




# Do You Have the “Write” Stuff?

## Being a Nurse Journalist

by Lorraine Steefel

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a blue pen and writing on a yellow notepad. The person is wearing a ring on their finger. The background is blurred, showing a person with purple hair.

If you thrive on learning new concepts and information, and enjoy new experiences and writing them down, consider being a nurse journalist or writing for publication to boost your nursing career. Nurse journalists write magazine and journal articles, textbooks, novels, grant applications, and more. They write full-time, part-time, or freelance, for magazines, web sites, publishing houses, and medical or pharmaceutical companies. Being published gives us a platform to voice our opinions, gain visibility, and inspire readers to take action. Publishing lends credibility to the nursing work we do and allows us to share our expertise with colleagues. Also, it's exciting to write a feature and see your byline printed. Write for your school newspaper, *Imprint*, a newsletter, or your local newspaper. Write a letter to the editor of *Nursing Spectrum* or other nursing magazines. Read books, magazines, and web sites about writing and attend writing workshops to learn more.

For the past 15 years, I've scooped the five journalistic “W’s”: Who? What? Where? When? Why?, and developed them into features — first as a freelance writer for health and nursing-related magazines, books, and web sites. Since 2001, I have been a senior staff writer for *Nursing Spectrum*. My career satisfaction comes from networking with nurses in a variety of specialties, and

from the knowledge I gain investigating a broad scope of nursing topics that keeps me abreast in the field. You too can share the rewards of writing and publishing.

Though some nurses pursue undergraduate or graduate degrees in journalism or writing, journalism is a hands-on profession, and the best way to begin is to just start writing. Select a time each day to sit at the computer or put pen to paper. Keep a journal, and/or jot down article ideas. Don't worry about publishing anything yet, just get your ideas on paper. Try to write every day.

Once you are comfortable writing, start thinking about publishing. With your topic in mind, study publications for which you intend to write, so you are familiar with the reader and the magazine's style. If you want to write for nurse researchers, your tone will be formal and the language academic. If you want to write for the general nurse readership, use a conversational tone. Avoid nursing jargon, and define the few technical words you include. Choose an appropriate magazine and follow the writers' guidelines for publication available in the magazine, on the publication's web site, or by writing or calling the editor.

Send a "query" letter to ask if the editor is interested in publishing your



manuscript. The query letter includes a description of your topic and why it's important enough to be written about, how you propose to write about the topic, your qualifications for writing it, and your contact information. Find out the appropriate editor's name by contacting the magazine, checking its web site, or logging on to *ONLINE Nursing Editors* (see Resources).

### Steps to Publication

Once you have your general idea and know the magazine that targets the readers you want to reach, you're ready to follow six steps to publication:

#### 1 Select a Specific Topic and Angle

Many writers believe that first-time authors should write about what they know. Since you'll be spending a fair amount of time with the topic, write about an area familiar to you or that you'd enjoy researching. Choose a topic that's timely, relevant, and compelling, such as new trends in nursing, new procedures, or topics your colleagues should know about. If you want to write about a nonnursing topic, consider one of your hobbies as a great departure point. Do you enjoy cooking, jogging, or camping out? Creating crafts? There are specialty publications that just may be interested in your expertise.

With nursing topics, read and talk to others about your ideas. Research the topic using *CINAHL*, *Nursing-Spectrum*, and other reputable web sites that post other publications on your topic. Then narrow the topic down. Suppose you want to write about obesity. Choose a patient population and then narrow the focus. Rather than "Challenges of People Who are Obese," consider writing "Challenges Obese Teens Face at School," that targets a specific patient population.

#### 2 Choose a Style

What style will best get your point across in an interesting way? The narrative style tells a story, such as a patient's journey through illness. The "how to" style walks the reader through a process, i.e. how to insert a Foley catheter or how to excel at the NCLEX-RN® exam. The "Q & A" style is frequently used when you are interviewing someone and includes the question followed by the answer.

#### 3 Tell the Story

Organize your thoughts around a central point and the issues that relate to it. Start writing as if you were "talking on paper" and don't worry about grammar at this stage. Be creative and hold criticism for later. In a short piece, you have about 800 words (about 3 pages) to tell the readers what you want them to know.

Read what you've written. Do you have a strong lead, such as an interesting statistic or anecdote? After reading the first paragraph or two, does the reader want to continue reading? Have you made your points clearly and kept the story flowing logically? Is there one main thought to a paragraph? Do you answer all the questions you have asked?

At the end of the article, summarize the highlights. You can use a quote that highlights the key points, or pose a thought-provoking question. Put the article aside for a day or so. Reread what you've written with a critical eye and examine the content and organization. Look for grammar and spelling errors, and don't rely on your computer to catch errors! "Too" when you really meant "to" won't show up as an error on spellcheck. Keep sentences short (no more than

about 20 words). Reference facts, statistics, and someone else's work according to the magazine's writers' guidelines. Revise your manuscript. Remember, no one writes a masterpiece first time around.

## 4 Submit Your Manuscript

Print out a hard copy of your article and read it out loud. If you are pleased with it, then send it on its way. Submit to *one magazine* at a time. It is generally not advised to send simultaneous submissions. The writers' guidelines specify if you should send a hard copy, a computer disk, or both. Some magazines require electronic submission only.

You should get an acknowledgement

from the editor. If you don't hear anything in three months, contact the editor to check on the article's status.

If your article is rejected, do not take it personally. It may not be a good fit for the magazine or the topic might have been discussed in a recent issue or require revision. Don't give up! Rejection is a challenge to do better or to find another publication – or sometimes both. Think of the many rejections that JK Rowling received before *Harry Potter* was accepted. And it's said that Steven King hung a collection of early rejection letters on his bedroom wall.

Writing isn't easy even for experienced writers. It takes time and effort — but consider the rewards. Your words can reach thousands of readers. There's only one way to find out if you have the "write stuff"... start writing! ☺

## Online Resources for Researching Topics

### CINHAL

[www.cinhal.com/csources/csources.htm](http://www.cinhal.com/csources/csources.htm)

Use CINHAL database to review nursing and allied health literature at your school library.

### NURSING SPECTRUM

[www.nursingspectrum.com](http://www.nursingspectrum.com)

On Nursing Spectrum's web site you can search published articles.

[www.nurseauthor.com/ONE/naed.htm](http://www.nurseauthor.com/ONE/naed.htm)

lists 200 nursing journals and writers' guidelines.



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## Sample Query Letter

Date

Mr. John Smith  
Executive Vice President, Editorial  
*Read Magazine*  
1234 Longview Road  
Falls Church, MI 12345

Dear Mr. Smith:

I am interested in writing for *Read* magazine. The manuscript I propose would describe the new mentoring program in which senior nursing students mentor freshmen at Anytown College School of Nursing, Mentville, NY. Compared to previous years without the program, Anytown now enjoys a higher retention rate of freshman students. I see by reading *Read* magazine that you have a Student Corner column that highlights new student programs, and my proposed article would be a great fit.

As president of the student body, I helped get this program off the ground. I also can provide quotes from key resource people and some great online resources that few people are aware of. My contact information is enclosed. I look forward to hearing from you and discussing the article further.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Your Name  
Contact information