

## CHAPTER 20

# Introduction to Scholarly Writing

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### Introduction

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Most scholarly writers enjoy writing: They find it exciting, even exhilarating—but they do not find it easy. People who are not accustomed to writing often expect it to be easy. They believe that writing a scholarly paper is a straightforward process in which the writer looks at the data, decides what it means, and then writes the paper from start to finish and sends the final product to a journal. Nothing could be further from reality. Writing is complex and difficult, and the only way to learn to do it well is to begin.

People who have had little experience in writing formal papers, however, often have no idea how to begin. This is a particular problem for those in scientific disciplines such as nursing. When they begin their undergraduate work, most students do not expect to become writers. They suffer through freshman English with the sense that writing is only for literary people and then take science courses requiring skills in memorization and an ability to handle multiple-choice examinations. Years later, when they are asked to write a paper, they feel lost, as if they suddenly had been told to make a speech in an unknown language. Yet, writing is a skill and a craft, and with practice, nearly everyone can learn to do it—and even come to like it.

Nurses have the first prerequisite for good writing—an endlessly fascinating subject: human beings. More than most other people, they see men, women, and children at their profoundest moments of fear, anger, and suffering; they watch over people; they help them to live and to die; they see everything that can go wrong; and they spend much of their working lives trying to prevent it from happening or, if that is not possible, to make it better or bearable. Nurses know the secrets of being ill, facing terrible choices, living with chronic illness, and looking at death. The problem is how to choose an approach that makes this world come alive for others.

No single correct way to write exists; however, a process is available that works for most people with some modifications, whether they are writing reviews of the literature, clinical articles, or research articles. This chapter describes that process, from the first idea for an article to the final draft.

## Keeping a Notebook

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No one becomes a writer without some tools for writing. The first, most basic tool is a notebook (or notebook file on the computer). The notebook allows the writer to capture ideas and insights that come up unexpectedly, as they likely are to do. These insights and ideas come clothed in words: They are concrete and precise. However, if not written down, the words soon disappear, leaving nothing but vague generalizations. The notebook provides a place to record the precise words that give an idea immediacy and vitality. In addition, the practice of writing things down sharpens the capacity to observe—when you write, you see more and learn to weed out the unimportant, leaving the essential core. That is because the very act of writing makes people more conscious of what they are doing and what matters.

Writing down reactions to what you have read, observations in the world of your work, and your thoughts and ideas about problems and solutions will soon lead to ideas for articles or even a research project. Not everything in the notebook will be usable, of course. Writers cull from their notebooks the best of what they have collected; they do not expect every thought to be important.

## Selecting a Topic

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The next step is selecting a subject for an article. The two cardinal rules for choosing a topic are to *write about something you care about* and *write about something you know*. An author's excitement about a topic enlivens the writing and keeps it from being tedious. Following these rules also makes the long process of perfecting an article for publication more bearable. The notebook will tell you what you find exciting—you will see it in the entries you have made. However, you also must know something about this topic, beyond empty generalizations and abstractions. Much of the work of writing comes before the actual construction of sentences and paragraphs; it involves digging for information in the literature, collecting physiologic or psychosocial data to evaluate a new intervention, or developing a survey instrument to find out what patients and their families think.

As you collect ideas and information, narrowing your topic to something manageable—and something that others have not written about extensively—is crucial. Often, the first thing that comes to mind is a topic so broad that it could not be covered in an article or even a book. The general subject of

oncology nursing, for example, could take up a hundred volumes; and a short paper on that topic is unlikely to provide anything new or useful, but a description of a particular problem that oncology nurses face or a solution to that problem may be both new and interesting. Checking the current journals before beginning an article is always helpful to ensure that the topic has not been published already. You may find articles on similar topics, but if your work has something new to contribute, that will not be a problem.

