seven-step writing strategy that

uses the acronym PROCESS. You must **Plan, Research, and Organize (PRO)** before you begin to **Create** a written work. (Later, you will need to **Edit, Shine, and Submit.**)

During your first session, you should consider the five elements of a good communication: **Source, Message, Audience, Route, and Tone.** (These five form another acronym used to teach nurses to write, and are described in detail in *The SMART Way* [Zilm, 1998; Zilm & Entwistle, 2002].) You first need to give attention to the Source (you) and the Message (what you want to say). Think about yourself as the Source: Is there some topic on which you are already considered an expert? What are your strengths – and your weaknesses? How much research are you going to have to do if you want to deal with a certain topic?

The answer to these questions depends on a number of factors, most importantly on whether you have already done initial work on the content. For example, if you have just completed a major thesis, dissertation, paper for a conference, or research project, then you have basic materials on hand to make up your message. On the other hand, if you feel you must write, but have not even thought about a topic, you may need considerably more time. Thinking about and deciding on a topic will be an important first step, and you may need to allow more research time (e.g., to initiate and carry out a research project, or to do reading and literature review).

You may even want to consider working with a co-author, or collaborating on a research project. Working with a co-author can be an extremely helpful strategy if you find it hard to write. Having a co-author will force you to establish those important “write times” in your day planner, and you may find it harder to break an appointment with a colleague than with yourself. Furthermore, two people often come up with results considerably better than each could do alone. Select your co-author carefully. He or she should also be proficient on the topic you want to develop or should have other talents to balance your own (such as idea generator, instigator, researcher, writer, detail person, or expert). You possibly should consider choosing a peer rather than a subordinate, as it is essential that you each take an equal role in the preparation of the final manuscript.

Like many nurse leaders, you may be or have been involved on a research team for a large, well-funded project that involves your agency. If such a project comes your way, be prepared to take advantage of it and really participate, not just as a sponsor or a contributor in the planning stages; the latter lead to mention in the acknowledgments, not in the list of co-authors. Follow the whole enterprise carefully with the project coordinator. Often results of a broad, rather general project (for example, an extensive research project to determine cost-effectiveness of a pilot program of, say, home-care follow-up of patients discharged on many medications and involving pharmacists and hospital-based

home-care nurses) have smaller, internal components that involve innovations in some aspect of nursing care. Usually the major publications on the project’s research outcomes do not actively describe the new nursing roles; only a brief mention of that may be included in the analysis. However, examination of the details of the new nursing interventions and modifications tested could lead to a separate article for a nursing journal – and *you* would be the ideal one to work with the project coordinator and the project nurse or nurses to develop and write such an article. Many nursing innovations arising from major projects do not reach practicing nurses – and thus fail to advance nursing knowledge – simply because the nurses involved have not seized the opportunity to communicate and share information on the nursing segments of the experiment.

Remember, of course, that such an article arising from a team project must be substantially different from the report of the main project; you probably will need to submit copies of the other articles from the project to your editor if you follow this route. Be aware, too, that you may now be moving into an area where you will be required to list multiple authors – and have their approval of the article before it is submitted. If you do the actual writing of the new nursing article, your name probably should come first. If you simply encourage the nurse or nurses involved to write, your name may not come in the author list at all. The name of the project director also probably should be in the list of authors, as well as the names of the nurse or nurses who carried out the interventions. However, if they are to be listed as authors, they also need to be involved in the planning for, writing of, and approval of the article. So you will need to book some “write times” that incorporate meetings with these individuals.

At this stage of your initial “write time,” you may have reflected on what you (Source) could write (Message) and whether you should go alone or with a co-author. Three other elements also need consideration at this embryonic planning stage. You need to think carefully about the intended Audience for your message. Whom do you wish to read your message: bedside nurses, nurse administrators, nurse educators, hospital administrators, board policy makers, politicians, physicians, the public? You probably cannot reach them all with one article. Who would want to read your message? What journals or other publications does your target audience see? Determining the target audience is one of the most important steps in planning a good article that will reach publication. It also is the step most ignored by beginning writers. Consider carefully the audience you wish to reach, and the one that will benefit most from the topic you are planning to write about.

