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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Graduate Nursing Student Scholarly Writing: Improving Writing Proficiency

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#### ABSTRACT

Since 2011, enrollment in Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) and Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) graduate nursing programs increased by almost 300%, suggesting that nursing had entered its “golden age.” This steep-growth trajectory reflects the concomitant growth in the number of doctoral programs, today exceeding 435 for the combined DNP and Ph.D. degrees. Unfortunately, the recent progress in advancing nurses in academic programs is hampered by a weakness in a competency crucial for nurses to complete their rigorous academic programs and disseminate research findings or evidence-based practice project interventions: *academic writing proficiency*. Since nursing curricula at the undergraduate level place lesser emphasis on the humanities, nursing students lack training in the liberal arts compendium of logic, grammar, and rhetoric necessary for effective and articulate communication and dissemination of knowledge in the field of nursing. Data generated from a recent national survey offers new perspectives on the pervasive problem of poor scholarly writing evidenced by students in graduate nursing programs: 97% of graduate papers contain grammatical errors, and only 13% of students demonstrate higher-order skills. While 81% of graduate program faculty ranked their own writing ability as “exceptional” or “highly proficient,” graduate faculty noted that 97% of the time, student papers evidenced numerous grammatical errors, such as flawed sentence structure, run-on sentences, punctuation errors, and ambiguous word choice. These data suggest that graduate nursing programs must pursue avenues to address student writing shortfalls.

The authors opine that the absence of action suggests that graduate nursing programs may be in a dilemma that parallels the metaphor and urban legend of the boiled frog, wherein acceptance of an unacceptable change occurs gradually through minor, unimportant, and unnoticed increments. Aimed at addressing this dilemma, the authors discuss the potential value of offering a customized writing course to refresh and improve students’ basic writing mechanics. A sample curriculum focuses on critical thinking, clarity, and logical flow. Nursing academicians must acknowledge the drift to low writing performance in their students, advance proficiency in scholarly writing to the top of the graduate nursing education’s agenda, and prepare nurses to achieve in nursing’s “golden age.”

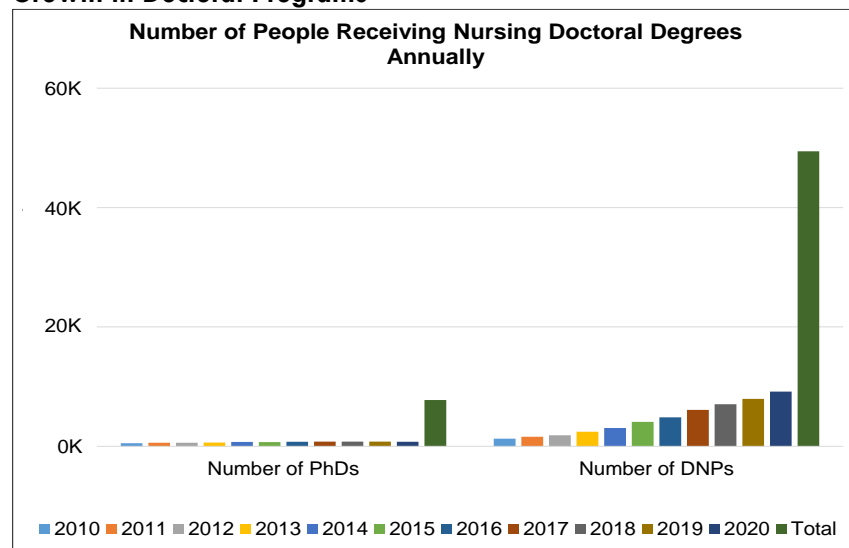
## Introduction

In 2011, the Institute of Medicine (IOM), followed by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN), called for more nurses with advanced clinical and academic preparation. Shortly after that, the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) degree emerged, and enrollments in doctoral programs in nursing increased dramatically. The AACN<sup>1</sup> has tracked the number of awarded doctoral degrees in nursing and reported a dramatic increase in the number of DNP and Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) nursing graduates from 2010 to 2016, revealing a 279% increase during that period alone. So significant was this growth that in 2018, the AACN boasted 300 DNP programs in the U.S., with almost 30,000 DNP students enrolled or graduated with earned doctoral degrees.<sup>1</sup> This