Next, you have to decide what kind of article you are going to write. If you have completed a project or a formal study, that decision will not be difficult—you will write a research or project report. In addition, you can write a review paper on the subject, based on your reading for the research or project, and often you can write a clinical article on some new problem you are dealing with in practice or a new technique or type of equipment you are using. If you look at current journals, you will see the variety of types of articles you can write.

## Making an Outline

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Once you have a topic and a tentative decision about the type of article you are going to write, outlining the article before beginning is useful. An outline helps to build the logic of the paper and helps the author to see the paper in an organized way. An outline also shows where the gaps in your logic are and what you need to think about further, and where information is missing and additional data are needed.

Outlining can be difficult if you try to write down every point you will make in the article because writers often do not know in advance exactly what an article will contain—they learn that in the process of writing. Indeed, much of writing is a process of discovery; it makes people's thoughts visible and enables them to develop their thoughts; one idea leads to another. An outline is most useful when you already have a reasonably clear idea of what you want to say—when you are reporting on a project or a study you have conducted, for example. In such cases, you have already done much of the thinking about the project. You know what you did and the outcome, and writing involves putting that information on paper in the right order and interpreting it for readers. An outline should be considered just a broad approximation of that order, not a complete description of the article to be written. It may even be little more than a set of notes and jottings, topics or points you want to be sure to include, and some indication of the order in which you might present them.

Sometimes people skip the outline. They find it easier to plunge into the first draft of the article, which often is the case when the writer is unsure about the direction the paper will take, for the act of writing will help to develop the idea better than struggling with an outline. To find the method that works best for you and for the types of articles you are writing, try different approaches. If the organization of an article comes easily to mind, outlining

will be useful in helping you to stay with that organization. If it does not, skip that step. Struggling to organize an outline when you do not know what you want to say is a waste of time.

## Writing the First Draft

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Writing is easier or more difficult depending on the conditions in which you write. The worst thing any author can do is procrastinate; avoiding a paper makes it far harder to write. Creating a writing schedule is very helpful. Set aside time for thinking, planning, and writing, and work at these routinely. Some people need a large block of time in which to write, and others work in short bursts. For those who need a long block of time, a half hour here and there is not enough to accomplish anything; a morning or afternoon or a whole day is necessary for progress because, in part, this kind of writer needs some warm-up time (otherwise known as *productive procrastination*)—time to sharpen pencils, to water the houseplants, to wash the car, or to do other mindless tasks that empty the mind of everything so that it is ready for the intense concentration required for writing. If you need that kind of preparation, allow time for it, but be sure to allocate enough time both to prepare and to write. Then, you will be able to work for hours. The other kind of writer generally needs no warm-up and can plunge straight into writing without any preparation; however, this kind of writer often can write for only 30 or 45 minutes before tiring. If you work best in short bursts, setting aside a long spell at the computer will be wasted. Instead, set aside a half hour a day and always use it for writing.

Observe yourself to see what works best for you, and then decide how to schedule your writing. Writing requires intense concentration; therefore, you want to do it when your mind is at its sharpest, and not when you are exhausted from a long day at work. Some people write best in the morning and others at night, although hardly anyone is at peak productivity between three and five in the afternoon.

Often, when people first sit down to write, nothing comes. Their thoughts vanish, and they stare at the blank sheet of paper or the blank computer screen in terror. That fear of the empty page is why people do not like beginning an article. However, if you already have some ideas written down in a notebook or you have an outline giving an approximate organization for the article, the project will not be so frightening, because you have a beginning. You can use the outline as topic sentences and then fill in the paragraphs that elaborate on those ideas. If you still have trouble finding the first words, writing down whatever comes into your mind often is helpful. Simply looking at the thoughts you have expressed will help you to focus them. Start with a thought or idea, write it down, and see where it leads. Perhaps the idea will be part of the beginning section of the article, or perhaps it will be the end, or it may fit somewhere in the middle. You may not know right away in which context it fits best, but you will discover that later.