Determining the Audience helps you to determine the **Route** – the publication – for which you need to write. For example, if you wish to reach politicians, a clear, thought-provoking, well-written letter, column, or short article for

the editorial pages of a major newspaper (e.g., *Globe and Mail* or *National Post*) will be more effective than an article in a scholarly nursing journal. The newspaper route may not meet your goals for academic tenure, but it still could look impressive on your resume. Alternatively, a well-written paper accompanied by a short executive summary and presented to a health care commission can reach and influence a political audience – and might still be considered an impressive “publication.” Too often nurses, including new nurse leaders, fail to appreciate that there are many kinds of “publication.” Articles in peer-reviewed professional journals are, of course, extremely important to academics seeking tenure. Other routes, however, are often more effective for nursing leaders who are not academics; you can develop a wide-ranging, broad curriculum vitae.

If you wish to reach bedside nurses and your content is affected by the health care payment system used in Canada, you may wish, for example, to consider *Canadian Nurse*; if the content is strictly local, you may need to write for the provincial nursing journal put out by the professional association or union. Even if your potential article does not report on “research,” you still may be able to submit it to a journal that focuses primarily on research articles; some research journals (e.g., *Canadian Journal of Nursing Leadership*, *Journal of Advanced Nursing*) have other sections or departments that contain opinion articles or articles that inform, editorialize, explain, or instruct. This means that you need to examine quite a number of journals. What journals might be interested in your topic?

The final of the five elements to consider is **Tone**, although this is not a vital element at this stage. However, you may want to start thinking about the way you want to present your message. Do you wish to exhort, cajole, inform, direct, teach, explain, expound, state? You need to think about these points, although at this stage you need not necessarily come up with a final decision.

Now that you have spent a part of your session focusing your thinking, you probably want to make a few notes to yourself. You have reached the **Organize** step. You may, at this stage, even want to start working on a bit of an Outline, brainstorming with yourself and jotting down ideas that you would like to incorporate in your publication. Remind yourself that these are tentative suggestions; at later reflection, some may border on genius, and some may eventually be discarded. Jot them all down anyway at this stage in one or two words or short phrases so you will not forget them and need to dredge them up again later.

Reading Time

Before you finish your first writing appointment, you should have made a few decisions, including what you need to do to get ready for your next “write time” appointment. If you need to look for a co-author, you need a list, in order of priority, of the individuals you might want

to approach. If you have time during the first appointment, you might want to make an initial telephone call or send an e-mail suggesting to a colleague that you would like to talk about collaborating on an article. Again, the planning that you have done during the initial “write time” will prove beneficial when you start to explain to your colleague what you hope to do.

You may have decided you need to look up your old thesis, dissertation, report, or oral presentation and read it to see if the basics for an article are there. If this work was done some time ago, you will also need to embark on some additional library research to see what literature has been added since you did your original review. So you will have a homework assignment to start that research.

You may have jotted down some ideas on potential outlets – journals, newspapers, a conference at which you could present a paper that would be the basis for a publication – that need further exploration. If you have, at this stage, a definite topic, know that you want to do an article, and have determined the specific audience and, therefore, the probable journal, you still have some work to do before you start to write.

There are more than 100 quality nursing and allied health journals and e-journals; you need to find the one that will fit most closely with your ideas and your topic. You need to do some “library research” and – be fair – you need to do it between the time of your first “write time” appointment and the next. Just as you would not go to a meeting ill-prepared, you should not come to your next “write time” without having done the outside leg-work. Even if you believe that you are really familiar with the journal (or other publication) that you have decided upon, you still need to review it. You need to examine that publication as a potential author, not as a reader. To do this effectively, you need to go through, page by page, four or more recent issues. For one thing, you need to see if there have been any articles similar to the one you propose to write. If you do not subscribe to the journal, go to the nearest library with nursing journals and spend an hour just looking. Do not look only at the journal you first considered; explore several similar journals to see if you might find a better fit.

