Writing for publication is a skill that can be learned, and benefits patients by spreading good practice. Joining a writing group can help nurses continue writing.

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**Innovation**

**Writing for publication**

**In this article...**

- How nurses can gain confidence to write
- Learning writing skills and finding time to write
- Setting goals and taking part in writing support groups

**5 key points**

1. Writing about nursing practice adds to the evidence base
2. Nurses may need support to help develop their writing
3. Writing for publication can be learned through taught workshops
4. Goal setting is an essential element of writing practice
5. Writing groups can provide ongoing support for all writers, whether they are new or established

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Writing for publication is essential for the dissemination of knowledge and practice, but many health practitioners are prevented from writing by a lack of confidence or knowledge of what the process involves, and insufficient time and space in which to write. This article discusses the importance of supporting nurses to write for publication and the approach used to do this in one mental health trust. Methods have included writing workshops, writing days and peer support groups where goal setting, planning and support have been key elements for those wanting to write.

Writing for publication is an essential method of sharing innovative ideas and best practice (Oermann and Hays, 2010). Although it is expected that those undertaking research will write up their findings and submit them for publication, there are also many elements of clinical practice that are worthy of dissemination. Often, however, the nurses delivering these aspects of care do not realise that they too should be writing for publication. Many have, in the course of their work, designed or implemented ideas for practice or undertaken innovations that benefit service users, staff and communities – or all of these. These are often not widely shared.

There is a substantial body of practice that is not being shared and is subsequently lost to the nursing evidence base, especially in the mental health setting. I work as a staff trainer in a mental health trust and hear regularly, both in training and in clinical supervision, about significant interventions, implementation of innovative service delivery and creative problem-solving by nursing colleagues. These practitioners believe they are merely doing what needs to be done, that others would do the same or that they are just doing their job. As Happell (2012) identifies:

“Many clinicians underestimate the relevance and importance of what they can contribute.”

Writing for publication can, therefore, allow nurses to share their excellent practice and ideas with others, to benefit those who use our services. Hoare (2008) says one of the reasons she writes is to “advocate for the poor, sick and vulnerable”. Advocating on behalf of others is an important element of the role of the nurse, and the use of writing as a method of advocacy should be more readily considered by practitioners.

The publication of their work can have a significant effect on nurses’ professional standing and their confidence. Holland and Watson (2012) identify that the personal and professional CVs of published authors are considerably strengthened by the fact that their work has been accepted for publication.

**Barriers to writing**

Time, or rather the lack of it, is one of the most frequently cited reasons for not writing (Holland and Watson, 2012) but successful and productive writers are often...
Developing writing within our trust

Within 2gether Foundation Trust a small number of staff have been successful in writing for publication and several are involved in editorial processes. There remains a large number of staff, however, who are undertaking significant practice and developments but not writing about it. What began as a one-off writing for publication workshop has developed into a peer network that supports nurses and others, either on a regular basis or for specific periods of time, while they work on a particular piece of writing. The support and encouragement of colleagues has been significant for those employed at the trust who want to write with a view to being published.

Writing for publication workshops

Writing for publication is a skill that can be learned (Rickard et al, 2009) and so, with this in mind, writing for publication workshops, which are open to all trust staff and service users, have been run since 2011. Those enrolled in the workshops are sent articles on writing and a planning sheet to help them identify topics and possible journals to submit to prior to the workshop.

The workshop aims to introduce some of the principles of writing for publication to:

► Give information about what is required;
► Develop participants’ confidence in their ability to write;
► Fuel an enthusiasm that will support the participants to carry on writing after the day.

Initially the workshop looks at the various publications to which work can be submitted. The requirements of professional journals are discussed, including the importance of identifying a suitable journal to which a finished article might be submitted (Box 1).

Workshop participants are then guided through the writing process, starting with producing a working title and writing an abstract. Although it is unusual to write the abstract first, doing so helps focus new writers and gives them the opportunity to produce something meaningful that can support them to continue with their article after the workshop.

A 10-minute free-writing exercise has been introduced in the later workshops, and in writing days, to increase participants’ confidence in their ability to write. The use of short free-writing exercises has produced some extraordinary work, much of it very moving.

The workshop then gives guidance about the process of writing and how to maintain skills by writing regularly, even if it is only for a short time each day. McGuinness (2008) identifies that just 20 minutes is sufficient to be productive. Most people can manage to find this amount of time to write something and so writing can start to feel achievable.

Proofreading and submission are covered and the trust’s librarian and communications team deliver short sessions on the day. The librarian gives information about undertaking literature searches and how the library can help with these. The trust communications team are able to give useful advice including use of the trust name in articles.

Participants are then given the afternoon to continue to write with structure and support. The day finishes with one person producing an action plan, which includes identifying who they might go to for support as it is recognised that mentoring from more experienced writers can be very helpful to those who are just starting out (Saver, 2006).

Writing support groups

Those who attended the first workshop were initially enthusiastic but found it difficult to maintain momentum. As a result, a writing for publication support group was set up, based on goal setting and mutual support.

