

Why more nurses should write for publication (but don't)

By Kathleen T. Heinrich, PhD, RN

NO MATTER WHERE nurses practice or how stressful their work lives are, many use words like “delighted” and “exhilarated” to describe how they feel when they write about their work. What’s more, by writing a single article, you can reach more people than you could over a lifetime of nursing practice.

So why don't more nurses write for publication? Here's a hint: It's not about needing more time. In this article, I explain why many nurses avoid going public with their stories, and offer four simple steps to publishing success. Keep a pen handy and you could have a writing project underway by the time you finish reading it.

Mixed messages and mistaken beliefs

People in other professions regard publishing articles as an act of professional generosity and a shared responsibility. But nurses who write often get mixed messages from other nurses. “Tell your stories, but don't stand out or call attention to yourself,” these messages seem to say. “Don't write too much about what you do, or you'll be seen as selfish in a caring profession.” With writing for publication eliciting more criticism than kudos from colleagues, no wonder so many nurses silence themselves.

At a time when experts say our profession's survival depends on sharing our stories, our silence is holding us back. As nurses, we have a choice—stay silent or dare to share.

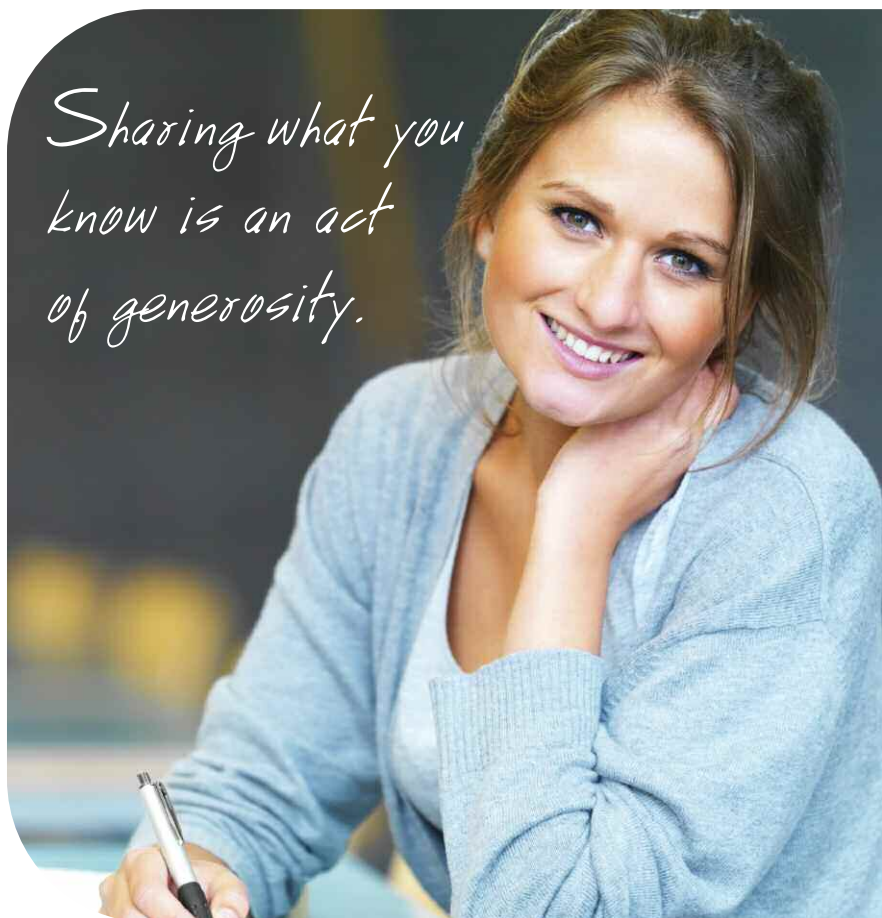
Make sharing safe

If you're willing to share, where and how should you begin? Over the last 15 years of helping nurses turn everyday experiences into articles, I've developed a sequence of four steps that translate to publishing success. I call them the four S's: Shift your perspective, Self-reflect, Specify essentials, and Seek support. To put them into action, grab a blank piece of paper and complete the exercise below.

