Writing for publication is difficult for many nurses. It’s not our primary job, in the first place. It’s something we either need to do for an academic job, or it’s something we want to do in addition to our clinical or administrative jobs. So many of us feel the pressure of time when we sit down to write. In addition, writing itself often brings a knot of pressures. What should we write about? How should the piece be organized? Is the grammar correct? Is the sentence structure the best it can be? What if we get it wrong? Perhaps it was those kinds of anxieties that prompted the dream that initiated this piece of writing for me.

“Dream Tips” for Writing

I heard about a woman who became very rich after she started dreaming about handbags. She translated her dream creations to real purses that sold very well, thank you very much. Instead of handbags, I dream about tips for the struggling academic writer. You might rightfully ask what my qualifications are to potentially advise you on such matters. I can offer three: I have struggled with academic writing, I have done freelance editing, and I have survived 30 plus years in academia. So here are my dream tips.

1. Always Be Working on a Manuscript

First, always be working on a manuscript, and keep a list of ideas for others. When you get a paper out for review, start on the next. I know people who have several (or more) going at one time, like my friend, Diane, the writing-machine. But I think it is more typical, and certainly easier, to do one at a time. If you can set aside some time each week to write it is helpful; some writing books suggest setting time aside each day to write. I do not know anyone, personally, in an academic position who writes daily. The important thing is to have a regular block of time set aside to write.

2. Put Your Ideas on Paper

Initially, concentrate on getting your ideas on paper. Edit later. Many writers spend the first part of a writing session editing what was written the day (or week) before. If writing does not come easily for you, consider finding a collaborator. Even if writing is not difficult for you, most manuscripts benefit from having more than one author. I was recently reminded of this. I gave a section of a paper I am writing to a collaborator for review. Her suggestions and revisions, though relatively minor, made the section clearer and added several important details. Paying someone to edit after you have a draft together is also an option. It is surprisingly easy to find an editor if you ask around, but it can be pricey. Editors get $40 an hour, or more, and a manuscript for a journal, needing moderate editing, will likely cost in the $200-$300 range.

3. Give in to Your “Quirks”

It is probably better to accept the fact that we all are quirky about what we require in order to write. I cannot write in a messy house. I prefer reading drafts printed on colored paper. Some people can only write in the middle of the night. Another, who shall remain nameless, needs a big supply of chocolate at her side. Most of us need a quiet place. Whatever. Just give yourself what you need and proceed. This does require that you think about what you need to write successfully.

4. Improve Your Skills by Reading

The best way to improve your writing skills is to read. By large, I do not think reading professional literature helps your writing. It adds to your knowledge base and may spark good ideas, but it rarely helps you become a better writer. To improve your writing, read good fiction writers. I will recommend a few who might be of particular interest to health professionals. Consider reading Elizabeth Berg (a nurse!). Two of her books, in particular, are beyond magnificent. Talk Before Sleep (1994) describes a woman’s experience of her friend’s breast cancer. Range of Motion (1995) is an amazing account of a wife’s attempts to cope with an accident that leaves her husband in a coma. Also, if you have not discovered Thomas Moran’s The World I Made for Her (1998), this is your lucky day. You will weep, I guarantee you that.

Jean-Dominique Bauby’s The Diving Bell and the Butterfly (1997) after a devastating stroke leaves him unable to speak or move, Bauby uses an alphabet board and dictates this delicate and sparse masterpiece, letter by letter, by blinking when an assistant speaks the desired letter.

The more you read, the more likely the cadence of good phrasing and sentence structure will become second-nature. If you are lucky, you will remember the joy of finding just the right word in a sentence, or just the right metaphor, and create that joy in your own writing. Should people complain about the time you spend reading, you can rightfully say you are furthering your career.
There are also a handful of excellent books about writing that offer useful suggestions. My personal favorites are *Bird by Bird* (1994) by Anne Lamott, *One Writer’s Beginnings* (1983) by Eudora Welty, and *On Writing* (2000) by Stephen King. Even if you didn’t find one good tip in these books (highly unlikely), the writing in each of them is a joy to read.

5. Take Advantage of Software Programs

No one today should be writing without *Endnote*, or an equivalent bibliographic software program. These programs take the pain out of referencing and make it easy to format papers in whatever style needed for a particular journal. This comes in handy and saves hours of work when your paper is rejected by one journal and you need to move on to the next.

6. Benefit From Rejection

Rejection is helpful. Not only does it have the capacity to teach you all sorts of interesting things about yourself, it gives you the chance to improve a manuscript. Many of the journals have terrific reviewers, and their suggestions, though prompting groans when you first open the envelope, can radically improve your manuscript. And this you get for free!

7. Overcome Your Fears!

The biggest block to successful writing and publishing may be fear. Fear that you are not up to the task. Fear that you will make a mistake. Fear that the manuscript won’t be good enough. Fear that you’ll be embarrassed by your efforts. I’ve been reading a wonderful book by Michael Carroll entitled, *Awake at Work: Facing the Challenges of Life on the Job* (2004). A Buddhist writer, he presents 35 principles to help us think about our work life differently. One of these is, “Step beyond the silence of fear.” Being fearless, he says, is to admit there are no guarantees. The manuscript might be rejected; it might get a “bad” review. Sometimes we are going to write something that sings like a bird and other times we are going to write something that stinks like a dead one. Being fearless, Carroll says, is to “trust ourselves to do our best. Rather than relating to work’s messiness and difficulties as a threat, we engage them from a basic stance of confidence: that being who we are where we are is powerful and sufficient” (p. 69).

I wish you good dreams and fearless writing!

References