

Problem in the profession: How and why writing skills in nursing must be improved

Joyce E. Johnson*, Kevin Rulo

^a The Catholic University of America, School of Nursing, 201 Gowan Hall, Michigan Avenue, NE Washington, DC 20064, United States.

^b The Catholic University of America, 219 Mullen Library, Michigan Avenue, NE Washington, DC 20064, United States.



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ABSTRACT

As a profession, nursing is obligated to disseminate knowledge by publishing research in the professional literature. Beyond producing scholarly work for publication, nurses need writing skills to complete doctoral dissertations and scholarly projects, and to succeed in obtaining funds for new nurse-directed business ventures. Ultimately, good writing skills are essential for the future of the nursing profession. In this article, we describe the critical role of writing in nursing, and offer a practical 10-point strategy for improving the writing ability of individual advanced practice nurses who need to improve their writing skills. This article also offers suggestions for increasing nursing's surveillance of nurses' writing skills such as increasing the emphasis on writing instruction as a priority in today's nursing graduate school curriculum, greater writing support for nurses who are writing dissertations and scholarly projects, evaluating writing programs, and monitoring the completion rate of nursing dissertations.

“Hard writing makes easy reading.”

~An old adage.

Introduction

Why are today's nurses expected to be good writers? The answer lies in both the historical traditions of nursing as a profession and the new realities of nursing today. As a profession, nursing is obligated to disseminate knowledge by publishing scholarly research in the professional literature. In 1960, Morison said that the profession of nursing “...develops standards of conduct, entrusted with the fulfillment of duties, has acquired knowledge and skills based on professional foundations, has applied knowledge and skills that better society, and includes continued study and research that advances the status and standards of the profession (p. 67). Without reservation, Morison said that graduate nurses better society and contribute to the public welfare by writing (p. 240). Davis, in his 1991 historical review of the professions and trades, also left no doubt about this professional responsibility. “The obligation to inform - to profess - characterizes professionals,” Davis (1991) said (p. 175).

More recent voices in nursing have echoed the critical importance of writing skills to the success of individual nurses and the future of the nursing profession, and have described the day-to-day challenges that nurses experience with the mechanics of writing. In 2009, Roberts and

Goss cited nurses' struggle with writing and the logical flow of ideas as the driving force behind the creation of an on-line writing tutorial. In 2011, McMillan and Raines (2010) reported that nursing students' greatest writing challenges were grammar, style guidelines, and writing mechanics.

Also in 2011, in its recommendations on the future of nursing, the Institute of Medicine (2011) called for doubling the number of nurses with a doctorate by 2020. It is critical, the IOM said, to add significantly to the current cadre of nurse faculty and researchers. In the immediate years ahead, this means that thousands of American nurses will begin what Roberts (2012) called the “formidable and demanding process of crafting a high quality research study.” Roberts offered some sobering statistics that will undoubtedly be an uncomfortable warning to today's nursing educators, i.e., that 40–50% of doctoral students who successfully complete their course work do not complete the final act of writing their dissertation (p. viii).

In her introduction to the 2012 special issue of the *Journal of Nursing Administration*, entitled “The Art of Communicating Outcomes,” Hill (2012) emphasized the critical importance of nurses' writing skills in communicating the value of nursing, the business case for resources and change, and the implementation of new nursing practices and processes based on evidence-based outcomes. In 2013, the American Nurses Association (ANA, 2013) reaffirmed that communication skills are key competencies for all registered nurses in all areas of practice. The ANA

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: johnsonjo@cua.edu (J.E. Johnson), rulo@cua.edu (K. Rulo).

competency model stated that nurses must be able to write clearly, concisely, fluently, and eloquently about the many decisions, plans, and activities inherent in contemporary nursing practice. The [Microsoft Corporation \(2013\)](#) agreed with the ANA when it found that skills in oral and written communication topped the list of must-have skills for top candidates in current and future high-growth jobs. In 2013, Microsoft named nursing as one of those top 60 high-growth, high-wage occupations that will account for 11.5 million new hires and 28% of the U.S. job growth by 2020.

In 2014, [Naber and Wyatt \(2014\)](#) published research on the effects of writing on nursing skills. In this study, the positive effects of reflective writing interventions on the critical thinking skills of baccalaureate nursing students prompted the researchers to recommend additional research and the possibility of incorporating reflective writing into the nursing curriculum. In 2016, the World Health Organization ([WHO, 2016](#)) published its competency model for nurse educators. Like the ANA, the WHO identified communication skills as one of the key competencies for nurses. Nurses must be able to “communicate best practice in nursing education with peers, students, and other stakeholders,” the WHO said. The WHO competency reflected what [Regan and Pietrobon \(2010\)](#) described as being active in the professional nursing dialogue. [Oermann et al. \(2015\)](#) suggested that at the master's and doctoral levels, such activity involves disseminating the findings of research studies and evidence-based practice projects, describing innovations in clinical practice, and serving as leaders in the health system.

