Sequel to On Writing Well Editorial

In June’s editorial, “On Writing Well: A Tribute to Two Mentors” (Smoyak, 2015), I paid tribute to two of my writing mentors, Hildegard E. Peplau and William Zinsser. Writing well was the topic of informal discussions as well as a presentation at the International Academy of Nursing Editors (INANE) conference held recently in Las Vegas, Nevada. Interestingly, the conversations seemed to center on the credentials, mostly academic, but some clinical, of the authors whose manuscripts are accepted for publication. The topic of how writing is a skill best learned, with a mentor to help, took a back seat to other issues such as whether to accept doctor of nursing practice (DNP) capstone projects. This editorial shares some of the dialogue at INANE and also presents suggestions for learning to write well.

DIALOGUE ON WRITING AT INANE

At almost every meeting of INANE, the topic of how to handle the various types of manuscripts submitted to journals is discussed. In 2014, in response to many editors sharing their exasperation and frustration over multiple queries from potential authors and poorly written student papers, Kennedy, Cowell, Newland, Owens, and Pierson (2015) drafted a survey. They presented the results from the 53 respondents at this year’s meeting. Almost all editors responded that they receive student papers; approximately one third said occasionally, one third responded often, and one third reported frequently. Whether these papers were from doctoral students in the PhD/doctor of education (EdD)/doctor of nursing science (DNS) category or DNP/doctor of nursing (ND) category did not vary greatly, totaling approximately 89% for occasionally, often, and frequently for the first group and approximately 85% for the second group. For master’s degree students, the results were different, with 40% reporting occasionally, 32% citing often, and 12% indicating frequently. For baccalaureate degree students, never accounted for 31% and rarely for 41%. Associate of science in nursing/associate degree students never submitted manuscripts (85.5%). Thus, the bulk of submissions are from doctoral students.

Data were presented about the most common problems encountered in these student papers; the eight types included: (a) poor quality of writing or language, (b) lack of detail or depth (i.e., superficial), (c) poor use of sources, (d) poor organization or missing transitions, (e) not adhering to format, (f) lack of evidence on expertise in the subject, (g) inappropriate topic, and (h) inaccurate or missing key content. Editors were divided regarding whether students should always identify themselves as such and whether they were complying with requirements for a course by submitting a manuscript for publication. There was agreement that faculty should take responsibility for helping students to learn to write, but there was little agreement on how this might be accomplished.

A set of responses to the survey was labeled faculty challenges. Issues named included faculty’s publishing record; their knowledge of publication processes and guidelines; their experience, skills, and competence in working with students; and their available time and effort to go beyond course content. Editors included comments about how annoying it was that faculty required students to do what they themselves had not done. Although not included in the survey, a substantial part of the discussion yielded a consensus that each school or college should have a process for teaching faculty and students to write for publication. There was also a voiced consensus that faculty should consider editors and the work involved in manuscript review when they make submission of papers a requirement for the entire class.

The audience was reminded that Nurse Author & Editor has included articles on students and faculty as partners, converting DNP projects to manuscripts, student/faculty authorship, and getting students to write (Hawkins, 2015; Johnston & Brassil, 2014).

HOW TO LEARN TO WRITE WELL

Key ideas and suggestions for learning to write well are presented.

Read the Editorial “On Writing Well” (Smoyak, 2015) Again

Both Zinsser and Peplau provided examples for how to learn to write well. Both read widely and made note of what they read for future reference for their own writing. Reading widely proceeds writing well. Of course, what is being read has to be noteworthy and important. Authors can be selected to serve as mentors. At Rutgers University, Gerald Grob (1991) is an author from whom I have learned how to always make transitions and keep a thread of an idea alive and well through many pages. Reading his work is a kind of mentorship. Grob is considered the master historian of mental illness institutions, agencies, policies, and patients in the United States and abroad.

Keeping a digital or old-fashioned paper folder with examples of good writing is an excellent process to make your own. Using a list of citations for
an article is an external way to judge an author. But a personal analysis or judgment is equally valuable. Does the article make sense? Is it useful for your clinical, academic, or research work?

Begin Small to Ensure Success

Letters to the editor are welcomed by nursing organizations for their journals and newsletters. Local newspapers would welcome a clinically informed letter, which congratulates or argues with an author. Start small; leave the Los Angeles Times or New York Times for later.

Some organizations also publish their minutes; offer to take them. If you are invited to present a poster or podium talk, turn this presentation into a report or short article, as much of the background work has already been done.

Think About What You Have to Say

There are avenues to present opinions, but you need to be clear about how that opinion was formed, how strongly you hold it, and who might agree or disagree. Reading journals and newsletters will provide ideas about opinions being published.

What’s happening in your clinical practice that should be shared with others? What’s new? Can any of your colleagues write with you? Nursing rounds might be one source of “what’s new.”

Collaboration appears more frequently as interdisciplinary methods are valued. Does your workplace have teams? How are they structured? How are new recruits to your organization oriented and mentored? Who decides what needs to be learned or understood?

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Literature Review and Analysis

Literature important to clinical practice includes print and digital formats. Does your unit or organization have a journal club? If not, why? Have you come upon relevant news that could provide good data for discussion? Do work policies allow such use of time? Does such time need to be carved out to improve practice?

Basic literature reviews are accepted by many journals. Again, read widely to discover where these are published.

Know Your Audience

Think of writing as talking with someone. Determine what he or she knows and doesn’t know so that your delivery is specific for him or her. Unfortunately, this important point is missed in many of the sources about writing.

SUMMARY

To write well one must begin by writing. It is a skill to be learned, akin to any sport or activity, not an internal endowment or something that happens unintentionally, hence the admonishment “practice makes perfect.” The need for students to write was a sub-theme of the INANE presentation by Kennedy et al. (2015). Carving out time to write should be a daily habit, as important and ingrained as brushing one’s teeth or walking the dog.

Making writing a habit should be an essential part of every nurse’s career.

REFERENCES


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