

Editorial

We have come a long way in nursing scholarship in the 10 years since the *Journal of Clinical Nursing* began, as illustrated by the volume of research and conceptual articles offered for publication in nursing journals, which are themselves still proliferating. However, we somehow do not seem to have advanced so far in the way we write, as the job of editing continually brings home to me.

Writing style has long interested me and I am still frequently surprised to see people referring to an article I had published in the *Journal of Advanced Nursing* on 'The use of the first person in academic writing...'. I suggested then that, in a young academic discipline trying to establish itself, many nurses seemed to believe that a so-called 'objective' style achieved by using the third person would give academic weight and rigour to their writing. The result was often 'excruciatingly tortuous sentences' explaining what 'the writer' or 'the author' thought (Webb, 1992 : 747). Over the years, with increasing use of qualitative research methods, use of the first person has become more widespread in nursing articles. In journals in other disciplines it is common to find the first person also used in reporting and discussing quantitative research. Examples of this would be 'We suggest that our findings demonstrate...' or 'We have consider that further research is needed to replicate our results'. We wish to encourage use of this direct form of expression in JAN.

However, this is not the only development in style of writing that would improve readability. When I first began submitting articles to nursing journals about 20 years ago I was frustrated and discouraged at my low acceptance rate. A friend who was a journalist on a daily newspaper took a look at some of my efforts and burst out laughing, saying that she could quite see why! She gave me some valuable lessons about user-friendly style and one of them was that, after writing an article, I should go through it and cross out every unnecessary use of the word 'the'. This one little tip can make a surprisingly big difference and it is one that I always use today – as those who have been on the receiving end of my editing will certainly know!

When editing articles about nursing care, for example, I often come across the phrases 'the nurse' and 'the patient' repeated – sometimes several times in the same sentence. An example of this would be 'It is important for the nurse to take into account the patient's individual needs and the nurse also should involve the patient's relatives in the decision making about his/her care'. Several things are going on here, apart from the laboured repetition which makes reading the sentence heavy going. This style harks back to the days of 'the hernia in bed 3', when care was highly routinized and every hernia patient, for example, was expected to progress equally and have the same needs on the first postoperative day, and the second, and so on. Today – apart from the fact that 'the hernia patient' would have had day surgery! – we aim for a much more individualized approach and do not expect 'the patient' always to behave in the same way. Both to reflect this and to make for a more interesting read, it seems preferable to use the plural and write about 'patients' and 'nurses'. Using the plural also neatly gets around the gender problem, allowing 'their' to be used in a grammatically correct way instead of writing his/her or using 'their' as if it were singular – the patient and their needs. Similarly, this form can be used to avoid frequently

repeating 'patient', 'nurse' or a person's name by substituting 'they' in some places.

A side-effect, perhaps, both of our greater concern with the psychosocial aspects of nursing and the current predominance of qualitative methods in nursing research is that writers often report their 'feelings' when they really mean their thoughts. When discussing choice of methods for a study, for example, one does not 'feel' that interviews are preferable to questionnaires. Rather, one considers the research question and makes an informed judgement about what is most appropriate. After generating the data, one concludes that certain interpretations are valid and that further research may be needed. These decisions are – or should be! – made on the basis of critical evaluation and this is a cognitive and not emotional judgement. This is another example of how writing style and choice of words are important when writing for a journal such as JAN.

In my 1992 article about use of the first person, I discussed the link between the language we use and our thinking. The fact that these are part and parcel of each other has been discussed in philosophy by Wittgenstein (1972), in psychology by Sapir and Whorf (Carroll, 1976), and in sociology by Spender (1980) who have all demonstrated that words are not 'mere words'. There is a connection between style and substance, and the words and language we use convey our ideas. Therefore it pays to give careful consideration to how we write because there is a connection between style and substance. Style communicates substance, or the information we are trying to get across. As Marshall McLuhan put it, the medium is the message. We will get our message across much more effectively to readers if we use an appropriate writing style, aiming for clarity of expression to enhance readability and persuade people not only to read our work but to enjoy doing so.

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References

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