In 2017, [McQuerrey \(2017\)](#) linked the critical importance of good writing skills to success as a nurse practitioner. Given the collaborative nature of a nurse practitioner's practice, great writing skills help to ensure the continuity of care and efficiency of information sharing with other health professionals. Precise writing is also essential for documenting patient histories, making referrals, instructing patients, and crafting health policies, [McQuerrey](#) said. In 2017, [Tyndall and Scott's \(2017\)](#) research suggested that competency in writing could differentiate between nurses who are entering the workforce with an Associate Degree in Nursing vs. those with Baccalaureate Degrees in Nursing.

In that same year, we made the case that advanced practice nurses who are developing a business plan for a new enterprise need superb writing skills ([Johnson & Garvin, 2017](#)). In a winning business plan, such skills enable nurses to craft crisp, cogent, compelling, and well-developed arguments that convince potential funders of the need for and viability of a new independent nursing enterprise. These arguments typically include a force field analysis ([Lewin, 1951](#)) that provides a clear, concise, and detailed description of the driving forces, which encourage the development of the new business, and the restraining forces, which describe the challenges that the potential new business must overcome. Driving forces persuade potential stakeholders that the proposed change is attractive and worthwhile, while restraining forces work to maintain the status quo. Thus, in a business plan, the nurse entrepreneur must detail both the driving forces and suggestions for overcoming the restraining force. Without clear, concise writing, the potential of many high value nurse-led enterprises will be lost.

Over the last 60 years, these diverse voices have converged on a common theme. *Today's nurses must be good writers*. Yet, there are signs that writing skills may be a competency that is under-developed in many nurses. [Roberts \(2012\)](#) highlighted the tremendous challenges that nurses face when they must write a doctoral dissertation according to the unique, exacting standards of academia. In 2014, Kennedy – an AJN editor – shared what she saw as a disturbing reality in nursing:

In the last few years, we've received an increasing number of unpublishable papers. According to my network of fellow editors, this is a widespread trend. Some of the papers we receive are poorly written, illogical, lacking clear purpose and organization, ineptly sourced. Writing for publication is a skill that must be developed, along with all the other skills educators aim to build in those who will advance our

profession. The manuscripts I see show that most students aren't receiving adequate coaching in this area on many levels. Their papers demonstrate a lack of knowledge about basic aspects of writing—sentence and paragraph structure, logical progression of facts and ideas. (p. 7).

These deficiencies mirror the research on the writing deficiencies that typically face graduate students such as lack of clarity, poor organization, weak construction of paragraphs, spelling and syntax errors, and poor document structure ([Lea & Street, 2006](#)).

Kennedy continued with another story:

A nurse who serves on the institutional review board of a major medical center told me [that] many of the project applications it has received showed that the authors didn't know how to write a proposal. She was embarrassed because it reflects badly on our profession if nurses can't communicate clearly and on par with other health care professionals. She's right. (p. 7).

“The quality of what we write also influences our reputation,” Kennedy concluded (p. 7). Kennedy's testimony illustrates the vital importance (as well as the lack) of writing ability among nursing professionals. The situation demands substantial and prompt intervention on the part of educators. Success will depend on our achieving the right mix of personal initiative and academic support. In what follows, we present a practical strategy for improving the writing skills of individual nurses as well as some thoughts about how the nursing profession could improve its surveillance of writing abilities within its ranks.

Writing instruction in nursing

How has the nursing profession attempted to improve the writing competency of contemporary nurses? A recent review of 80 articles by [Oermann et al. \(2015\)](#) provided some important insights into the educational programs and strategies (writing courses, teaching strategies, writing assignments, or learning activities) being used to improve the poor quality of writing in both pre-licensure and graduate nursing programs ([Oermann, 2013](#); [Roberts & Goss, 2009](#)). The review identified a variety of helpful strategies such as sessions with writing center tutors, collaboration with librarians, in-class peer review, instructor feedback on written assignments, writing courses, and writing workshops.

[Oermann et al. \(2015\)](#) found that some of the writing workshops used the number of manuscripts submitted or accepted as a learning outcome. However, only one-third of the approaches that were designed specifically to improve writing skills had been evaluated for effectiveness in improving writing. In most cases, the evaluation only examined student and faculty satisfaction with a specific writing program or strategy. Unfortunately, [Oermann et al. \(2015\)](#) concluded that “...It is not known which of these approaches is most effective in improving students' writing and whether any improvement found at posttest is sustained” (p. 32).

A ten-point plan for nurses

What can we do to improve nurses' ability to write well for diverse audiences, publications and purposes? How do we build this important competency? Where do we begin? Based on our experience and on writing studies research, we offer below a practical, ten-point plan for nurses who are ready to begin.