Holland and Watson (2012) identify that writing groups are helpful in supporting individuals to focus on their writing. Rickard et al (2009) found that attending support groups after a writing course increased both the participants’ confidence and the number of their papers that were accepted for publication in peer-reviewed publications.

The support group began in 2012 and now meets on a monthly basis, although some members meet outside of the meetings. Colleagues who are writing academic assignments or dissertations are welcomed. Three other groups have since started in different localities to allow interested individuals to access a writing group that is geographically near to them. People usually attend one group but are welcome to go to any of the others that exist, should they wish.

The groups have found there is an optimum size of about four to five people at each meeting, but many more individuals are on the emailing list. A number of people attend regularly, some come when they can and others come for a period of time while they are working on a particular piece of writing. A few people start working on an idea but stop attending the group when personal and work circumstances change; they do, however, have the option of returning to the sessions when they are able. It is becoming apparent that flexibility – allowing people to drop in and out of the groups – is essential in helping them return to their writing without being bogged down by feelings of either guilt or failure.

Goal setting is an important part of the support group structure and participants are invited to feed back what they have achieved since the last meeting or their last attendance. Progress and each individual’s goals for the coming month are written down, then scanned and emailed to all those who attended by the group organiser.

Each group has an identified organiser who will:

► Make sure the notes are distributed swiftly following a meeting
► Invite all those on the mailing list to the next meeting;
► Send out reminders of when groups will be held.

BOX 1. SELECTING AN APPROPRIATE JOURNAL FOR PUBLICATION

Every individual practitioner who attends the writing for publication workshops is encouraged to:

► Select journals to which they could submit their work
► Identify what subject matter the journal will accept
► Read the author guidelines, paying particular attention to the required word lengths and formats for different types of writing
Writing days
Time is an often-cited reason for not writing (Holland and Watson, 2012), as is the lack of a suitable environment in which to write. Several writing days have therefore been organised, allowing interested staff a day to write and receive support from colleagues in small groups where writing is shared and discussed.

A whole day – starting at 8am and finishing in the late afternoon – is a long time and so the time is structured to support writing. Periods are set aside for:
  » Writing, interspersed with speed-writing exercises;
  » Group discussions;
  » Time for small groups to get together and share their work.

This last activity is used to promote the positive experience of being in a group where support, guidance and help can be given and received. We hope individuals will decide to set up their own monthly support groups.

Those involved in the writing sessions report that they are reading more widely and broadening their outlook. This is supported by Oermann and Hays’ (2010) view that the “literature review and the thinking that is done in developing the manuscript contribute to the knowledge base and the understanding of the author”.

Several of those attending the first writing day had previously had several articles published and were able to give advice and guidance about the writing and submission process. By the second writing day, others had submitted work and some articles and papers had been accepted for publication. This experience is similar to Oermann et al’s (2014) findings that the impact of writing retreats justified the time spent away from the participants’ usual work, as intensive and structured writing time resulted not only in work submitted for publication, but also in a long-term change in behaviour as individuals continued to write and submit further work for publication.

Overcoming barriers to writing
Goal setting, an important element of the writing days, the workshops and the groups, aims to support each individual to persevere with their writing. Commonly, those attending the writing workshops initially do not feel confident in their abilities. The writing days have included staff ranging from support workers to senior staff. It has been important to welcome everyone, no matter what they plan to write, and to ensure that a sense of safety is developed.

Participants can be helped to identify:
  » What has relevance for their area of practice and needs to be disseminated to others;
  » A subject that has a unique angle;
  » An area where there is a lack of information published already.

An unforeseen advantage of the eclectic writing support groups is the conversations between workers of all bands and disciplines that foster creativity and an unusual shared understanding. Ideas for co-writing articles are now starting to emerge from these discussions.

The role of educators
Educators and trainers employed in healthcare organisations have a role in supporting those with whom they work to begin or continue writing for publication as they are often in a unique position of working with most, if not all, of an organisation’s workforce. Their role is to encourage the development of individuals and the sharing of knowledge, and they may often hear of excellent practice that needs to be shared with others.

To develop the confidence to write requires a structured and safe environment and trainers are well placed to create this. They also have access to environments and facilities that can be used for training in writing or to provide a suitable space in which individuals and groups can write.

Persistence with writing requires motivation, and trainers could consider this to be part of how they can support the self-development of others. For educators to be able to provide such significant support and development, they need to consider writing themselves and, ideally, to have had some articles accepted for publication.

Outcomes for staff who are starting to write
A number of members of the writing groups and participants in the writing days have started to have their work accepted for publication by specialist practice newsletters, a variety of peer-reviewed professional journals and the trust’s weekly staff briefing. Others are in the process of submitting articles to journals. Individual are reporting that the experience is having a positive impact on their professional development. One who attended the very first workshop cited the experience as one of the supporting factors for starting work on a book on the lived experience of bipolar disorder; the book has since been published.

Conclusion
I hope that this article will inspire others to start their own groups or structured writing days. As Jackson et al (2012) said: “We owe it to ourselves, to those who will follow us, but most of all to the patients, clients, families and communities who depend upon us, to record our stories of practice.”

References

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