

Writing for Publication: You Can Do It!

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KEY WORDS

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All rehabilitation nurses in all types of roles and settings, including students, have the potential to be authors. Practical advice on the 10 steps for developing a publishable manuscript is offered in this article. Helpful hints are provided for each step. Nurse authors will need to plan time for each of these steps and understand the work involved before beginning the journey toward publication.

Rehabilitation nurses in clinical practice, administration, research, and education roles, including students, have the potential to become successful authors. Ideas for manuscripts can come from nurses' clinical or managerial experience or from scientific investigations, curriculum development, and teaching courses. In addition, topics can emerge from students' assignments and experiences. Preparation is crucial in the journey toward publication.

The purpose of this article is to offer practical advice for developing a publishable manuscript. These tips can also be used for shorter compositions, such as newspaper or newsletter columns or editorials.

Step 1: Becoming an Author

Through perseverance and with the aid of mentors, most rehabilitation nurses can become published authors. Two noteworthy books explain the writing and publishing process: Marilyn H. Oermann's *Writing for Publication in Nursing* (2005) is a reference text for nurses who want to become authors; and Clarkson N. Potter's *Writing for Publication* (2000) is a basic book that helps potential authors write well enough to become published. There also are online articles with information for beginning writers, including *For Beginners: 10 Ways to Prepare to Get Published*, by Jill Nagle (2007), and *infoBytes: Produce Reader-Friendly Writing*, by the Primary Health Care Research & Information Service (2008). Writing for publication is a learned skill and is not just for nurses in academic settings.

Yes, writing can be time consuming, but professional nurses possess the knowledge and experience to be successful. Likewise, nursing students bring a fresh perspective to practice from what they have learned. As nurses, we like to read about how other nurses in similar situations solve problems; this helps validate the work of nursing and demonstrates commitment to our profession. Nurses have stories to tell, and there is an audience.

When it comes to choosing a topic, do not assume that your ideas have already been written about or

that your everyday knowledge is represented in the literature. Your fresh, unique perspective on a well-known topic may not be well covered. Even if your topic or focus already is covered in a journal article, do not be discouraged. There are more than 100 nursing journals, and the chances are good that your unique perspective will meet the needs of one of them. Many of these journals have a rehabilitation focus, such as *Rehabilitation Nursing*, *Journal of Neuroscience Nursing*, *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation*, and *Clinical Rehabilitation*. You have no excuse not to write. You too can be an author. So let's get started.

Hint

Talk to an experienced nurse author. Potential questions to ask these authors include "How do I select a topic or narrow its focus, so the work is feasible and I can be comfortable writing about this topic?" "How do I know what type of manuscript to write (e.g., feature or newsletter article)?" "How do I select a target audience for my manuscript (e.g., journal or newspaper)?" "How do I find literature on my topic?" "How do I get started writing my ideas and organize the literature within my manuscript?" "How do I structure the sections of my manuscript?" and "What style of writing is best?" These people may work in your facility or may be colleagues in the Association of Rehabilitation Nurses or other professional organizations. University faculty members are another resource to consult as you develop your writing skills. Seek advice from these people, and they may become your writing mentors.

Mentors may become coauthors. Coauthorship may be beneficial to all parties involved. For example, university educators usually have a background in successful publishing. Clinicians may have an idea for a manuscript about a new intervention from their practice and bring enthusiasm and energy to the writing project that can motivate the educator. Highly motivated coauthors will increase the likelihood that deadlines will be met. In turn, the clinician

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can learn from the more experienced writer. Sharing the workload with each other and supporting one another can keep participants from getting discouraged during the writing process. When more than one person is involved in writing for publication, the order in which authors will be listed must be determined before publication. Often, first authorship goes to the seasoned writer because he or she knows the publication process. Other times, the mentor may guide the novice writer through the process. Sometimes, if more than one writer is interested in being first author, a flip of the coin may determine the order, with the remaining authors listed in alphabetical order.

