

# Scholarly Writing and the DNP Student

**Koenig Alexis**

*Faculty of Graduate Nursing, Herzing University Online, USA*

## ABSTRACT

Advanced practice nurses (APN) are progressing to terminal degree status which complies with the IOM's Future of Nursing Report (2011) to increase doctorate-prepared nurses. The APN, a true lifelong learner, has the inherent responsibility to communicate findings that shape and inform practice. How the DNP APN communicates with healthcare professionals and disseminates new knowledge is the focus of this paper.

**Keywords:** APN, DNP, Terminal Degree, Scholarly Writing, Graduate Faculty, Dissemination

## The DNP: the Newest Terminal Degree

How can academia examine and improve scholarly writing as a competency? First, faculty in terminal programs such as the DNP should assess the student's writing abilities. Faculty should be prepared to deliver justification to students as to why this is an expected outcome for the DNP. Stressing the importance of scholarly writing at the beginning of the program is critical for students. Students need to understand how and why there is an emphasis on scholarly writing as a program outcome. Faculty should be prepared to provide students with the tools to be successful in the dissemination of clinical practice knowledge. Upon completion of their degree, the DNP graduate and clinician will be communicating new knowledge to other healthcare professionals as they guide and lead professional practice to improve patient outcomes.

The APN often shares new knowledge through submission to peer-reviewed journals or presentations at conferences. Acceptance of a submission to a journal requires the mastery of literary skillsets to be accepted as an author. Disseminating knowledge through journal submissions; therefore, requires instruction and preparation. It is unfair and remiss to assume that completion of a program satisfies the ability to write a scholarly manuscript. Additionally, successful scholarly presentations allow the presenter to effectively communicate and disseminate new knowledge to an audience. The goal for nurses in a DNP or other doctoral programs is to offer assurances to both students and regulatory bodies that instruction in communicating new knowledge and findings is a measurable program outcome. How this is achieved may vary from program to program.

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## \*Corresponding Author

**Koenig Alexis**

Faculty of Graduate Nursing, Herzing University Online, USA

**E-mail:** [alkoenig@herzing.edu](mailto:alkoenig@herzing.edu)

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As one competency in nursing, communication is foundational in successfully caring for patients. Melnyk, et al. (2014) [1] address the importance and need for APNs in speaking and writing skills to communicate how to improve patient outcomes. One AACN Essential speaks directly to this competency. In Domain four, the Scholarship for Nursing Practice descriptor states “The generation, synthesis, translation, application, and dissemination of nursing knowledge to improve health and transform health care” (AACN, 2021) [2]. As expressed earlier the goal of this article is to examine the literature that speaks to the importance of communication skills development and expertise for APNs’ effective professional practice.

### Preparation for Academic Rigor

Dr. Shirey (2013) [3] presented an article on a teaching and learning approach for students in the DNP program termed the SMART Approach. The SMART Approach’s elements are Strategies, Methods, and Assessment of Outcomes Related to Teaching/Learning. The six strategies of the SMART Approach consist of reiterating standards of professional excellence, building the discipline as a professional responsibility, dispelling fears about scholarly writing, empowering with knowledge and support, facilitating independence as writers, and celebrating scholarly writing excellence (Shirey, 2013) [3]. You can infer that these six strategies aim at building up the student’s capacity as a scholarly writer. The methods provided by Shirey (2013) [3] to achieve this goal are scholarly writing assessment, formalizing planning and structure, enhanced evaluation, and feedback, acknowledging the value of rewriting, mentoring for publication, and reiterating knowledge dissemination as a means of professional influence.

Dr. Shirey’s article is based on a faculty evaluation project that was evaluated on a group of 29 DNP students. Future research on the SMART Approach is necessary to accept it as a valid intervention for the development of scholarly writing for advanced degree programs.

Writing competency cannot be overstated, as the doctoral-prepared nurse will often lead quality improvement programs that require excellent spoken and written communication skills. To do this, scholarly activities must be generated early in academic programs to enable students to learn, practice, and refine these skills. There is no historical framework for the development of scholarly communication coursework

among doctoral programs for APN students. Other doctoral programs, for example, Ph.D. programs, do prepare graduates for continued scholarly research endeavors.

### Addressing the Needs of the APN/DNP

Shellenbarger, et al. (2015) [4] discuss the differences in the traditional end-of-program competencies that focus on the generation of new knowledge while “DNP graduates focus on integrating, translating, and applying evidence-based knowledge into practice, and leading practice change.” APNs’ leadership roles in nursing rely heavily on the critical nature of effective communication. The qualitative work by Shellenbarger, et al. (2015) [4] discussed the findings for the development of scholarly writing of DNP students. In this study, the authors sampled six first-semester doctoral students yielding three themes. One theme, learning throughout life, indicated that learning to write occurred while in primary and secondary schools, and continued through work and life experiences, as necessary. This is an interesting finding in that faculty in doctoral programs cannot assume there is a background in scholarly writing activities. The second theme noted by Shellenbarger, et al. (2015) [4] is the influence of emotions and attitudes towards writing. The researchers suggest that faculty must recognize that not all students come with the same attitudes towards writing, nor are they necessarily aware of what it means to be a scholarly writer. The authors state that the use of discussion boards, reflection activities, etc., along with the support of faculty to provide positive writing experiences can mitigate negative experiences while providing opportunities for writing improvement. The last theme, getting through the gate, acknowledges the roadblocks to writing. As you can see, faculty need to provide opportunities to develop scholarly writing activities that acknowledge feelings and perceptions towards writing in the academic setting while working to enhance student confidence and writing abilities.

