Our Readers Can Become Writers
Yes, We Mean You!

By now, most of us have had to admit that at least one of our New Year's resolutions has passed from resolve into oblivion. However, this editorial will provide you with a replacement resolution—to turn yourself from a reader into a writer. For those of you who have already had some of your work published, this will invite you to write more.

TALKING BACK

My best suggestion for how to begin is this: As you read anything—newsletters, editorials, journal articles, the daily newspaper—pretend that you are listening to an active voice and “talk back.” This talking back can be expressed out loud and then put into written notes, while the idea is still fresh. Acquiring such a habit is a relatively easy thing to do. All that is needed is some commitment and resolve. It is shifting from being passive or absorbing to being active and creating. Another dimension of this “talking back” habit is to start thinking about to whom you would be speaking (not longer, in the beginning). Write anything that is on your mind; you may have had some thoughts on your walk. Write without having editing, correctness, or expression as filters or barriers. Give the document a name, save it, and return to it the next day.

When you commit yourself to this approach and your writing habit is firmly established, then you can decide which route to publication you will pursue. When I have made this suggestion in many workshops, participants often e-mail to tell me that, for them, this was the best advice about writing they had ever had. Some writers have shared that their dedicated time is at the end of a workday, when they are able to shut the door, announce to colleagues that they must not be disturbed, and do their writing. The most interesting “space” that a nurse-writer used was the doctors’ writing area on their hospital unit, where a few of the computers were always available. No one objected, and she had her quiet, private, not-to-be-interrupted space.

CONSIDERING THE MANY WRITING APPROACHES AND VENUES

Letters to the editor are always welcome. Editors of newsletters and small circulation journals are particularly welcoming, so you might want to start there. It is very likely that your letter will be acknowledged, even if it doesn’t see the light of day in print. Be persistent; never give up after just one attempt.

Many of you are in positions where you are well on the way to developing a journal article. There are opportunities to turn your notes and presentations into manuscripts, since you have already committed your ideas to written words. For example, inservice education topics could yield developed manuscripts on the best ways to persuade new employees to become a part of team effort, or the most effective methods for safe medication delivery, or ideal strategies for teaching patients about new medication regimens. Years ago, an author had an article published in JPN on the best way to evacuate a unit when an actual fire occurred on the unit. As I visited psychiatric wards in New Jersey and elsewhere, I saw copies of this article displayed on bulletin boards.

Another good opportunity for manuscript development happens for those of you who have been asked to do a presentation at a conference, workshop, or convention. Here again, you have committed your ideas into written words. The steps required to transform the PowerPoint® slides or handouts into an article are relatively easy. Poster pre-
sentations can also be the beginning of a journal article. In a similar vein, some of you have produced guides for units on how to plan for discharging patients or how to include family members in care. Others have served as consultants to self-help groups for individuals with schizophrenia, depression, or addiction. These groups yield excellent ideas for topics such as how to develop collaborative efforts with mental health providers, how to decide whether medications are working, or what to disclose to employers about diagnoses.

Journal clubs seem to be becoming more popular. These clubs are not only organized by faculty in various academic units, but also in acute care and community settings, where the clinical nurses have found such groups to be an important way to keep current on the latest developments for clinical practice. When the clubs have been meeting for months, the topics that have been covered could yield a review of the literature article.

Journal editors have different policies on how they handle letters of inquiry from potential authors. Some editors respond to these letters individually, whereas others simply direct the person to the journal’s guidelines for submission. I usually respond to inquiry letters by saying that it is difficult to answer “would your journal be interested in your topic” question when I do not know how well the potential author writes. If I have had an extended conversation with the writer at a convention, then I might extend the offer of a courtesy review of the manuscript draft before formal submission.

When considering which journal would be the best fit for your topic, it is necessary to become familiar with all aspects of the likely journals. Information about the editor, staff, and reviewers, as well as the journal’s Information for Authors, can usually be found both online and in print.

TIPS FOR WRITING

When I do workshops on writing for publication, I share some very specific tips with participants. Here are a few of them:

1. Never write the first sentence first. Leave that for the last part to write. Try writing the last sentence first. Doing this will help you to get clear on what your message actually is.

2. Develop a network of colleagues who will read your draft and provide feedback. Choose these colleagues for their publishing record. Those who have been published in refereed journals can be the most helpful to you.

3. Use a physical folder to file ideas that you collect from news sources. This clipping and storing habit has very good potential to be a source for future works. As this habit develops, particular folders, separated by topics you are working on, can yield quotes.

4. When you think your work is complete, put it away for a day or two. Then, read it aloud to yourself, and decide whether or not the messages you want to convey are being delivered in the best possible way.

5. Become familiar with people who have written about writing well. My choice for one of the best authors would be William Zinsser. His On Writing Well (Zinsser, 1980) is a classic, and I met him when he presented a paper at one of the first meetings of the International Academy of Nursing Editors.

6. Keep in mind that editors are your best friends. When your submitted article is returned with suggestions for revision, your attention to them is essential for improving your manuscript. The appropriate word is not criticism but critique.

7. If you are writing with a group, as in research, make a priori agreements regarding who does what. These should be written and signed by all authors. The group should also decide—and write down—the order of authors (first, second, third, and so on) for publication.


   An excellent plumber is infinitely more admirable than an incompetent philosopher. The society, which scorn of excellent plumbing, because plumbing is a humble activity, and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy, because it is an exalted activity, will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water. (p. 102)

SUMMARY

Should this editorial provide you with the needed push to move from reader to writer, I will be very pleased. Keep in touch and let us know how this new resolution is working for you.

Finally, even if I have not spoken with you directly at a convention, but you have the draft of an article about which you would like a courtesy review, send it to me, as a Word document, before the first of February. My e-mail is: smoyak@docs.rutgers.edu.

REFERENCES


Shirley A. Smoyak, RN, PhD, FAAN
Editor

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

DOI:10.3928/02793695-20111214-01