Shift your perspective

Can you imagine a medical researcher keeping the

cure for the common cold to herself? Of course not. Once you see the generosity in sharing what you've learned, you'll stop viewing publishing as selfish.



Sharing what you know is an act of generosity.

To hold this thought, write the following sentence at the top of a blank piece of paper and fill in the blank as appropriate.

I owe it to my _____ (examples: patients, students, or colleagues) to write about what they've taught me.

Keep this paper where you can easily see it.

Self-reflect

Self-reflection involves thinking about your nursing ex-

periences as a writer would. The book *You'll Know You're A Writer When...* has the following example: "The doctor says you may have terminal cancer and you think, 'I can use this.'"

To use your experiences in your writing, you need to keep track of them. So get yourself a pocket-sized notebook and keep it handy. That way, when intriguing things happen, you'll be ready to record them.

Sharing what you do will renew your passion for nursing.

Once you begin to view your nursing practice through a writer's eyes, you'll see that each day brings new stories begging to be told. Think of what has happened in your life over the last few days, and write a few lines on your piece of paper about one of the situations or events that stands out.

Congratulations! You've just written your first notebook entry.

Specify essentials

Before you start writing, consider four essentials. The best articles focus on a single idea, address a particular group of people, appear in a publication that this group reads, and open with an irresistible slant. The equation below incorporates the four essentials and can help you turn your idea into a great article:

Idea + Readers + Vehicle + Slant = Great article

In the example below, I've filled in the four essentials using this article as an example.

My idea: How to help nurses turn their everyday practice into an article

My readers: Nurses across all specialty areas

My vehicle: *American Nurse Today*, "Career Sphere" section

My slant: Why more nurses should write for publication (but don't)

Now it's your turn. On your paper, write your own version of this equation. Remember—choose a *single* experience, event, or challenge (idea), which you may want to use as your first notebook entry. Then identify the audience you wish to address (readers). Next, select a specific publication that targets your readers (vehicle). Finally, find an angle so beguiling that it makes your article a *must* read (slant).

If you're not sure how to fill in the blanks for these items, you may want to reach out to others for help. Read on.

Seek support

When reading *Winnie the Pooh* not long ago, I noticed that every time Pooh gets into a tight spot, he asks him-

self which of his pals can help. Turning your ideas into articles is much easier when you imitate Pooh by creating a support circle. Such circles include professional colleagues eager to help you with your writing projects; they could become your biggest rooters. When you lose heart or your words stop flowing, they can remind you that you're the perfect person to write this article and can point out how much readers will benefit from reading it.

They can help you come up with a good idea, figure out a snappy slant, coauthor the manuscript (the term for an article before it's published), and peer-edit your drafts.

To figure out whether you need a rooter, a coauthor, a peer editor, or all three, fill in the information below.

What kind of help do you need to turn your idea into an article?

a. **Rooter:** Gives you unconditional support

b. **Coauthor:** Teams up with you to write the manuscript

c. **Peer editor:** Helps you refine the manuscript

Name names. Who do you know who could help?

a. **Rooter:** _____

b. **Coauthor:** _____

c. **Peer editor:** _____

If no one comes to mind right away, don't fret. Just asking yourself these questions may help you see a colleague-friend in a new light or recognize someone new as a potential helper.

Grab the gusto

Following the "four S's" can help you grab the gusto that writing articles can bring. What's more, when your colleagues see how much fun you're having as an author, they may decide to write articles themselves. Share these four steps with them, and you'll soon find yourself surrounded by a circle of nurses who see publishing as an act of generosity. Beyond helping others, sharing what you do will renew your passion for nursing, enhance your career, and draw others to a profession that's vibrantly alive with its own stories. ★

Selected references

Heinrich KT. *A Nurse's Guide to Presenting and Publishing: Dare to Share*. Sudbury, MA: Jones & Bartlett; 2008.

Lara A. *You'll Know You're A Writer When...* San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books; 2007.

Kathleen T. Heinrich is an educator turned consultant. In her book *A Nurse's Guide to Presenting and Publishing: Dare to Share*, she describes her four-step approach to help nurses turn their practice into presentations and publications.