1. Make a Commitment to Improving Your Writing Skills

Becoming a good writer is a professional journey that begins with a realization: that, in so many practice arenas of nursing today, possessing strong writing skills means a greater chance of work success. Strengthening writing skills, however, requires making a long-term commitment to improving your critical thinking about the art and craft of writing, mastering rules of grammar and usage, learning practical

techniques and strategies, developing disciplined habits, and writing on a regular basis.

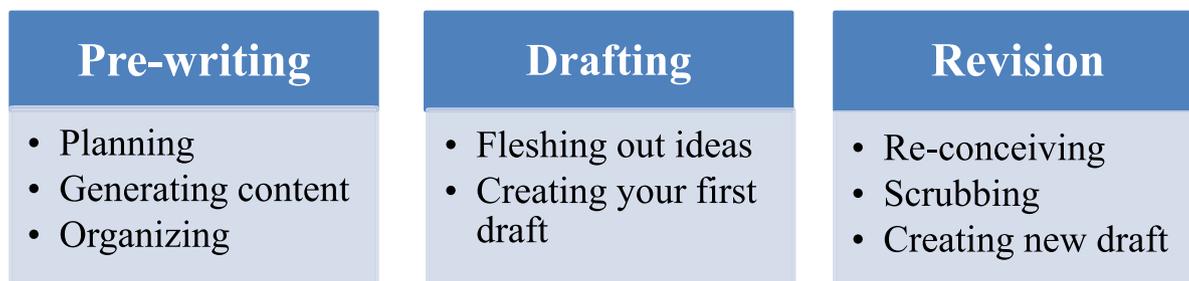
For inspiration, it is helpful to look to [Collins \(2001\)](#) research on how successful companies made the transition from achieving good results to creating *great* results that lasted over time. According to Collins – beyond focused leadership, superb staff, confrontation of brutal facts, and the process of both “doing and stop doing” – the companies that became great had created a culture of discipline that included disciplined people, disciplined thoughts, and disciplined action. It is this exactly this type of discipline that nurses need in order to develop into the great writers they aspire to be.

2. Understand the Writing Process

Discipline enables writing growth. Possessing a dynamic understanding of the writing process will accelerate and deepen this growth. Students too often tend to see writing as a product to be submitted rather than as a process that involves stages of pre-writing, drafting, and revision. The pre-writing stage (which often includes the composition of outlines or other research artefacts) comprises planning, acquisition of source materials, and initial structural mapping. The next stage, drafting, involves the initial first composition, while revision denotes any subsequent alterations. Particularly neglected for less-experienced writers are the revision stages. Apprentice writers seldom grasp that the writing process is itself a thought process. As a result, revision is conceived of more narrowly as error correction. Experienced authors, however, revise not just their sentence-level language, but also their paragraph structure, their larger organization, their argument. For experienced authors, the writing process tends to be messy, recursive, open-ended. However, precisely because writing is intimately caught up with thinking and learning, no one single process will suit every type of thinker or every kind of paper. Writers should be encouraged to explore a variety of drafting strategies.

I’m not a very good writer, but I’m an excellent re-writer ~James Michener

In general, the revision process works best when a concerted effort is made to begin with global concerns first before shifting to more local improvements. The reason is simple: focusing on sentence-level issues before larger issues like argument and structure may result in a writer spending a good deal of time polishing and perfecting sentences that will later be cut or recast significantly when deliberating content or arrangement. Tackle the larger building blocks of your paper first for a more efficient process. Toward the end of the revision stage comes “scrubbing,” where you wax and buff your prose ([Hoffman & Hoffman, 2003](#)). There are many effective methods that can be employed to this end, including reading out loud, a practice popular in many Writing Centers that can help you clarify meaning, perfect rhythm, and spot any errors.



3. Analyze Your Rhetorical Situation

As a writer, one of your most critical tasks will be to analyze the audience of your potential readers in view of your purpose: otherwise

known as your rhetorical situation. A reading audience may include diverse individuals with differing needs and expectations, differing abilities, and differing baseline knowledge about your subject. Having a good sense of your audience helps you tailor your writing to the information your readers want and need; craft the publication with the appropriate tone, style, language, and content; and avoid offending your readers. Understanding your audience in light of your purpose is a critical first step of effective communication. Because achieving this understanding is so important, nursing writers would benefit from at least a rudimentary education in rhetoric, which can be understood, as [Steven Mailloux \(2017\)](#) has pointed out, not as a discipline in its own right so much as an “interdiscipline” well suited to “critical work in various intellectual spaces” (p. 2). This critical work relies on a certain developed aptitude, which could best be characterized, following [Aristotle \(1926\)](#) (4th Century B.C.E), as “the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever” (p. 15). Rhetoric, in other words, can be conceived as an interdiscipline that provides an author with a proven framework for analyzing audience, purpose, situation, and context, in order, on the basis of that analysis, to construct optimally persuasive communications. Studying rhetoric, then, gives you a greater capacity for assessing the variety of communicative contexts in which you will find yourself and for adapting your prose to meet a wide range of need.