article discusses the challenges associated with the growing number of nursing graduate students with a specific focus on improving nursing graduate students' scholarly writing. Additionally, the authors offer perspectives from nursing faculty, advocate for the integration of writing courses into academic programs, and delineate envisioned content in a sample eight-week writing intensive specially designed for integration into existing courses or developed into a standalone required cognate. Finally, the authors underscore the reality of the current dilemma, characterizing graduate nursing student scholarly writing as a "drift to low performance."

In 2020 alone, over 9,100 nurses earned DNP degrees, and over 760 nurses earned Ph.D. degrees, as illustrated in Figure 1.

## Growth in Doctoral Programs



**Figure 1. American Association of Colleges of Nursing 2020 Factsheet**

<https://www.aacnnursing.org/News-Information/Fact-Sheets/DNP-Fact-Sheet>

This steep-growth trajectory was made possible by the attendant growth in the number of nursing doctoral programs, today exceeding 435 for both the DNP and Ph.D. degrees.<sup>2</sup> This remarkable upward trajectory in the number of nursing DNP and Ph.D. graduates brings with it the expectation that these graduates will generate research that advances the nursing profession and improves the health outcomes of patients. While the doctoral program enrollment bodes well for the profession and universities, it has stressed the country's nursing faculty charged with guiding significant numbers of graduate nursing students through advanced courses that eventually terminate in either the DNP or Ph.D. degree. This is because faculty are already teaching, guiding, and supporting graduate students in increasing numbers

through advanced graduate studies. These programs eventually culminate in graduate students developing one of the following scholarly papers: the master's capstone thesis, the DNP evidence-based practice (EBP) project scholarly paper, or the Ph.D. doctoral dissertation, all requiring highly-developed academic writing skills.

Unfortunately, the recent progress in advancing nurses in academic programs is hampered by a weakness in a competency crucial for graduate nurses to complete their rigorous academic programs and disseminate research findings or EBP project interventions: *academic writing proficiency*. Nurses completing these graduate-level programs are expected to disseminate knowledge through professional publications, poster presentations, business case

development, novel evidence-based project interventions, and developing policy.<sup>3</sup> Current weak writing skill sets make meeting those expectations very challenging, ultimately jeopardizing the dissemination of the knowledge so crucial to advancing the nursing profession and improving health outcomes. As Roush<sup>4</sup> suggested, these post-graduate students' contributions are substantial, significant, and distinctive because they amplify both clinical practice innovations and disseminate evidence.

### The Problem

Much of the problem with writing in the nursing profession relates to traditional undergraduate training for nurses, where the focus centers on technical proficiency in the basic sciences and knowledge transfer to clinical decision-making rather than on completing lengthy assignments that require academic writing.<sup>5</sup> Nursing faculty typically and appropriately focus their efforts on preparing undergraduate students to pass the Health Education Systems, Inc. (HESI) or the Assessment Technologies Institute (ATI) exams and the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) required to officially enter the nursing profession and practice as a registered nurse. Unfortunately, after a lengthy and expensive academic experience, students often do not graduate with even the most basic writing skills, such as a working ability to write in the active voice. Surprisingly, students often lack the ability to develop a paragraph that introduces and justifies a concise topic proposition. This suggests a weakness in critical thinking and logical narrative flow sufficient to justify any topic of interest.<sup>6</sup>

