

Writing for professional publication.

Part 5: Creating interest

John Fowler



Abstract

The first four parts of this series on writing for professional publication focused on the research and preparation required before beginning to write a potential article. In this fifth part of the series, John Fowler, an experienced nursing lecturer and author, explores the final step in preparation for writing: that of creating interest.

Keywords: Publication ■ Professional development ■ Career development

If you follow the guidance given in this series of articles on writing for professional publication—and, most importantly, this particular article—then you will almost certainly turn your ideas for a potential article into published work. Now that's got you reading, hasn't it? What's more, it's true.

Which articles have you looked at in this journal today, and which of those articles have you gone on to actually read? Your responses to these questions will differ to those of your colleagues, but underpinning all the responses will be, 'those that appear interesting to you'. Now consider, what drew you to look at certain articles? For me, it is some or all of the following:

- The title: is it intriguing? Is the topic one in which I am professionally or clinically interested? Is this a subject that is currently in the news? Does the title suggest that I will be able to understand the content of the full article? If not, I will probably ignore it
- The presentation: is the article one big block of writing, or is it broken up with headings, boxes, diagrams and possibly pictures? What

Dr John Fowler wrote his first article for publication as a staff nurse 30 years ago. Since then he has published over 50 articles in a variety of publications and edited seven nursing text books. He has supported over 40 nurses in writing for publication.

do the headings say? Do they provoke interest?

Whether you do this consciously or not, you will be making similar judgements about each of the articles you look at, and you will carry out that evaluation in approximately 10 seconds. If in this initial scan something rings positive, then you will stop scanning and pay more attention. You will begin to selectively read bits of the article. It is unlikely at this stage you will start at the first sentence and read every single sentence in order until you reach the end. For me it goes something like this:

- I'll start with the subtitle, the phrase that follows the main title and gives you a bit more information about the article
- Then I'll have a go at the abstract, the collection of sentences right at the beginning that is meant to sum up the article, usually in 250 words. But I even find myself skipping the abstract if the first sentence doesn't capture my attention
- At this stage I will look in more detail at the boxes and pictures and I'll scan the sections again to see whether there is a particular part of the article that appeals more to me than others. Personally, I always read those short patient case studies that are often in boxes
- If at this stage I am convinced that this article has something more for me then I will read the conclusion: I'll look at who has written it and make judgements as to what perspective they are coming from

- Finally, and to be honest, only rarely, will I return to the beginning and read the article through from beginning to end.

Now put yourself in the position of an author: the process is the same, but in reverse. Firstly, you want to capture the reader's attention; then you want them to start scanning the article; and finally you want to draw them into the main body of what you are saying. One way of doing this, once you have written your article, is to put it to one side for a few days and then look at it again, but this time from a reader's perspective. If it doesn't look interesting then refine it.

Now, very few nurses who want to have their work published are professional journalists, and refining an article to maximize its interest is a journalistic skill. Once accepted for publication, your article will be assigned to an editor or subeditor, who will be responsible for making sure that the general layout and presentation of your article conforms to the journal style. If the content of your writing lends itself to the inclusion of diagrams, pictures or charts, then make sure you include them so that the subeditor has some additional material to work with.

All of the articles that I have ever published have gone through about four or five draft stages. Initially I'm focusing on content and accuracy, then word count, and then finally continuity and creating interest. What you write and how you present it in your initial draft will need additional work if it is to appear in print. Your prime role as author is to make sure the content is accurate, up-to-date, and informative. Once you have produced your draft article to these standards then begin working on creating interest in the reader's mind.

In the next article, I will specifically examine writing the abstract, a particularly important part in gaining the reader's interest.

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