Conducting an audience analysis might involve conducting surveys, speaking with informed sources, or conducting a content analysis of similar reports or a journal's archives. Reviewing a journal's archives is especially helpful when a writer is unsure about the appropriate voice and tone of a professional journal. Seasoned professional writers often review 3–5 years of archives in order to gain a sense of a journal's voice and tone. Depending on the publication, you may want to know the following about your readers: demographic characteristics such as age, gender, racial/ethnic group, religion, socio-economic status, occupa-

tion, political affiliation; baseline knowledge of the subject; interest in the subject; cognitive ability; reading level; understanding of highly technical, scientific, or statistical terms and concepts; personal stakes in mastering the information; and expectations from the publication ([Moxley, 2017](#)).

Experienced writers know that when writing for a heterogeneous audience, it is best to write for the majority of readers but also to offer some additional information (or sidebars) for the other readers in the minority. In addition, if you write frequently on number of topics, it is helpful to create some background files with “boilerplate” text that is written for different audiences.

4. Know the “Tools and Rules” of Writing

- Active vs passive voice
- Parallel construction
- Items in a series

Coordinate ideas
 Vertical list
 Two-part connectives
 Restrictive vs, non-restrictive clauses
 Subject-verb agreement
 Who vs whom
 "Be" words
 Weak verb use
 Stronger Verb use

Any discussion about the rules of writing usually elicits sighs from graduate students. We may not always find the prospect of having to master English grammar and usage very interesting. However, we should acknowledge the necessity of doing so. Excellence in composition requires it. Among the more foundational if less recognized “rules” are those related to genre (a category of composition in form, style or subject) and discourse (written or spoken communication). Both students and teachers would benefit from enriched perspectives on these aspects of prose. David Bartholomae has written about basic writing at the undergraduate level in ways applicable even to advanced graduate student nursing scholars. For Bartholomae (2008/1985), who has studied and taught apprentice writing extensively, the problem of the apprentice writer is less a failure to know and apply rules of grammar and usage and more a need for the writer “to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community” (p. 382). Graduate student writing efforts entail a struggle to find their voice, to express themselves ably in the discourse of professional nursing scholarship, which can also impact other writing competencies. For example, attempts to acquire proficiency in new discourse forms and practices or to gain facility in unfamiliar genres can temporarily impair other aspects of composition like organization, clarity, and correctness. The rewards, however, are well worth the effort. Explicit education about disciplinary genres and discourse practices can increase not only writing ability but also “discipline specific learning and thought development” (Bazerman, 2005, p. 281). In addition to genre and discourse are the indispensable, although too frequently ignored, core “tools and rules” of writing, which ensure elegance and readability. Consider these:

Active vs. passive voice

Lively writing uses the active voice. The voice of a verb tells if the subject of the sentence performs the action or is acted upon. For example:

The scientists analyzed the data.

(*The subject acts.*)

The data were analyzed by the scientists.

(*The subjects are acted upon and are the object of the action verb analyze.*)

Verbs whose subjects perform the action are in the active voice, while verbs whose subjects are acted upon are in the passive voice. The actor in a passive sentence may be named in a prepositional phrase or may not be named at all. The passive voice can be used (1) when the actor is unknown, not important, or deliberately omitted or (2) when the writer wants to emphasize the receiver of the action such as “The data were analyzed.” Passive verbs always consist of a form of *be* and the past participle of the main verb: *were* analyzed, *are* worn, *was* considered. Other helping words may also be present such as *have* been analyzed, *have* been worn, and *would* have been considered.

Parallel construction

Parallel ideas should be expressed in parallel form. Nouns should be parallel with nouns, adjectives with adjectives, prepositional phrases

with prepositional phrases, infinitives with infinitives, dependent clauses with dependent clauses, and so on. This might include:

Items in a series

A series includes three or more elements. Repetition of the construction is essential, but the “tag word” (such as *by* or *it*) may be omitted. For example:

- The scientist maintained a busy schedule by *working* fifty 50 hours per week, *writing* a new book, and *teaching* part-time at the local community college.
- The organization is well known in the community *for its progressive policies*, *for its employee benefits*, and *for its public relations program*.

Coordinate ideas

Coordinate ideas are connected by coordinating conjunctions such as *for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet*. This also includes comparisons created by *than* or *as*. For example,

- Political candidates often try *to discredit their opponents* or *to confuse the voters*.