Research has shown that nursing curricula at the graduate level have not emphasized the humanities.<sup>5,7-8</sup> As a result, graduate nursing students lack training in the liberal arts compendium of logic, grammar, and rhetoric necessary for effective and articulate communication and dissemination of knowledge in the field of nursing. This lack of preparedness in an essential aspect of the humanities—written communication—resulting in graduate students likely struggling or failing to master writing skills critical to a successful dissertation, scholarly paper, or capstone thesis development. These writing deficiencies include an absence of clarity, poor organization, weak paragraph construction, syntax errors, spelling mistakes, and inadequate document construction.<sup>7</sup> As a result, many nursing graduate students leave their programs without graduating after investing time, hard work, and substantial expense in their advanced education.<sup>9</sup>

Graduate program faculty experiences with students' weak writing performance align with literature that highlights this general weakness in writing proficiency routinely experienced by nursing graduate students and demonstrated in the very labor-intensive process of countless reviews and revisions of draft academic documents.<sup>10-12</sup> Graduate program faculty throughout the country suggest that poor writing skills underpin student course failures, particularly in courses requiring substantial writing.<sup>5,13</sup> Adverse outcomes include diminished success in publishing research findings and EBP project intervention outcomes in professional journals. This culminates in escalating frustration for students and faculty alike,<sup>14</sup> prompting some nursing programs to include writing proficiency courses in graduate nursing programs.<sup>15</sup> Given the World Health Organization's (WHO)<sup>16</sup> recognition of communication as a critical nursing competence, other experts in the field, notably Oermann et al.<sup>17</sup> and McQuerry,<sup>18</sup> emphasized the need for writing proficiency to disseminate clinical practice innovation not only to the nursing profession but to other interested stakeholders as well.

Naber and Wyatt<sup>15</sup> suggested that student writing represented a key valued skill, and their research supported that reflective writing offered positive effects on the critical thinking competency of nursing students in BSN programs. Therefore, Naber and Wyatt<sup>15</sup> contended that reflective writing should be considered a critical component of all nursing programs. In 2016, the WHO<sup>16</sup> published its nurse educator competency model and recognized communication skills as a critical nursing competency. Like Oermann et al.,<sup>17</sup> the WHO amplified the need for nurses to disseminate best practices by publishing innovative clinical interventions to colleagues, students, and other healthcare professionals.

In 2017, McQuerrey suggested that good writing skills ranked as an essential attribute of the success of clinically-focused nurse practitioners. Noting that writing proficiency safeguarded care continuity, McQuerrey<sup>18</sup> argued its importance in effectively transferring information to others in the healthcare arena and further noted that clear, succinct writing is necessary for adequate documentation of patient histories, creating patient referrals, and forming healthcare policy.<sup>18</sup>

Not surprisingly, journal editors have also voiced frustration and exasperation when reviewing articles submitted by nurses to their journals. Albert<sup>19</sup> notes that journal editors accept only two percent of manuscripts following initial review reflecting Kennedy's<sup>20</sup> disappointment in

increasingly submitted unpublishable articles throughout the nursing publication business. These writing deficits reflect Lea and Street's<sup>7</sup> early research on graduate student writing, which identified troubling deficiencies including the lack of clarity and logical flow, faulty manuscript construction, errors in spelling, problematic word usage, and generally weak narrative construction. Today, these writing shortfalls continue with graduate school faculty generally failing to make meaningful progress in improving student writing performance.<sup>6,13</sup>

### Nursing Faculty Perspectives

In 2021, Johnson and Goodman developed a online survey to understand nursing masters' and doctoral nursing faculty perspectives on graduate student writing.<sup>13</sup> Twenty-six questions collected demographic data and faculty perceptions of student writing ability. Faculty demographic data included questions regarding years of experience in academia, faculty rank, program format (on-campus or online), and experience as a director, chair or reader for dissertations of EBP project papers. The remaining 18 questions centered on identifying faculty perceptions of student writing skills, faculty expectations of rigor, and ways to improve student writing skill sets.<sup>13</sup>