Step 2: Starting the Writing Process

You may want to consider writing for a professional organization's newsletter (e.g., *ARN Network*), submitting a letter to a journal's editor, or doing a short journal piece or full-length feature article. Read nursing journals to see what short columns, departments, and articles are published. Consider *Rehabilitation Nursing* as an example. In this journal, there are several opportunities for writing, from short briefs to feature articles (Association of Rehabilitation Nurses, 2007). First, the Break Room features brief articles of 750 words or less to describe best practices (e.g., patient, family, or staff education) with the goal of helping to increase the quality of patient care. Second, the Clinical Consultation column addresses problematic clinical situations and is presented in a case study or question format with a description of evidence-based interventions. This column is approximately three typed pages or 750 words long. Third, feature articles of 1,000–3,000 words (4–15 pages of text) focus on areas of clinical practice, education, administration, and research. This journal also publishes short book reviews of approximately 500 words on a variety of health-related texts.

Another writing opportunity to consider is submitting a letter to the editor of your local newspaper. If you want to get published in your local newspaper, think about some healthcare issue about which you feel strongly. Clarify your opinion and then develop your thoughts in a letter. Pay attention to the limits the newspaper has set for its letters to the editor. Keeping your letter brief will help ensure that the newspaper does not edit out your important points.

Hint

Read journals or newspapers to find a topic about which you are passionate (see Step 3 for more information). Then write and submit your short article, following the style and format criteria set by the target publication. Your manuscript does not have

to be fancy, but you should use a computer or word processor. Editors will not take the time to decipher your penmanship. Spelling and grammar do count. The impact of your article will suffer if you misspell words or use awkward slang; be sure to check for typographical errors before submitting the article.

Use an effective style of writing. For example, short sentences convey ideas clearly and conserve space. Likewise, keep your language conversational, using complex words mainly for precision. Statistics and other facts are simple ways to support your point; make sure your facts are correct. Humor can often catch an editor's attention, but never compromise your point to get a laugh.

Step 3: Developing the Topic

Where do ideas or topics come from? Start with an idea or an area of expertise from your nursing practice (e.g., intravenous therapy, blood pressure management, skin care, patient falls). Ideas may come from administrative nursing roles, such as managing a budget, initiating a clinical ladder program, or developing a professional practice model. Topics may also come from research or educational activities (e.g., completing research projects, teaching online nursing courses, or implementing a master's degree nursing program for nontraditional students with a baccalaureate degree in another field). In addition, topics may be developed from students' theses or concept analyses or from their experiences in the teaching and learning process.

Many of these topics, other than reports for completed research projects, are too broad for an article, so it is important to focus and refine a topic. Think of the particular aspects that are important and should be covered (e.g., nurses' perceptions of why patients fall, financial strategies that affect an organization's bottom line, tools for developing and evaluating a nursing leadership online course, or an analysis of caregivers' fear of another stroke in a loved one). Look at the critical issues and focus on specifics. Read what has been published recently on the topic. With just a bit of searching, you will learn more about your topic and more clearly define the parameters of your idea.

Hint

You will need to set aside a designated time just to work on topic development. This step cannot be rushed. It may take days or weeks. Search peer-reviewed journals, books, and non-peer-reviewed professional magazines for information about your topic. Electronic bibliographic databases, such as the Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature, are excellent ways

to search for topic-specific professional literature. Databases such as Medline (www.pubmed.gov) and MedlinePlus (www.medlineplus.gov) are also helpful in locating published information. The World Wide Web is another important source for gathering information. Web search engines such as AltaVista (www.altavista.com) and MetaCrawler (www.metacrawler.com) may be used to locate a variety of information. Health-specific directories and search engines such as Healthfinder (www.healthfinder.gov), developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and MedHunt (www.hon.ch/MedHunt/), developed by experts on telemedicine, are respected portals to medical information on the Internet. All of these Internet databases are compilations of published research, scholarly activities, books, government reports, and newspaper articles.

Step 4: Gathering Resources

Even if you are an expert in a particular topic, research the topic in books and journals, search the Internet, and discuss it with your colleagues. Reading provides great background information and helps outline a broad picture. In addition, talk to nurses who do not deal with the topic routinely or are new to it. Find out what they need to know about the topic and what they consider the difficult concepts and issues. When you start to write, writing will be easier because you know the topic well. But write from your own experience, not just what you read or what your colleagues tell you.