Vertical list

In any list – whether in a print publication or a PowerPoint presentation – do not mix word forms such as sentences, single words, verbs, or different types of phrases. For example:

- The order of business for the executive will be:
 - o *hearing* the subcommittee reports
 - o *creating* a new process for billing
 - o *revisiting* the need for a new recruitment campaign

Two-part connectives

These include *either/or*, *neither/nor*, *not/only/but also*, *both/and*. The construction following the first connective must match the second. For example:

- *Either* the manager will edit the newsletter *or* he will hire a freelance editor.
- The manager *will either* edit the newsletter himself *or* hire a freelance editor.

Restrictive vs. non-restrictive clauses

Figuring out whether to use *that* or *which* can be confusing. A writer uses these types of clauses to help the reader distinguish between necessary and nice-to-know, but unnecessary information. One easy way to remember the difference between *that* and *which* is “*that* defines, *which* describes.”

Here are some easy to remember guidelines for these two terms that are often referred to as the “gatekeepers” of restrictive and non-restrictive clauses:

- Use *that* to introduce clauses that are *restrictive*, or *essential*. An essential clause contains information that is necessary to understand the main idea of the sentence. Commas *do not* precede or follow restrictive clauses.
 - o Example - The sales meeting that was held in Washington, DC was not well attended. Without the restrictive clause (that was held in Washington, DC) the reader would not understand which sales meeting was the subject of the sentence.
- Use *which* to introduce clauses that are *non-restrictive* or *non-essential*. These clauses contain information that adds some information but is not necessary to understand the main idea of the sentence. Commas

are used to set off or surround non-restrictive clauses.

- o Example – The original budget, which was modified in 1999, has been completely changed by the new administration. The non-restrictive clause - which was modified in 1999 – is not essential to the main idea of the sentence.

Subject-verb agreement

Subject-verb agreement should be simple, but it is often a problem in writing. It is easier when there is just one subject in a sentence. However, when there are two or more subjects joined by *and* you must use a plural verb: The *writer* and the *editor* need a style manual. However, if two or more subjects are preceded by *each* or *every*, use a singular verb: *Each* writer and editor *needs* a style manual.

When two or more subjects are joined by the connectives *either/or*, *neither/nor*, *nor*, or *or*, the verb must agree with the subject that is closest to the verb.

- Either a new printer or a new printer *is* needed.
- Neither my staff members nor the writing consultant *is* coordinating the arrangements of the training program.

The following words are considered singular and require singular verbs: anybody, anyone, each, either, everybody, everyone, everything, neither, nobody, no one, nothing, one, somebody, someone, something. However, there are some exceptions: *some*, *most*, *all*, *which*, *that*, *who*. If the reference word (antecedent) is functioning as a single unit, the pronoun is singular. If the antecedent is functioning as multiple entities, the pronoun is plural: *Some* of the *evaluations were reviewed* by the manager, but *all* of the forms *have been submitted* on time. Collective nouns usually take a singular verb because they are considered a unit: audience, class, committee, community, company, crowd, department, division, faculty, family, group, jury, staff, and team. Media and data are exceptions. For example:

- The review *committee has* issued its reports.
- The *faculty is* unhappy with the new tenure guidelines.

Who vs. whom

Using the pronouns *who* and *whom* can also be confusing. The easiest way to determine the use of the relative pronoun *who* or *whom* is to clarify how the pronoun is functioning in the clause that it introduces. Use *who* when the pronoun functions as a *subject* and *whom* when the pronoun functions as an object. One easy way to remember this is to use the “he/him” method. Substitute *who* for *he* and *him* for *whom*; then check to see if the sentence makes sense. For example:

- *Who/Whom wrote the letter?*
He wrote the letter. Therefore, *who* is correct.
- *Who/Whom should I vote for?*
Should I vote for him? Therefore, *whom* is correct.
- *We all know who/whom pulled that prank.*
This sentence contains two clauses: *we all know* and *who/whom pulled that prank*. We are interested in the second clause because it contains the *who/whom*. *He* pulled that prank. Therefore, *who* is correct.
- *We wondered who/whom the book was about.*
This sentence contains two clauses: *we wondered* and *who/whom the book was about*. Again, we are interested in the second clause because it contains the *who/whom*. The book was about *him*. Therefore, *whom* is correct.

“Be” words

To improve your writing, avoid using weak copulatives whenever possible.

Copulatives include words that connect parts of a sentence such as “be” verbs – which are best to avoid. Here is an example:

Weak verb use

There was improvement seen in the number of patients that were found to be back to sleep, those sleeping on a firm surface, and the number of patients that were room sharing, but not bed sharing.

Stronger verb use

Observed improvements included the number of patients found to be back asleep, those found sleeping on a firm surface, and those room sharing. Infants and parents found that bed sharing demonstrated no improvement.