Some of this leg-work may be assigned to an assistant (secretary, student researcher, executive assistant), but, if you really wish to get published, not all of it can be. You, as the principal author, need to be familiar with what is available. At least you have started to gather the information that needs to be on your desk for your next “write time.”

You also need to have on hand a sample issue or two (or photocopies of several articles and types of articles) used as well as a copy of the “Information for Authors” guidelines for the publication that you are most anxious to approach. You will need these when you eventually begin to write to guide you on matters of style, format, and tone.

A great benefit from these first one or two “write times” is that you have raised your writing project from something you are going to do sometime to a project you are actively working on. And, as such, you will find yourself thinking during the week about your topic, your audience, your choice of publication, and seizing ideas that come to you between appointments. You may find you even read the evening newspaper a little differently, or look at magazines in a waiting room with new eyes. You are on your way to becoming an author.

Drafting Time

Depending on how much “research” you needed to do, and whether you have involved a co-author with whom you needed to have discussions, by about your third or fourth “write time” you should be able to sit down at the computer and begin to create a rough draft. Apply the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair, draw up a blank file on your computer (or, if you are really old-fashioned, take a lined tablet) and put some words on the first page. Because many writers are intimidated by a blank screen or page, put some words down immediately. “Draft #1” is a good start, because it reminds you that this does not have to be a perfect final version.

Almost every nursing leader has been through the stages of writing a first draft, usually of a paper for a nursing course in a university program. The main difference this time is the Audience that you envision. Instead of an instructor or thesis committee of instructors, this is an exchange of ideas between you and a collection of readers. It certainly helps to envision your readers in your mind’s eye and to think of them as friendly peers who want or need to hear what you plan to say.

You may find many benefits at this stage if you are working with a co-author. Both of you should have planned to come to the “write time” session with some ideas in mind. One of you works at the computer, and may be the one to ask questions to get and keep the material flowing. The other fiddles with ideas on a writing pad, offers suggestions and comments, and encourages the flow. You can work with a co-author at a distance and e-mail drafts back and forth; you can even use a version control where you can split the screen and compare an earlier draft with one “corrected” or added to by the other author. But if possible it is a good idea to work on your first articles by meeting together.

Starting with a title is a good idea. A good title should capture the main idea you want to convey in a few choice words. That means, in effect, that you have decided what you want to say. You should, by this stage, have developed a working outline for the content, and that will highlight the basic points for this article. The phrase “for this article” is a helpful one to keep in your mind. Most journals prefer their articles, even research articles, short and to the point; you cannot put down everything you

probably would like to say. You need to keep a focus. So, occasionally remind yourself – or remind your co-author – that you could put that point or those ideas into another article another time.

Remember that the creation of the rough first draft is not a time for nit-picking criticism; that time will come later. The draft allows you to get the ideas from your outline into a collected narrative. Spelling, punctuation, even grammar can be fixed at the next stage.

The boundaries of the “write time” appointments should not be unduly trying at this stage. You may find that you are excited by your project, and want to spend more time; if so, make your appointments to write as often as you can fit them into your schedule. Just keep making the appointments, keep working on the article during those times, and do not worry about the pressures to complete it.

However, as soon as you have a fairly complete draft, you should make another specific commitment. You need to send a letter of query to the editor of the journal you have chosen.

Query Time

If you are an accomplished author with many publications to your credit, you may have queried the editor about the idea for your article at an earlier stage (such as when you completed the outline). However, for *beginning* writers, the best time to query an editor about an interest in your article is when you have a complete first draft. Many beginning writers do not know what they intend to say until they reach this point.

Most editors of professional nursing journals today prefer that authors ask them about possible interest before you a manuscript; this saves time for both you and the editors. You can make your query by letter – the best way – or by e-mail (containing the same information as a letter, but quicker); you can also query an editor through a telephone call or in a mini-interview when you meet at a conference or other event.