## The Beginning

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If the thoughts that come to mind are not those that should begin the article, begin somewhere else. Inexperienced writers often think that writers must write from beginning to end. Few writers do. Writing is circular, serpentine, and exploratory; the process is not orderly. If you do begin at the beginning, and the opening seems awkward or unfocused, do not be dismayed. The first paragraph of an article is one of the two hardest paragraphs to write. The other is the closing paragraph. If you think about it, you will understand why: The opening paragraph invites the reader into the article and the closing paragraph sends the reader away with the message—the implications for practice. If readers do not like the beginning, they will stop reading; therefore, the opening paragraphs are crucial. They must interest readers, lead them into the article, and show them that it will be worth reading. Most writers have to struggle to make the opening accomplish all of that. Sometimes several revisions are required to perfect the opening, and often, it is the last paragraph to be completed. Some writers wait until the chapter or article is complete to draft the introduction and/or conclusion.

## The Middle

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Usually, starting in the middle is easier than starting at the beginning. The middle is easier to write because in most articles, it is the part that requires the least thinking. For example, if you are writing an article that reports research, the methods section is the easiest to begin because you have already done all the thinking there; the only tasks are deciding how much to say and how to organize it. Similarly, in a clinical article that describes an approach to caring for patients undergoing an experimental treatment for cancer, the introduction is much harder to write than the description of the care because you already know about caring for patients; you do it all the time.

## Involvement in Writing

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Once you have some paragraphs on paper, you can begin to see the structure they are creating, or you can fit them into the structure you have laid out in the outline. However, remembering that the outline may change as you write is important because writing is about discovery—often, people are not sure what they really want to say until they have put it on paper and can see it. Sometimes, after writing a few paragraphs, the author decides that this is not where the article should be going, and the original outline should be followed. Occasionally, however, the direction of the article will change so much that the original outline has to be abandoned. Eventually, the real subject of the article becomes clear. Writing becomes exciting when you suddenly realize what you have to say and how this insight can benefit readers.

Thinking and writing are tied together. When you write, you think more clearly, discover that you know things you were not aware you knew, have new ideas about a subject, and can put things together in new ways. That is why writing is exciting and also why it is difficult. The writing is not hard—the thinking is. When you write, you are not simply recording what you already know, you are discovering and creating, which is just as true of scholarly writing as it is of fiction and poetry.

Moreover, when you are deeply involved in writing something, your mind works on the subject around the clock, not only when you are sitting in front of the computer. Ideas for the article will come into your consciousness when you are doing other things or idly dreaming, driving home, or taking a shower. New points and examples to illustrate them seem to appear from nowhere because the unconscious is working for you. However, if you leave the article for too long and cease to think about it, you lose the advantages of that concentration; your mind works on something else and will bring up nothing for you. This is true of any project, not just writing. When you work on something steadily, it is exciting to take it up again each time you return to it because you have so many ideas about what to do or say. When you have been away from it for too long, you have to get beyond the blankness and reengage your mind with the subject before any ideas come.

For that reason, working on an article consistently is important—if not every day, at least every few days, until you have completed a draft. Schedule your writing time and go to the computer and wait for the words to come. One way to begin the flow of words each time you return to an article is to read over what you have written thus far, making changes or notes where you see problems. This bit of editing helps authors to ease into new material. However, if you use this method, you must quickly move to new material and not become obsessed with old problems. Finishing your draft, all of it, before you stop to seriously edit is important. If you worry constantly about particular words and sentences, you will never be able to see the general shape of the article or work on its coherence. So, keep your critical sense at bay, trust the process of composition, and write until you have a draft, no matter how rough. Experienced authors know that the first draft is merely the raw materials for an article, not the final product. Indeed, one of the obstacles to good writing is the notion that an article can be done well in one draft. An article almost never springs to life neatly organized and well written. Writers begin haltingly, and much of what they write at first goes into the wastebasket or is deleted. Few can write well in less than about three drafts, and many people will need more. The first draft simply provides something with which to work.

