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Tips for Professional Writing

Key Words: writing, publishing

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Abstract

Writing and psychotherapeutic interpretations each necessitate and enhance clarity of thought and understanding. Even though both processes require similar skills, writing often seems more formidable. This article presents some tips on ways to begin writing, choose a journal, format a manuscript, and save time and frustration. A summary of the writing process includes the following: plan, research facts, write, rewrite, and revise.



any of us struggle with writing. Yet, writing becomes an essential skill when we recognize that sometimes others know us only by what we write. Often our writing introduces us to clients, patients, or other professionals. Writing for publication seems more formidable and often so intimidating that we decide to leave writing to professional writers. Yet, it is gratifying to have an associate or friend tell us how much something we wrote meant to him or her. Even the grueling process of revising and rewriting fades into memory when the words we have deliberated on for so long appear in print.

Effective writing requires the same skills needed for making a psychothera-

peutic interpretation, requiring both clarity of thought and knowledge of the subject. Interestingly, the process of writing also enhances these same skills. For example, many of us recommend daily journal writing to increase self-understanding. Rewriting lecture notes offers another way to learn. Writing an outline provides structure and organization. Thus, we write for different reasons, using different methods and styles. The writing process usually helps clarify our thinking, and that alone provides incentive to write more.

Writing in a personal journal means putting thoughts on paper without paying attention to logic or detail. Scientific writing, on the other hand,

requires factual accuracy, attention to detail, and repeated editing. There is no one right way to write, and there is no one formula for writing. However, in professional writing some rules do apply most of the time.

We have learned about writing by receiving criticisms of our own writing and critiquing the writing of students and colleagues. Each time we send something for publication we learn more. Knowing how many editor's marks appear on our manuscripts, it seems intimidating to write about how to write. Yet, we have written and learned and want to pass on some ideas about professional writing.

1. Decide upon the purpose and audience of your writing before you begin. Clarify your thoughts by answering these questions:

- Who are my readers, and what do they want to know? If writing only for yourself, pick up the pen or turn on the computer and actually write thoughts at random without editing or rereading. When writing for professional purposes, write in the style and manner most common for your audience, whether they are psychotherapists, clergy, social workers, psychologists, counselors, physicians, or teachers.

- What do you really want to say?

Write down one to three main points.

- What has already been said on the topic? Do a literature search and initially limit your review to the last five years. Try these steps to increase efficiency: Download and read pertinent abstracts; get copies of the publications you may reference in your paper; highlight or underline applicable points to avoid having to reread the articles; scan each paper's references to find other appropriate articles.

- How do your findings

relate to what already is known? Focus on whether the information is "new, true, important, comprehensible/useful" (St. James, 1995).

2. Begin writing. Write a summary of your literature search findings for each of your main points. This may mean writing a paragraph or several pages for each point, depending on your proposed manuscript length.

3. Choose a journal. Choose a journal that matches your topic and purpose. Based on your literature search, select two to four journals that publish articles on topics similar to yours. Look through the journals to verify that your design, number of subjects, and proposed format will fit the journal. For example, if all the articles in a journal cite national studies with thousands of subjects and yours is based on data from 30 local participants (or vice versa), you need to consider another journal. If several journals look appropriate, choose the one you read or prefer.

4. Follow the instructions/information for authors provided by the journal. Carefully read the information/instructions for authors and follow the directions exactly, including the reference format. Remember, for example, to double-space the references if that is requested. If the journal does not give specific instructions on how to quote information from the web, consult these sites for more information:
<http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/online/citex.html>
<http://www.library.ualberta.ca/guides/citation/index.cfm>
<http://www.apastyle.org/elecgeneral.html>

5. Consider using End Notes, a bibliographic software program. If you write papers with 20 or more references, consider spending the time to learn End Notes or another similar computer program. End Notes enables you to download references from the Internet and then place them in an End Notes library. This eliminates having to type each ref-

erence individually. When you use a reference in the paper all you have to do is open the End Notes Library and click on the desired reference. The reference is then inserted into your paper. Finally, when you complete the paper, select the reference style you want and the program will format the references and place them in the proper order, either numerically or alphabetically. This is particularly valuable when you revise the manuscript. You can click the "unformat" button in the End Notes program to reinsert the references back into the text. After revising the manuscript you can click the "format" button to make the references appear in the chosen format and proper order. If you are not familiar with the program, try to enlist the help of someone who has used it. This will significantly reduce the time it will take for you to learn the program.