Hint

Collect and keep your resources in a system that works for you. Some writers use folders, index cards, color-coded sticky notes, computer files, notebooks, or tape recorders. Read the abstract of an article first and list the main points at the top of the page. For instance, when reading a research article, begin by reading the abstract and writing the key variables used in the study on the top of the first page. As you read the article, keep in mind the guidelines for what makes a good research article. A detailed evaluation tool for a critical review of quantitative research studies is provided by Long (2003). An in-depth set of evaluative criteria for qualitative research is provided by Bromley and colleagues (2002). If you think you can use an article, drop it on the floor in a specific place by your chair. When you have sorted through the stack of articles you accumulated on the topic, you will have one pile of no-use articles and several different piles for articles that are related in some way and can be used.

Key Practice Points

1. Ideas for manuscripts can come from nurses' clinical or managerial experience, as well as scientific investigations, developing curricula, and teaching courses and students' assignments and experiences.
2. Preparation is crucial when writing for publication, so be sure to talk to an experienced nurse author, set aside time to work on topic development, and physically gather and keep resources about the chosen topic in a system that works for you.
3. Choose a journal for submission and contact the editor to see whether there is interest in your chosen topic; if there is interest, begin to put words down on paper using active voice for a first draft.
4. Timelines are a good management tool, but remember to include time for colleagues to review your manuscript and for rewriting or editing to make sure the content flows well.

Next, gather different color highlighting markers, a pen, and some sticky notes in a large variety of colors and sizes. You will need to decide which colors represent different portions of the article (e.g., red or pink for literature review, blue for clinical implications, yellow for conclusions). As you read each article, highlight portions of the text that you think are important and that might be useful for writing your manuscript. You can use the appropriate color of sticky note to flag the edge of that page of the article. As you write different sections of the manuscript, you will be able to find the flagged sections of each article for the appropriate material. Any one article may have several different sticky notes, even on the same page. This process will eliminate the need for taking voluminous notes or copying the article several times to file in different folders.

Step 5: Targeting a Journal

There are more than 100 general and specialty nursing journals. Some journal editors send manuscripts received out for review to peers or referees; other journal editors read manuscripts in house to determine whether they fit the journal's needs. So which one do you send your manuscript to? Although this is your decision, publication in refereed journals is viewed as more prestigious and a key move for writers wanting to advance in their scholarship. Look at the journal selection in your library. Journals are also listed alphabetically with instructions for authors at some university online libraries. On the University of Toledo Web site (www.utoledo.edu/library/mulford/) you can choose the link "Instructions to Authors" from the left-hand menu. Pick out a few journals

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from the list that look promising. Perhaps choose two general journals (e.g., *Nursing 2007*, *American Journal of Nursing*) and two specialty journals (e.g., *Rehabilitation Nursing*, *Journal of Neuroscience Nursing*) that relate to your topic. Review three recent issues of the publications that you think are appropriate for your work. Inspect the journal cover to cover, paying close attention to the table of contents and titles, and read several of the articles. As you read, focus on each article's format, style, tone, and intended audience. Read the journal's mission statement and determine whether the journal and its audience are right for you. Look for the journal's annual index (located in the December issue or on the Web site). Review this index, scanning article titles to help you develop your manuscript's focus and determine articles that you need to read before starting to write. Read and follow the author guidelines published in an issue of the journal or available online. Journals are very particular about details in the author guidelines, and if these are not followed the editor may not consider your manuscript for publication.

Hint

You may want to telephone or write a topic query letter to the journal editor to see whether there is interest in your topic. You can telephone or send mail or e-mail topic queries to multiple journals, but you may send your manuscript to only one journal at a time. Many editors will be happy to help you through the initial topic development process. The editor of *Rehabilitation Nursing* suggests submitting an abstract or overview of the potential manuscript. After which, she can provide feedback and advice about the topic and its development. Before you start writing, wait until you get a positive response to your inquiry from the journal editor, then go for it. Remember that a positive response is no guarantee that the journal will accept the manuscript, but nothing ventured, nothing gained, so start writing.

