Learning From Errors: The Importance of Proofreading

Although effective written communication is important in the field of nursing, students often dismiss the importance of proofreading their written work. The practice of proofreading is useful in professional correspondence, manuscript preparation, and patient charting, where patient welfare is dependent on accurate, concise communication. The activity described in this article helps students to make the connection between competency in writing and competency in professional nursing.

Objectives and Strategy

The objective of this project was to help students understand and appreciate the importance of written communication and proofreading in the nursing profession. In this instructional strategy, the ARCS (Attention, Relevance, Confidence, and Satisfaction) model used indicates that a topic’s relevance to student experiences can serve as a strong motivator for learning (Francom & Reeves, 2010). Accordingly, this classroom activity took examples from the medical field to demonstrate applications of proofreading.

Activity

Students were given a handout of charting errors frequently found online by Internet search, using combinations of the following terms: medical, blooper, typo, error, and charting. The students were asked to speculate about what the authors of the erroneous statements intended to write and then discuss the type of errors made.

Examples of errors and associated lessons are as follows:

● “He went to see the chef of surgery” (Med League Support Services, n.d.). In this example, it is likely that the writer meant “chief of surgery.” Failure to proofread and the overreliance on automated spelling checks can lead to this form of error.

● “On the second day, the knee was better, and on the third day it disappeared” (Nursing Link, n.d.). This phrase
demonstrates the pitfalls of vague pronoun references. Speculation suggests that the writer was referring to the disappearance of a rash or discomfort; but as written, the statement indicates that the knee disappeared.

- “He had a left-toe amputation one month ago. He also had a left-knee amputation last year” (Nursing Link, n.d.). Proofreading requires meticulous verification of data. In this case, either the dates or the orientation (left) must be wrong. It is inconceivable that there would be an occasion to amputate a digit from an already-removed limb.

**Student Results**

The activity was conducted for four semesters in an English composition course at a nursing college. Average student scores were 2.5% higher in editing and writing skills on midterm examinations for those students who completed the exercise, compared with the students who did not complete the exercise. Best practice suggestions from the ARCS model indicate that student success stemming from this exercise may be attributable not only to relevance but also to gaining attention with humor and concreteness. At the same time, identifying errors made by professionals can instill confidence in proofreaders as they suggest improvements and corrections to the applicable text. Building learner confidence is another effective instructional practice (Francom & Reeves, 2010).

A comparable lesson around the proofreading of more formal communications will be launched this year, using deidentified e-mail correspondence.

**References**


**Miriam R.B. Abbott, MA**
mabbott@mccn.edu

Mount Carmel College of Nursing

The author has disclosed no potential conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise.

doi:10.3928/01484834-20160114-13