A good query letter specifies succinctly but clearly the subject on which you wish to write and how you will go about it. It also provides your qualifications as a good source for this material. It must be well enough written that the editor can gauge your talents as a writer (with good grammar, spelling, and punctuation, and a clear, informative, logical flow). You provide enough information that the editor can decide whether this topic fits the genre of the journal and whether other similar articles have appeared or are already scheduled for a forthcoming issue. The query also allows the editor to provide you with feedback, often including suggestions for the content. Having this kind of feedback before the article is completely finished and sent for peer review is extremely helpful and saves rewrites at a later date. As well, the editor will remind you that the manuscript must be submitted according to the journal’s

style guidelines and tell you what they are.

You need to know before you put in the final work on the manuscript whether the editor will be receptive or not. Responses to letters of query come much more quickly than responses to a manuscript. Furthermore, although it is unethical to send your article off to several journals at the same time, you can send a letter of query to more than one editor. You are still at the stage of your manuscript where you can adapt suggestions on content and can focus on the style, needs, and audience of the journal that expresses interest in your query.

Critical Time

While you are waiting for a reply to your letter(s) of query, you continue to book “write times” and work on your manuscript. Now that you have come to grips with the *content* of the article, you need to put on your critical cap and start examining your drafts for flow, grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, and other areas pertaining to writing skills. Although you may be reasonably secure about your writing, a quick review of a couple of reference books that discuss common errors of writing is helpful. For example, although you are probably already familiar with the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA, 2001), you may want to skim through its opening chapters, which give a review of common errors that slip by even highly qualified writers. Or you may want to do a quick review of *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White (2000), which is *the* indispensable and inspirational aid for all professional writers. Note there are new editions of these aids, and they should be on your desk-side reference shelf. You may even wish to run down the list of common errors in writing in Zilm and Entwistle (2002).

You also could highlight a few paragraphs or the opening couple of pages of the manuscript file on your computer and run them through your grammar check; you will probably be amazed at the amount of feedback your computer gives. Computer grammar-checkers are especially valuable for picking up long sentences, dangling modifiers, sentence fragments, and awkward phrasing. Even if you disagree with the grammar-check comments, and want to skip them, at least consider rephrasing.

During this stage, you should also be especially aware of how you are dealing with references and with material, including quotations, that you have taken from other sources. Although you may quote long passages in student papers, you must be particularly careful about copyright issues when you are writing an article for publication. If you use or quote material from other sources (such as tables, poetry, or even long passages), you are responsible for obtaining copyright permission for its use in your article. Review the material on this point carefully in a style guide for authors (e.g., the APA [2001] *Manual*) or you could be accused of plagiarism or of infringing

copyright.

Polishing Time

Once you have received a positive response to your query letter from the journal editor, review your article in light of the recommended style guide. Most – but not all – nursing journals follow the recommendations of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA, 2001), but may have minor differences (e.g., in the style of headings). These will be spelled out in the guidelines sent to you by the editor or published in the journal (sometimes in every issue, but at least once a year). See, for example, the “Information for Authors” in the *Canadian Journal of Nursing Leadership*; this is the clearest and most useful guides for authors that I have seen in a nursing journal.

You may now have reached a time when you would like to ask a colleague to review a hard copy of your draft. Emphasize that it is still a draft, and ask him or her to give you comments and suggestions on the content and on the general flow. If you work in an environment where you need to have your comments approved before they are published (as in some government agencies), now is the time to ask for a such a review. If you work in a large organization where there is a communications or public relations office, you might want to call upon one of the staff there to offer opinions. Keep in mind that such staff may be more familiar with material for lay audiences than for scholarly publications; however, they often offer valuable and important advice. Depending on the importance of this article to you and your future, you may wish to hire an editor to go the manuscript and provide feedback. Realize, however, that you make the final decisions about what is said and how it is said.

At this step, you also need to examine your references with great care. Recall all the problems that you went through with the instructors in your university courses; journal editors are even more picky. Check the reference style religiously. Realize, too, that although the journal may have editorial staff who will give a final polish to your manuscript, an article with too many style or writing errors will be rejected.

Mail Time

Now that you have given a final “shine” to your article, you are ready to submit it. Once again, go over the “Information for Authors” material. Check to see whether you need to ensure that some of the copies are “blind” (they should not contain your name or other identifying material so they can be sent anonymously for review). See if you should send an “author note” – and be sure that it is not attached to the blind copies. Print the final hard copy and give it one final proof reading – or, if you cannot bear to do that yet again, give it to someone else to proof for you.