Step 6: Planning for Success

Here are a few ideas for composing the beginning of your manuscript. First, write a summary or purpose statement that reflects what you want the reader to know. Follow this with a statement covering what you want the reader to do with this information. Refer to these statements as you continue to write. Next, take 5 or 10 minutes to write down all the major ideas you want to cover on the topic. You will need to organize your thoughts and ideas. To develop the flow of your article, try using index cards, diagrams and drawings, or a simple draft on your computer's word processing program.

Hint

Word processing programs, such as Microsoft Word® and Word Perfect®, allow information to be moved easily with cut-and-paste tools, but they can do more. Take the time now to find out what your software can do for you. For instance, automatic grammar checkers take time to run and can give bad advice when they miss the context, but you should run the grammar checker to get readability statistics. You will need to take a moment to customize your checker, setting it to check spelling, readability, and only the grammar you really want it to check. EndNote® is a commercial reference management software package used to manage references when writing manuscripts. This software allows the user to organize and retrieve information, such as citations for books, articles, and Web sites, by interfacing with library databases. The citation manager then works with word processing software to insert properly formatted citations or references into the manuscript.

Step 7: Starting to Write

Many authors develop writer's block because they waste time trying to develop great titles and opening lines. Peterson (2007) recommends the following ideas to authors suffering from writer's block: (1) schedule time to write and work, regardless of the quality of the output (Silvia, 2007); (2) engage in brief periods of freewriting or mindwriting, in which you impulsively write whatever comes to mind (Boice, 1990); (3) use writers' exercises such as chunking (chunking is a method of splitting content into short, easily scannable elements); (4) take a break or try meditation or relaxation exercises to relieve any pressure when writing (selected examples of quick relaxation exercises by Danskin (2007) are provided in **Table 1**); (5) do something out of the ordinary; if writer's block comes from a lack of new ideas, attempts to spark creativity by going somewhere new or doing something different can be useful; (6) return to the writing after a lapse of a day or two; (7) write a basic outline of the topic if you are having trouble keeping the manuscript on track; (8) brainstorm or generate new ideas around your specific topic at the beginning of the writing; this may help you by relating every point to another; and (9) read a book, watch a movie or play, or participate in similar activities that might bring inspiration.

Hint

Start with the core information and put words down on paper, creating a first draft. Make sure you write something about each item in your

outline or plan; you can move the text around and polish it later. Do not worry about writing perfect sentences or polishing each line; just get all your thoughts written down. After you organize and edit the material, your title and first paragraph will be simpler to write. A wise person once said, "If you never start writing, you will never finish." So just start anywhere and write about your topic. Later, try moving your last paragraph up as your first paragraph.

Step 8: Using Active Rather Than Passive Voice in Writing

Active voice connects with the reader and is authoritative. Yes, it is okay to be authoritative in your writing, even in scientific or research manuscripts, but always follow the writing style format suggested by the targeted publication. Active voice uses "I" and "you." Yes, that is okay too. Passive voice is indirect, makes your writing vague, creates a distance between you and the reader, and often contains more words, which can make reading your manuscript difficult. Here are examples:

- Active voice: "I sent the e-mail." (Passive voice: "The e-mail was sent.")
- Active voice: "Joan picked up the blood pressure cuff." (Passive voice: "The blood pressure cuff was picked up by Joan.")

Hint

When using active voice writing it is best to write as though you are talking directly to another nurse. Use active voice 80%–90% of the time in your writing, if the targeted publication allows. Remember that active voice is more direct and positive. It puts the actor first, the action second, and anything acted upon last. The subject of the sentence is doing something (i.e., something does something to something). For instance,

- People build budgets.
- People were building budgets.
- Build the budget. She built the budget (so blame her).

Passive voice is indirect and weak. It puts the thing acted upon first. It may leave the actor out. Something is done (perhaps by something). For example,

- Budgets are built by people.
- Budgets were built by people.
- The budget was built (so no one is to blame).

Remember that many journals and newspapers prefer active voice, but some prefer passive voice for their publications. Different publishers have specific writing styles and format suggestions. As a writer, you will need to pay particular attention to the publisher's information for authors and follow it closely.

