On Scholarly Writing

Dr. Margretta Madden Styles, former Dean of the University of Texas Health Science Center–San Antonio, Wayne State University, and the University of California at San Francisco, wrote several books and articles that began with the same word. That word is “on,” a simple, two-letter word. On, a preposition, is defined as a function word used to indicate reason, ground, or basis (Merriam-Webster, 2013). How can such a simple word have such importance? Knowing the reason or the grounds for something or doing something “on the basis of” all convey that some rationale for considering a subject or taking some action exists.

On Nursing, the beginning of one of Dr. Styles’ titles, conveys a broad expanse of thinking (Styles, 1982). On, from the above definition, means that a reason existed for nursing existing. In that book, Dr. Styles conveyed the distinction between professionalism (the composite character of the profession) and professionhood (the characteristics of the individual) (Styles, 1982). That was fairly heavy thinking about nursing!

The subtitle of that book is Toward a New Endowment (Styles, 1982). Another preposition appears! Toward is defined as in the direction of (Merriam-Webster, 2013). The new endowment in this case, at least in my view, is summed in her words “a tide of rising expectations” (Styles, 1982, p. 233). In other words, the journey continues; no destination exists; we must constantly rise to the challenges before us.

Although the words nursing and new endowment clearly have meaning, many of us would ignore the prepositions. Yet, as illustrated by Dr. Styles, they too have important meaning. Does not scholarly writing mean that we attend to the totality of what we present? Even the prepositions, which in the English language are thought of as minor contributors to our making sense of communication, take on meaning.

I intend to give more thought to the prepositions I use. I hope this reminder from Dr. Styles’ work will help you undertake that same thoughtful endeavor.

Toward better writing . . .

REFERENCES

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