Make the necessary number of hard copies and, if required at this stage, an electronic copy in the proper format. Check to see whether you are required to send a “copyright release form” or other such form along with this material. If there is more than one author, some journals require that a page showing the signatures of each co-author be included in the package; this is to ensure that all authors have seen and approved the final copy.

You need to write a “covering letter” to accompany the article. Direct it to the individual who responded to your query letter. The covering letter can be brief, but it should mention whether you had earlier exchanges about this article. If you did not write an “author note” separately, you can include a paragraph for the editor that provides this information. If you are using an agency letterhead paper, be sure that you also include your specific mailing address within the agency as well as phone and e-mail numbers where you can be reached.

Mail it in a protected envelop that guarantees delivery, such as an Xpresspost envelop. Because you will keep an electronic and a hard copy, you do not need to use registered post. You may wish, however, to send an e-mail message to the editor noting that the manuscript is in the mail and asking the editor to let you know if it does not arrive within a few days.

You still will have some final stages to go through. Your article may be accepted exactly as written, although this is a rare occurrence for a beginning author. Usually after the peer review or editorial review, you will have the manuscript returned to you with suggestions for revision. The reviewers may advise, for example, that you need some additional material or explanations, or that the article needs to be shortened. Sometimes the reviewers will mark passages that they believe need further work. Most of these suggestions will be good ones. Weigh them all, and make necessary changes. If you definitely do not agree with some point made by a reviewer, you do not need to make a change, but you should write a brief note in the covering letter that goes back with the revised manuscript explaining to the editor why the change was not made.

After the revised manuscript is accepted, there still may be copy-editing changes made by the editorial staff as they prepare it for publication; if this happens, usually the article is returned to you in “galleys” or as “page proofs” for you to review. At this stage, your immediate attention is required because that issue of the journal is in production; usually you must reply within 48 hours of receiving the proofs. This review allows you to pick up any typographical errors; it is not a time for revision. Unless you spot some major error, you should make minor corrections, and not do any rewriting at this stage. If you do find something that you cannot approve, you should phone the editor immediately and discuss it.

Next Time

Once your article is published, be proud of it. Pass it around, and show it off. Immediately add it to your resume and prop a couple of copies of the journal prominently around your office and home. You have added to the body of nursing knowledge. You have changed your attitude to writing. It was hard work, although your next article will be easier to write. You deserve some congratulations.

Tidy your office, buy yourself some flowers to put on the table next to the journal with your article, book yourself some “write time,” and begin again.

Author

Glennis Zilm, BSN, BJ, MA, has worked as editor, mentor, coach, and consultant to nurse authors since she was an assistant editor for the *Canadian Nurse* in the 1960s. She is author of numerous articles in nursing journals and several reports for professional associations. With co-author Ethel Warbinek, she wrote the history of her school of nursing: *Legacy: A History of Nursing Education at the University of British Columbia 1919-1994*. In workshops for nurse authors, she devised the SMART elements of communication as a teaching tool. Her second edition of her textbook on writing skills for student nurses, now with co-author Cheryl Entwistle, has just been published.

Recommended Resource Shelf for Nurse Leaders Who Want to Write

American Psychological Association. (2001). Publication manual of the American Psychological Association (5th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

Day, R. A. (1993). How to write and publish a scientific paper (3rd ed.). Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.

Hibberd, J. M. (1999). Writing as a managerial tool. In J. M. Hibberd & D. L. Smith, *Nursing management in Canada* (2nd ed.) (pp. 555-574). Toronto: W. B. Saunders.

Strunk, W., & White, E.B. (2000). *The elements of style* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Zilm, G. (1998). *The SMART way: An introduction to writing for nurses*. Toronto: Harcourt/ Saunders.

Zilm, G., & Entwistle, C. (2002). *The SMART way: An introduction to writing for nurses* (2nd ed.). Toronto: Saunders.