## Rewriting, Revising, and Editing

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The best way to become a good writer is to become a good editor. Happily, editing is a skill that you can learn, and doing it is the best way to learn it.

Another good way to learn to edit is to volunteer to be a reviewer for a journal, such as the *Oncology Nursing Forum*. Once you have a draft of an article, allow it to rest for a time. The act of writing is so intense that it produces a kind of euphoria, and when writers finish a draft, they experience a great feeling of satisfaction. Unfortunately, that good feeling gets in the way of their critical sense. When people finish something, they are certain that what is on the paper is exactly what they intended—and if they look at the article right away, they see only what they want to see. That is not the time to revise. A day or so away from the article will give you some perspective and will enable you to see what you actually wrote and recognize how far it is from what you had hoped to write. That is when revision begins.

Experienced writers often edit as they go, which becomes easier the more you get into the habit of editing your work. However, experienced writers also allow the first draft to rest a bit before beginning the serious work of revision. Editing requires some objectivity, and time away provides at least a modicum of that. Printing out the first draft also is important. The typed page is anonymous—my *y* looks just like your *y*, so nothing personal about the paper exists to attach it to the writer. Having the whole draft in front of you is essential when you begin editing so that you do not have to scroll back and forth to read it. The reason is this: When you read a draft, you may see something on page 10 that sounds suspiciously like the point you were making on page 2. The information may belong on page 2 or page 10 but is unlikely to belong in both places. If you have sheets of paper before you, you can look at pages 2 and 10 together and see where the point fits best, whereas if you have to scroll back and forth on the computer, you are less likely to fix this problem.

Your draft should be double spaced so that you have room to edit, write in new ideas, add information, and move paragraphs and sentences around in a way that you can follow. To edit well, you must be ruthless.

## Revision for Clarity and Coherence

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Every piece of scholarly writing is designed to inform, explain, and convince readers of the author's conclusions. Every article you write will use reasoning to convey more than facts alone. If authors were communicating only isolated facts, they simply could list them, but the relationships between facts, the synthesis they create, the writers' interpretation of those facts, and the conclusions they pinpoint make the argument in a paper. The aim of the first revision is to make this argument clear and coherent.

However, before you can make a coherent argument, you must be clear about your conclusions. Then, you can check the argument to see whether it is logical and makes a convincing case for readers. This requires close reading of your own article. The first step is to look at your conclusions: Where is the article going? Where are you trying to take readers? What do you want them to conclude? If you do not know where you are going, it is very hard to

take others with you. If you are clear about the destination, it is much easier to show others the way.

Most first drafts are incoherent at best because, in part, writing thoughts in a clear, logical line is difficult. The mind tends to work in bursts and circles rather than a straightforward progression. Furthermore, people change course frequently as they write and say things they did not expect to say and had not thought about before writing; thus, the draft grows organically and not always linearly.

As a consequence, the first draft often contains some ideas that go nowhere, false starts that were never completed. Some sentences are half thoughts that might be important to an article but would require much more elaboration. These should be removed, and perhaps saved for another article. The first draft also may contain a mass of vague generalities with the germ or an idea of an article buried among them. People often begin with a topic that is too big, and they may not discover which aspect of the topic really interests them until they have poured out the generalities that tend to occupy the surface of their mind. To move from the first draft, you need to sift through all the material to see which of it is solid and what you want to do with it. You will need to throw out all the meaningless generalizations and then work the germ into a new draft on your real subject. Discarding much of what you have written may be difficult. If it is, try saving the ideas in a notebook so that you can review them later for usable elements.

Sentences and paragraphs will be present that simply are variations on a theme—the same idea or information in slightly different words on page 2 and page 10. Often, when writers have a great idea in their mind, it somehow seems weaker when they see it in words on the page. They may struggle with it a bit, trying to bring the words closer to what they want to say, but after a time give up. Then they may try again a few pages later—hence the repetition of page 2 on page 10. Combining the two and making the point only once, as best you can, is important.