Here is a list of commonly used weak “be” verbs that are avoided: is, am, are, was, were, be, being, been, has, have, had, do, does, did, shall, should, will, would, may, might, must, can, could.

5. Create the frame for your article or publication. With roots in the social science,

framing is an interesting, complex topic. In the field of communications, framing is a way of organizing, perceiving, representing, interpreting, simplifying, and communicating about reality. *Great writers give a lot of thought to how they will “frame” their articles*. Sometimes, framing is called “spinning” or finding an angle for a story. Here is why you need to think about creating the “big picture” of your story. A frame can actually influence a reader's perception without altering the actual facts in the story. Different frames can encourage some interpretations and discourage others. A successful frame can also help readers connect to what they already know. Frames can stimulate discussion about complex issues, and they can demonstrate gains and losses, as well as equal but different perspectives.

Here are some examples to help you think about framing an article:

- *Relationship*: cause–effect, antecedent– consequence, opposites, or contradictions.
- *Comparison*: similarity, difference, or degree.
- *Process*: Possible or impossible – what might be possible or what is not; past vs. future – how did it work in the past and or how will it work in the future?
- *Definition*: what kind of issue is it; what are the component parts?
- *Testimony – authority*: What do the experts say about ___; testimonial –what do the users say about___; statistics – what do the data tell us about___?
- *Chronology*: How did something evolve over time; what factors aided or constrained the evolution; what were the critical milestones?

6. Consider the beginning and ending of your article.

The beginning of an article is critically important because it sets the pace for the entire piece and engages your readers. Your opening gives your readers their first impression of you as a writer and the worth of your ideas, and it frames your entire argument. After a strong beginning, readers should look forward to reading your article. Beginnings might include a compelling human-interest story, a provocative question, a puzzling scenario, a stirring example, or an intriguing quotation.

Now, here's a surprise...we recommend that you write your beginning last. Why? Your writing is a creative process of discovery that involves thinking through complicated issues, organizing (and re-

organizing), and refining your thoughts, developing your arguments, and arriving at some logical conclusions. By composing your beginning before you move through that creative process, you may arrive at the end with a beginning that simply does not match the rest of your article. So, while it may sound counter-intuitive, writing your beginning at the end is the best way to be sure that your beginning is the right opener for your article (<http://writingcenter.unc.edu>).

- Using the wrong word.
- Choosing words that have unwanted meanings.
- Using a pronoun when readers can't tell whom/what it refers to.
- Using jargon or technical terms that make readers work unnecessarily hard.
- Using too many words when a few will do.
- Avoid using clichés, or those catchy phrases that have been used so frequently that they have become annoying.

Great is the art of beginning, but greater is the art of ending. ~ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

But what about your ending? Longfellow was wise to believe in the importance of endings. The ending of your article is the bridge between your writing and the reader's daily life. The ending gives your readers the answers to two small, but critical questions: "So what? Now what?" These answers help your readers understand why the information in

- Avoid sounding too authoritative by using big words.
- Consider using sensory metaphors that include the five senses

(<http://writingcenter.unc.edu>; Berger, 2015)

To write well, express yourself like the common people, but think like a wise man ~Aristotle

your article matters to them and what potential course of actions they might take in the future. You might circle back to your introduction and then identify solutions to an issue or questions that require future study. Great writers push ideas forward. In reality, the ending is a writer's last word. It's your opportunity to synthesize your ideas and to identify future possibilities, connections, and thoughts. It's your final chance to make an impression on your readers, and to help them see things differently. Spend time thinking about and writing your ending because your ending is your gift to your reader.

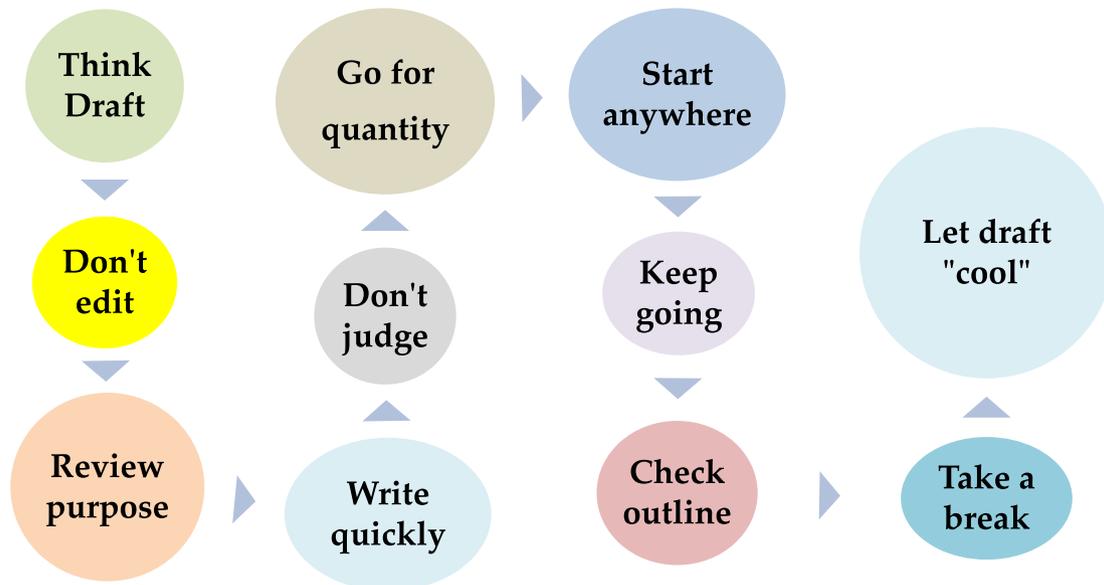
In his new book on writing, Evans (2017) said that the key to great writing is clarity or making yourself clear beyond a doubt. Evans also emphasized the importance of the economy of language, which he traced back historically to the British who rationed newsprint in times of war.