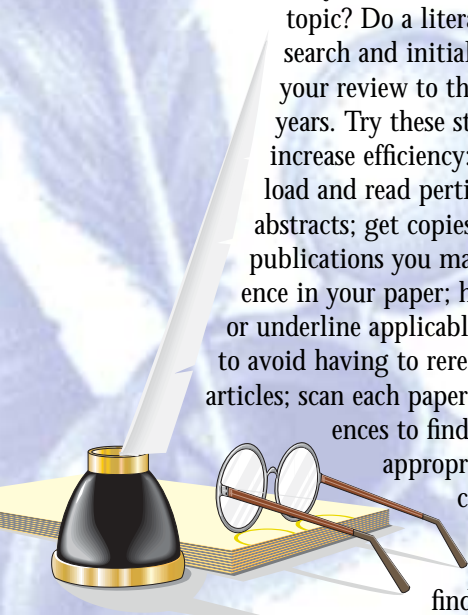
6. Pay attention to details. Spell check the paper, proofread it, and get *at least* one peer to read and offer suggestions before submitting it.

7. Consider putting laboratory data or pertinent points in a table, figure, or graph. A table may also serve as a handout or visual aid for oral presentations.

8. Minimize abbreviations. When using an abbreviation for the first time in a paper, spell out the word and follow it with the abbreviation. Example: white blood count (WBC). An exception to this rule applies to units that are abbreviated. Example: sodium 143 mEq/L.

9. Use a running header on each page to make the manuscript look professional. Check the number of characters/words that can be used in the header by consulting the journal's "information for authors." Example: the running head for this article is the full title: Tips for Professional Writing. We could shorten the heading to just "Writing Tips."

10. Use active voice to shorten and



clarify. Active voice: The student read the chapter. Passive voice: The chapter was read by the student. Minimize the use of "to be" verbs, including "is, are, was, were, been, and being."

11. Minimize prepositional phrases. Prepositions describe the relationship between words in a sentence. Examples of prepositions include: above, behind, near, in, off, under, outside, with, etc. Avoid using more than two (or at most three) prepositional phrases together.

12. For clarity use 3-6 short sentences for most paragraphs. Avoid one sentence paragraphs.

13. Be consistent with terms. Example: HbA1c, A1c, glycated hemoglobin, glycosylated hemoglobin (index for average blood glucose level) have similar meanings. Pick one of these and stick to the most accurate single designation throughout the manuscript.

14. Edit, revise, and rewrite. Writing well comes from practice: revise, revise, revise....

15. Avoid jargon, cliches, and slang. This includes medical, educational, or other types.

16. Use specifics rather than generalities. For example, replace "diabetes of long duration" with "diabetes mellitus diagnosed 29 years ago." Replace words like "very" with specifics. Example: replace "very tall" with "a height of six feet four inches." Avoid vague terms. Read the sections entitled "The Power of Detail" (page 43), "Be Specific" (page 70), and "Making Statements and Answering Questions" (page 85-86) in *Writing Down the Bones* by Natalie Goldberg. Be prepared to stay up late reading the whole book. Her encouragement almost compels one to write.

17. Reference all facts to add to credibility. See <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research> for more information.

18. Get help in writing sections about which you have little expertise.

For example, a statistician may need to write the statistical section. This increases the paper's credibility and spreads the credit.

19. Use short yet specific titles. These should usually be less than 10 words.

20. Print a copy of each revision and keep all copies until the final one is ready to mail. Particularly when writing a dissertation, keep a paper copy of all revisions.

21. Save your work to more than one location. Always back up your manuscript on a disk as well as saving it on your computer. To easily identify the latest copy, add the date to the manuscript title when you save.

22. Insert the path, file name, and date at the end of the manuscript. This helps you keep track of the last version and the computer location of your manuscript. Example: the computer path for this article is "C:\Manuscripts;" the file name is "revisontipsprofessionalwriting8-15-03."

23. Get a book about writing, particularly one about form. See the list at the end of this article for some suggestions.

24. Carefully consider all the recommendations of reviewers. Even when you disagree with reviewers, it usually proves less time-consuming to make suggested changes.

25. Use the appropriate reference guide as you write. The American Psychological Association (APA) recently released the 5th edition of its publication manual. A list of what's new in this manual can be found on-line at www.apastyle.org/whatsnew.html.

About the Authors

Kay McFarland, M.D., has been a member of The American Psychotherapy Association since 1998. Dr. McFarland, Distinguished Professor of Medicine (Emeritus) at the University of South Carolina School of Medicine, is a board certified internist, endocrinologist and geriatrician. Her research and professional publications deal primarily with the psychosocial aspects of chronic disease, diabetes management, and end of life care. She finds writing helps her organize what she teaches, understand herself better, and define topics about which she wants to know more. Her book, *Love Grows When Shared*, portrays her feelings and beliefs, which keep evolving as she continues to write stories, poems, and essays.

Donna Rhoades, PhD, has been a member of The American Psychotherapy Association since 1998. She is a private research and project consultant practicing in Columbia, S.C. Other occupations include developing touch screen data collection systems and selling used books over the Internet. Professional writing has been an integral part of her professional life as an educator and licensed professional counselor.

Suggested Reading

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