Another problem with first drafts is that they often contain information that readers do not need. Writers know everything about the project or clinical problem or method they are describing, and sometimes deciding what is relevant for others—or easily generalized—and what is simply a detail the author knows but no one else cares about is difficult. For example, an article describing the development of a research group on an oncology floor might contain the information that the group always met on Tuesdays. But, no one cares about that. What matters is that the group met during work hours and regularly; Tuesday is irrelevant.

Another type of incoherence in first drafts is an illogical ordering of ideas and information. Articles need to be built block by block or idea by idea. They are like houses: You cannot put on the roof until you have the rafters. Unfortunately, thinking and writing logically is difficult, so sometimes people put information in an article in the order in which it occurred to them rather than the order in which readers should see it. If, for example, you are report-

ing a study of the effects of an innovative approach in caring for patients with cancer near the end of life, you will need to first tell readers what that innovative approach amounted to, and then describe how you tested it. Thus, you first describe the intervention and then the instruments or measures you used to test it. If you reverse that order and describe the measures before the intervention, it will make no sense to readers. Similarly, if you are writing a paper about a new concept, the reader needs a definition of the term the first time it is mentioned, not five pages later.

Finally, a major problem with first drafts is that writers do not always make their logic clear. They make a series of points and then grow silent: They do not stop thinking, but their logic does not appear in their writing. The consequence is a *logical leap*, when a reader must infer what the writer means. But, it is only the unfortunate reader who is leaping; the writer knows exactly what the logic is but did not say it. To deal with this kind of problem, you need to read your first draft very carefully and ensure that you have articulated your reasoning.

One way to deal with the question of logic and direction is to outline the draft as if someone else had written it, and then compare that outline to the original outline. You can see where you went off the track, or where the article changed direction because you had new ideas about how to present the information or new ideas about what it meant. When you see the shifts, you can decide what to do with them.

Even if you did not start with an outline, outlining the first draft often is helpful. Looking at the bare bones of the organization as it is presented in an outline, you quickly can see where it is logical and illogical, and it is much easier to deal with problems.

## Organization

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Several types of sequence or organization are available for articles, depending on their purpose. When you describe something that happened or explain a process or development of a process or procedure, you probably will use chronologic order. If you are describing a piece of equipment, you may use spatial arrangement as the organizing principle or may organize the article based on the functions of the parts. If you are describing a solution to a problem, as project or research articles often do, you should first indicate the problem. Then, describe the solution and how you measured the outcomes, and, finally, give the evidence of its effectiveness.

The organization will be clearer if you consider the reader. When writers compose a first draft, they frequently struggle to find the words to clearly express themselves, and that struggle is so intense that they often give no thought to what the reader might need. When you begin revising the first draft, take the reader's perspective. The reader does not have the information you have about the topic; he or she must obtain that information from the words you

put on paper. If the information is not there, the reader cannot follow your argument. For example, if you are writing a review article, the reader must have some information about the studies being reviewed in order to understand your conclusions about the studies. If you are describing research that tested a new intervention, the reader must know how you measured outcomes in order to decide whether the intervention was useful.

As some writers revise their work, they find it helpful to think of a particular reader to whom they are trying to explain their main points. They think about what this reader will need in order to understand the information presented, and then they structure the paper accordingly. You might try imagining that you are explaining your article to a friend, or actually tell someone what you are writing. If the person cannot understand, ask what additional information you need to provide. Then, once you have made your argument clear, organize the paper as you organized your conversation, including all the information the reader needs and eliminating everything that was unnecessary.

## Ask for Help in Revising

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After you have done all the reorganizing that you think is needed and have reworked the paper to make it coherent and clear, asking a colleague to read your second draft is helpful. Ask the colleague to simply point out problems in the paper, and then you can correct them. The problems that slip by writers are not the problems that they know about but rather the problems that they do not see.