The survey focused on four operational aspects: *student technical writing ability* or proficiency in clearly conveying information, correct use of grammar, evidence of logical flow, and adherence to required format such as APA; *use of higher order thinking* as demonstrated by evidence of critical analysis, synthesis, and evaluation; *writing proficiency* as demonstrated by submitted assignments meeting course professor writing expectations; evidence of *faculty-developed curricula designed to improve student writing* including but not limited to lectures, writing exercises, writing assignments and the like.<sup>13</sup>

Survey distribution was completed using an email list of faculty from graduate nursing programs nationwide. Distribution to 2,234 graduate nursing faculty netted 173 respondents who offered disturbing ratings for various dimensions of graduate nursing student writing proficiency.<sup>13</sup> Approximately 70% of respondents held the rank of associate or full professor with an experience range of 3.5 to 44 years.<sup>13</sup> Sixty-eight percent taught in DNP programs, 37% taught in Ph.D. programs, and the remainder (63%) taught in masters programs.<sup>13</sup> Over 50% of the respondents taught online and in-classroom, followed by 37% who taught online courses. Publications by faculty

ranged from 18 to 100 and paralleled years of service.<sup>13</sup>

Faculty respondents ranked their writing proficiency as noteworthy with 81% ranking their ability as "exceptional" or "highly proficient."<sup>13</sup> In reviewing student writing proficiency, faculty noted that 97% of the time, student papers evidenced numerous grammatical errors, including sentence structure errors, run-on sentences, sentence fragments, errors in punctuation, and confusing word selection. Furthermore, only 13% of students demonstrated higher-order thinking skills, and only 20% of the students submitted assignments with any evidence of proofreading.<sup>13</sup>

Faculty respondents also noted that student written assignments demonstrated adherence to the required style guidelines only 50% of the time.<sup>13</sup> The faculty also expressed their opinions about requiring admitted students to complete a technical writing course before beginning their doctoral program. Almost 70% reported such a course would be helpful and successful completion should be required before commencing program courses.<sup>13</sup>

The information provided by this first-ever national survey offers new perspectives on the pervasive problem of poor scholarly writing evidenced by students in graduate nursing programs.<sup>13</sup> These data suggest that graduate nursing programs must pursue avenues to address student writing shortfalls. Oermann et al.<sup>17</sup> identified that university writing centers, including writing instructors, workshops, and boot camps, can create effective learning environments to equip students with the tools necessary to elevate writing skills. Efforts such as this are easily and unfortunately offset by the few students willing to invest the energy and time to acquire and repeatedly rehearse the untidy and demanding process of academic scholarly writing.<sup>5</sup> Other more novel and contemporary options include mandatory student use of online writing aids such as *Grammarly*, *White Smoke*, *Ginger*, or *ProWriting Aid*.<sup>21,22</sup> These products have features that assist writers in adhering to the basics of writing mechanics and may support adherence to selected formats such as American Psychological Association (APA), Vancouver style, and Modern Language Association (MLA).

### Writing Course Potential

In 2021, as a pilot initiative, Johnson embedded a writing improvement sequence in an entry-level first-semester doctoral nursing course. Sequence content was based on the textbook *Write! A Guide for Nursing Graduate Students and Professionals*.<sup>6</sup> The course professor required

students to review the content of one of the textbook's chapters each week and complete writing exercises at the end of each chapter. After the course, the professor asked students to reflect on the writing content and evaluate the worthiness of the experience and additional required coursework. Students consistently remarked that embedding writing exercises in each week of the course acted as a refresher and helped them acknowledge areas of writing weakness that required ongoing attention (Babb, 2022, personal communication, n.d.). Students also noted that by embedding a focus on writing proficiency in an entry-level course, the exercises reinforced not only the importance of enhancing academic writing proficiency but reminded students of the expectation to retain and further advance scholarly writing proficiency throughout their graduate school journey (Kanter, 2022, personal communication, n.d.). Informal comments such as these underscore the need to continue emphasizing the importance of scholarly writing in graduate nursing curricula and throughout the graduate program experience.