7. Choose your words carefully. A good writer thinks carefully and strategically about

8. Write, write, and write again.

finding exactly the right word for the right idea. Making bad word choices or using too many words can confuse your readers and detract from the power of your writing. Consider these common mistakes:

Novice writers often report that when they begin writing, they find themselves staring at blank page. As shown below, we advise aspiring writers to reduce this pressure by thinking about their work as a first draft, writing quickly, refraining from editing as they write, and taking a break when they need one. Since it is easier to write some sections than others, it is fine to write those sections first and then return to the more difficult part of the article. This approach can help you overcome the problem of staring at a blank page and feeling stuck with your writing.



The other important step is letting your work “cool” for a day or two before you return to the draft with fresh eyes for scrubbing and continued editing.

9. Create an action plan.

The final step in improving your competency in writing is creating an action plan that

will help you become a great writer. There are many benefits to action planning. Creating a plan can increase your commitment and motivation to becoming a better writer. An action plan will serve as a guide to what you need to do to improve your writing skills. An action plan establishes a timeline for improving your writing, helps you identify the resources you need (including a committed writing partner and mentor), and provides a mechanism for tracking your progress. Most of all, an action plan reflects the discipline that is required to become a truly great writer.

10. Collaborate.

Collaboration in writing most probably brings to mind the possibility of co-authorship; however, there is much more to the idea. We tend to think of writing as a solitary activity but so rarely is this actually the case. One of the characteristics that most distinguishes successful authors is that they share their work with colleagues and experts, receive feedback on their work, and incorporate that feedback into their writing through revision. For these authors writing is always a collaborative enterprise. Providing substantive responses on written work is itself a competency that needs to be taught and practiced. Accurately assessing the strengths and weakness of a paper; presenting critical feedback in a positive, supportive manner; offering suggestions for improvement – these skills are commonly not well-mastered even by doctoral students. The same is true for students' ability to receive comments and responses from readers. Students are frequently unable to assess the responses they receive and ill-equipped to discern avenues for re-drafting based on feedback. Opportunities for teaching and practice in these areas will arise in dissertation guidance but should also extend, if possible, to the classroom environment. One effective in-class method is the peer review workshop, where students can share their work and receive constructive criticism from their peers. Another means of fostering exchange for revision is by use of the Writing Center, which provides students the opportunity to meet one-on-one with colleagues trained in the pedagogy of writing improvement.

A call to action for nursing

This article has focused on a major problem in the nursing profession – weak writing skills. As we suggested, building the writing competency of nurses is certainly the responsibility of individual nurses. Yet, it must also become an absolute priority in nursing education today. This is not only a matter of professional obligation. Improved writing skills are essential for ensuring that the large number of nurses who are currently enrolled in doctoral programs can successfully write and defend a doctoral dissertation that meets the exacting standards of academia and that truly adds to the body of professional knowledge. Doctoral students who complete their coursework but fail to write and defend a successful dissertation represent an unfortunate failure not just for the individual students, who have invested a great deal of time and expense in their graduate school education (Swales & Feak, 2012). This “ABD” (all but dissertation) phenomenon also represents a major failure of the leaders of the nursing profession, who are responsible for assuring that nurses who are enrolled in doctoral programs complete their dissertations. As the IOM (2011) suggested, it is these nurses who will lead the nursing profession into the future. Beyond successfully completing doctoral dissertations, today's nurses must meet their obligation to the profession by writing scholarly articles that are accepted for

publication in high-quality, peer-reviewed journals, and creating well-crafted business plans that succeed in obtaining the required funding for new nurse-directed business ventures.