## Editing: The Fine Points of Writing

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The aim of good writing is to make understanding what you have to say as easy as possible for readers. To achieve that, every sentence must be clear, without ambiguity or confusion and without incomplete ideas or misplaced parts. Once you have a coherently organized draft, you need to go back through it to make sure that every sentence says exactly what you mean it to say.

Words have a life of their own and will do strange things to your thoughts if you are not careful with them. Indeed, when misused, they will make you appear foolish. Look at this sentence, for example: “The patient took some milk of amnesia before being admitted.” Or try this one: “I can’t hear you because of the noise of the celery I’m chewing in my ears.” You do not want your sentences to look like that.

To write well, use words precisely and put them together following the conventions of the language. Precise usage requires an understanding of the meanings of words. When you are unsure about a word, the dictionary will tell you how to spell it, how to use it correctly, when to use it, and when not to use it. This resource also will help you to avoid using the word if it is altogether

wrong—something the spell-checker cannot do. A dictionary thus will save you from countless misunderstandings. However, it will not always tell you about a word’s connotations, that is, the shades of meaning or associations derived from the context in which the word is used. You learn those by reading and examining the use of words by others. Because words that have similar denotations, or dictionary definitions, may have quite different connotations, you must be careful about using a thesaurus. A thesaurus lists alternatives to a particular word, but these are rarely strict synonyms, and they often have different connotations. For example, you might find the word *aggressive* listed as an alternative for *assertive*, but the meanings of these words differ sharply; they cannot be used interchangeably.

In addition to using words precisely, you must put them together in a way that will produce coherent sentences. Therefore, you must have a basic understanding of English grammar and constantly work to enlarge your understanding of the language and the way it functions. The easiest way to improve your sentences is to listen to them. Languages are spoken: The written language simply is a set of signs and symbols to represent what the writer would say if the readers were listeners instead. The rules of grammar and the principles of rhetoric are designed to make communication clear and effective, and many of them represent what people do unconsciously when they speak. Unfortunately, when people sit down to write, they often forget how they would speak, and they use words as if writing and speaking were totally unrelated.

## Read Aloud and Continue to Revise

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The best way to become a good writer is to hear what you have written by reading aloud to yourself. Therefore, once you have developed an article to the point where it is clear and coherent, try reading it aloud to yourself or to a friend. “Does it sound right?” is the key question to ask about each sentence. When something does not sound right, your understanding of grammar will enable you to figure out what is wrong and fix it. However, if you do not give yourself the opportunity to hear the problems, you will not be able to solve them.

When you have made all your sentences clear, you need to edit one more time to eliminate unnecessary words. The aim of intellectual prose is to enable the reader to understand what you have to say as quickly as possible. Therefore, you want to write clearly but also concisely, with no extra words, no unnecessary repetitions, and no needless overlaps and redundancies. Every time you read what you have written, look for sentences, phrases, and words to cut. Often, you will find a few more unnecessary words even after you have gone over the article several times. The more unnecessary words that are eliminated, the crisper and cleaner your prose will be. As you learn the habit of editing, you will discover that making sentences clearer often means making them shorter. Confused thinking and wordiness go hand in hand. The best scientific writing is clean, clear, direct, and concise.

## Conclusion

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The more you write and revise your work, the easier it will become to see problems and find solutions. If you consistently work on what you have written, reshaping sentences, striving for greater precision, and eliminating unnecessary words, you will find that you steadily will improve as an editor and writer. Do not expect it to happen overnight, however. Find another oncology nurse to be your mentor in writing and editing. The Oncology Nursing Society offers the *Clinical Journal of Oncology Nursing* Mentor/Fellow Writing Program, in which novice writers can receive help from experienced writers. Becoming a better writer is a lifelong occupation and a continuing source of delight.

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