Another quality improvement program, an intervention program to improve writing skills is noted in the Read Aloud program. Here, DNP students read papers aloud written by peers. The students using this intervention were able to assess readability, organization, and clarity (Rowan & Fullerton, 2020) [5]. The authors suggest that DNP programs should find ways to elevate scholarly writing. Here, advanced practice registered nurses (APRN) will have learned to successfully communicate care processes and evidence-

based practice interventions. This quality improvement program suggests that mentorship along with peer support improves writing competencies (Rohan & Fullerton, 2020) [5]. Faculty should be effective mentors in the writing process.

Another approach to meeting doctoral student needs was discussed by Hande, et al. (2017) [6]. The researchers identified the need to recognize student stressors. Determining a student's stressor is a competency that would allow faculty to implement strategies to support the DNP student. The stressors of a DNP student would begin with an assessment of the student's ability to complete a scholarly program. Issues such as work-life-school balance require faculty to acknowledge the stressors facing students. The faculty would then be able to help the student navigate through the program. The question becomes are program faculty equipped with the competency to address personal and program stressors? The AACN did develop a grid to highlight the differences in terminal degrees and provided faculty expectations; however, these expectations do not fill the competencies needed. They do begin to build a framework for program development.

## DISCUSSIONS

Discussions on the preparation and completion of DNP candidacy are ongoing. Volkert & Johnson (2018) [7] explored specific difficulties for DNP students related to personal support and program support. Individual strategies are unclear to students as are program requirements to be successful. University program requirements are not unified, and expectations vary from program to program. The authors surveyed doctoral students enrolled in Ph.D. and DNP programs. Of the 366 received responses surveyed on doctoral stressors, 135 responses were listed in the category of program stressors. Other categories like support and outside demands received sixty-six responses each. Health issues received forty-five responses followed by financial at 35 responses and time issues at 19 responses. To further explore the issue of program stressors, there were unique issues identified by the DNP students ranging from a lack of familiarity by program faculty regarding the capstone project to a lack of faculty committee members to support the student. Issues surrounding the funding of projects, clinical placement issues, and finding preceptors contributed to student stressors too. The discovery of these stressors needs

to be addressed by individual programs if programs plan to continue to provide qualified DNP graduates with the tools needed for professional success.

Hampton (2019) [8] also conducted another study to look at writing skill development. Faculty in this study described writing skill development to include: "...content, construction, format, and plagiarism or citation use (Hampton, 2019) [8]." Within each skill listed, strategies to meet the criteria were described. It is important to note that the study did discuss the use of strategies by faculty over time; however, there was no mention of the library being used as a specific strategy by doctoral students to assist in writing competency. Anecdotally, students defer to the internet for literature rather than use the library to search for peer-reviewed articles. Oftentimes students are unaware of how to use the filters and find the library as cumbersome and frustrating. Although Hampton discusses peer review as a strategy, the librarian can be a vital support system for the doctoral student's development of scholarly writing. As a foundational source, the university library is a positive strategy or tool to assist in supporting scholarly writing skills and scientific inquiry. It is a scholar's companion and can help immensely to improve the writing process.

Scholarly writing skills have been identified as a specific challenge for the DNP student. Prerequisites for program admission do not include fundamental writing skills and are not a requirement for most programs, thus there are inconsistencies on how to develop scholarly writing in programs. Hampton & Chafetz (2020) [9] point out, faculty are often without a consistent means to evaluate academic or scholarly writing. The authors studied the inconsistencies of how academic writing skills are evaluated, by including thirty random papers selected for rater training with the use of the City University of New York Assessment Test of Writing (CATW) and the Scientific Writing Assessment (SWA). The rubric, SWA, was identified as a reliable and valid tool to evaluate student assignments. The tool also helped identify areas of writing weakness. Areas identified as weak could then be addressed by both faculty and students. Moreover, faculty and students can become equally aware of scholarly writing strengths.

## Fulfilling the Scholarly Role to Advance Writing Skills

Continuing the recognition of the IOM's Future of Nursing Report in 2011 to push for doctoral-prepared nurses,

requires collaboration and planning to improve writing and communication skills. Johnson & Rulo (2018) [10] specifically discussed the need for a plan at the graduate level. These authors promoted a ten-point plan for nurses to improve the writing skills of students. This plan would certainly improve and assist students with scholarly writing in the post-baccalaureate programs (Johnson & Rulo, 2018) [10].

Other ways to meet the outcomes for successful completion of a DNP degree would be to have an expectation for the student to submit a manuscript for publication. Faculty could mentor students or even co-author with the student. Co-authoring would emphasize the expectation for scholarly writing for students and graduate faculty. Additionally, publication and/or presentation would reinforce the standard for APNs to disseminate new knowledge. Addressing these recommendations is an example of preparing students to meet the requirements in Domain Four, the Scholarship for Nursing Practice (AACN, 2021) [2].

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