Overcoming deficits in nurses' writing skills requires action that will elevate writing competency to a much higher priority in nursing education today. This may include adding new, improved writing courses to the nursing curriculum; creating on-campus and on-line programs that teach nurses how to convey content clearly and concisely within formatting guidelines, and how to edit and revise draft publications; and assuring that all educational efforts focused on improving writing skills are evaluated with metrics, and not merely measures of faculty and student satisfaction. This might also involve establishing writing committees in graduate programs that would develop technical writing standards for all faculty and students, and providing enhanced support for doctoral students who have completed their coursework and are beginning their dissertation. According to Ondrusek (2017), nursing faculty at a university may not possess the level of writing skill needed for to coach a struggling writer. This reality has reportedly stimulated interest in university writing centers and independent writing coaches who can provide writing expertise, coaching, and guidance that is customized for the nurse's needs. Opportunities for collaboration across academic curriculum and support units should be further cultivated. University writing centers and writing programs have proved to be helpful partners for Ph.D and DNP. programs. They can develop content for writing-intensive courses. Writing center instructors can be paired with individual students to assist weekly or semi-weekly with ongoing projects. Writing faculty and writing center administrators can also help faculty in nursing implement best practices for writing instruction in their curriculum.

These actions, however helpful, are not sufficient, given the critical importance of writing skills to the profession. Nursing must take a proactive stance by instituting monitoring of critical outcome measures that reflect writing competency in the profession. These include data-driven evaluation of the effectiveness of writing interventions, as suggested by Oermann et al. (2015); success rates of nursing schools in helping doctoral students move from the dreaded ABD (all but dissertation) to successful completion and defense of the dissertation (Roberts, 2012); the acceptance rate of nurses who submit articles for publication in peer-reviewed journals; and the success of the advanced practice nurses who submit business plans for new nursing ventures. Employing such data-driven evaluation strategies would provide badly needed, new measures of success for the nursing profession – measures that would strengthen the profession, improve the type of writing problems reported in graduate schools and by manuscript editors (Kennedy, 2014), the acceptance rate of scholarly articles authored by nurses, and the success of business plans in obtaining funding for new nurse-directed businesses.

Sidebar

A re-writing exercise

It has been said that great writers devote more time to rewriting than they do to writing.

their first draft. So, as you work toward becoming a good writer, here is a great exercise:

1. Select an article or report that you have authored. This can be a journal article, a technical report, a white paper, or another type of scientific or technical publication.
2. Set aside time in your work/personal schedule to work on this writing assignment.
3. Examine the structure of the article. Are the main points easy to identify and arranged in a logical order? Do all the sub-points answer questions about the main points? Did you include transitions that make it easy to move from one subject to another?

4. Re-visit the beginning of your article. What strategy did you employ to capture the readers' interest? Did it set the stage for rest of the content? How could you improve it?
5. How was the ending? Did you leave your readers with thoughts for the future?
6. After these revisions, begin "scrubbing" the content. Print out your paper and mark with a pen any issues of style, grammar, and punctuation. Where do you stumble as a reader?
7. Analyze your word choices. Does the article include the best words to express your thoughts? Are the words accurate?
8. Reflect on the tone of your article. Did the tone accurately reflect your attitude toward the subject, the subject and the publication? What changes would you make?
9. Compare it to your original article.

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Joyce E. Johnson, PhD, RN, NEA-BC, FAAN, Associate Professor, The Catholic University of America School of Nursing doctoral program. Primary teaching focus: basics of technical writing, policy analysis, healthcare finance, ethics, scholarship, C-Suite leadership, dissertation development.

Publications number over 120 articles on nursing shortage issues, nursing management, information systems technology, patient safety and quality improvement. Experience includes serving on editorial boards of several nursing journals and periodicals, functioning as an active reviewer for 4 nursing journals, and for 13 years founded and published *Nursing Connections*, the first nationally refereed scholarly journal to be published from a practice setting.

Dr. Kevin Rulo, PhD, MA, BA, Clinical Assistant Professor of English, Director of the Writing & Rhetoric Program, and Director of the University Writing Center, The Catholic University of America. Published and presented on a variety of topics related to modernism, theory, and literary studies. As director of the Writing and Rhetoric Program, Dr. Rulo teaches, mentors, and oversees the English Department's doctoral teaching fellows in Writing and Rhetoric and a variety of other writing and literature courses. As Director of the Writing Center, Dr. Rulo strives to strengthen the writing environment of the university and to create a positive atmosphere for the development of writers of all levels.

Dr. Rulo specializes in transatlantic 20th century literature, especially the relationship between modernism and satire. His current book project, *Satiric Modernism*, examines the flourishing of satirical thinking and creative practice in the experimental literature and art of the last hundred years. He has published and presented on a variety of topics related to modernism, theory, and literary studies.