Table 1. Selected Relaxation Exercises

For these simple exercises, it is best to be seated, with eyes closed, feet flat on the floor or crossed at the ankles, and hands resting comfortably in your lap. Begin each exercise with a deep breath that you let out gently. As you let it out, feel yourself beginning to relax.

Exercise 1: A Favorite Scene, Place, or Person

- As you sit quietly, recall the most relaxing thought you can imagine. Perhaps it is a favorite place or scene, such as a vacation spot, a meadow, or whatever works for you.
- Take a few seconds to get that picture in your mind. Now, see or imagine that place in your mind. Be sure to feel the good feelings you have when you are in that place. Just let them take over your whole awareness.
- If your thoughts wander, just take them gently back to that peaceful, relaxing place.

Exercise 2: Focus on a Word

- Pick some word that has good associations for you, a word that you associate with relaxation, comfort, or peace. It could be a word such as *serenity*, *peaceful*, or *joy*. Now, let that word hold the center of your thoughts. After a while, perhaps your mind will drift to other restful thoughts. If so, just let it wander.
- If your mind wanders to stressful thoughts, gently bring it back to the original word.

After each exercise, slowly and gently activate yourself by breathing a little more deeply, wiggling your fingers and toes, and opening your eyes at your own pace. Continue on your way. Relax and refresh, then go back in a separate session to your manuscript or congratulate yourself on its submission.

Note. From Danskin (2007).

Step 9: Refining the Article

Finish the draft of your article and congratulate yourself. Then be prepared for rewrites, in which you edit each sentence and reorganize content for better flow. Such rewrites are an essential part of the writing journey, not extra work. Read your first draft, saying each sentence out loud. Is it clear? See whether you can eliminate one or two unnecessary words. If you have a block of information that is difficult to grasp or very detailed, consider putting it into a list or chart. After you are comfortable with your rewrites, ask one or two colleagues to read your manuscript; print out a copy or e-mail it to them. If you are working with coauthors, each person needs to read and provide input to help polish the manuscript. Encourage your reviewers and colleagues to be very critical so you can make the article stronger.

Hint

Less is more, and shorter is better. Each paragraph should explain one idea. Reveal the paragraph's topic in the first sentence. Make no more than three points about the paragraph topic. If the matter is too complex, break it into more paragraphs or use bulleted or numbered lists. Start a new paragraph when you change topics.

A sentence should contain one idea or concept. This sounds easier than it is. It is hard to root out partial or implied ideas. For example, you could add *usually*,

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normally, or generally to each hint in this article. It could imply that the hint is not an absolute rule, but that would be a second idea. It would distract from each hint. When we are writers, we think our implied second ideas are important. When we are readers, we find them pointless or confusing.

Step 10: Paying Attention to Details

Make the changes suggested by your colleagues and finalize the manuscript. Develop a concise cover letter to the editor that describes who you are and why you are qualified to write on the topic. Most importantly, include a brief summary of 100–150 words explaining what your article has to offer. Remember to be careful with grammar and spelling in the manuscript and cover letter. Submit the manuscript and congratulate yourself.

Hint

Grammar matters to the extent that it promotes or impedes understanding or reflects well or poorly on the writer or message. Choose a simple format and grammar. Use your grammar checker (see Step 6). You may want to consult *The Elements of Style*, a classic text for common grammar, punctuation, and style problems (Strunk & White, 2000).

Now, take a deep breath. You have worked hard to get to this point. After submitting your manuscript, try one of the relaxation exercises described in Table 1.

Conclusion

Writing for publication builds and disseminates nursing knowledge. These 10 steps can help you through the writing journey. You will need to plan time for each step and be aware of the work involved before you start. Following these steps and breaking the work into stages with timelines will help. Timelines detail the schedule of a project and tasks to be accomplished, including what you will do and over what period of time. For new and seasoned authors, writing for publication can take 3–6 months from idea generation to manuscript submission. Of course, this timetable depends on the number of hours available to devote to writing. Ernest Hemingway said, “We are all apprentices in a craft where no one ever becomes a master” (Andrews, Biggs, & Seidel, 1996). Writing for publication is hard work, but you can do it.

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