### Graduate-level Academic Writing Courses

In addition to embedding writing content and exercises in existing coursework, students may benefit significantly from completing a writing enhancement course specifically designed for graduate nursing students. Partnering with university writing centers or English departments may enable the development of courses that better support graduate nursing students from all backgrounds and offer students the guidance and support needed to address writing proficiency shortfalls.<sup>6</sup> Such programs can assist students from non-traditional backgrounds, such as international students and multilingual learners. Ultimately, writing courses can provide robust support for graduate nursing students seeking to gain proficiency in achieving rigorous academic writing expectations from pre-matriculation throughout the early stages of students' programs.<sup>5</sup>

Course content in such programs would likely enhance writing proficiencies in the fundamentals of academic scholarly writing, build on learning success as the course progresses, identify students who may need additional or more tailored forms of support, and prepare students for the rigors of graduate work. An envisioned program may include learning principles that may enrich student learning, such as a *micro-learning strategy* wherein instructional design divides the course into small, focused segments, such as the "rules and tools" of writing that link each segment to a specific learning outcome.<sup>6</sup> Another principle,

"*chunking*," gathers related topics with one key learning objective.<sup>6</sup> *Multiple instructional techniques* include video, checklists, job aids, expert guidance, and demonstrations designed to enhance proficiency in learning new techniques, as well as *spaced learning* which involves repetition and reinforcement of learning via recaps of learning and additional exercises.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, *feedback* resulting from interactive exercises can provide immediate, specific feedback on the learner's responses.<sup>6</sup> The final and perhaps most important principle, *customization*, enables faculty to meet the needs of graduate nursing students in developing the dissertation or the evidence-based practice (EBP) scholarly paper.<sup>6</sup>

In an envisioned course of this type, faculty would likely emphasize student learning through practicing effective writing techniques and, focusing on good habits, strong fundamentals, and developing an appreciation of the disciplinary and genre demands of graduate-level writing. The curriculum would likely provide modules and writing exercises that require the application of course content and mastery of principles and theories. Course content might teach students about the art of persuasion and its use in various simulated communicative situations comparable to those in clinical practice. As a result, students could develop and foster a healthy writing process that includes sound research habits, organizing, drafting, scrubbing, and multiple revision.

Exercises and opportunities for practical application embedded in weekly assignments throughout the course would effectively engage students and familiarize them with the rigors of scholarly writing at the graduate level. The course content would also orient students to the main genres of graduate student writing, such as the capstone paper, the EBP scholarly paper, and the dissertation. Importantly, students would be better able to disseminate research and innovations if introduced to manuscript formatting, authorship, and writing about scientific and healthcare information for lay readers.

### Far-Reaching Impact

However, the impact of developing a writing course extends far beyond the student's academic arena. The American Association of Colleges in Nursing (AACN) addressed dissemination as a professional responsibility in their 2018 position statement, which defined the inclusivity of scholarship, underscored the scholarship of scientific inquiry and discovery, and described the promotion of scholarship.<sup>23</sup> With colleges and universities throughout the country



producing many advanced-degree-prepared nurses today, the healthcare industry's contemporary issues are best addressed by those assumed to comprise the most trusted profession—nurses.<sup>24</sup> Knowledge dissemination at the highest level of scholarship—the nurse prepared with an advanced degree—is a professional privilege and a major professional responsibility that all master's and doctoral-prepared nurses must embrace as they progress in their respective professional journeys.<sup>13</sup> Focusing on improving graduate nursing student writing skills in academic programs can lay the foundation for future knowledge dissemination by equipping graduate students with enhanced writing proficiency and enabling them to practice those enhanced skills in a protected academic environment.

*Sustaining* improved student writing skills, evidenced in an initial writing course, must be a priority for all graduate nursing faculty.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, writing rigor requirements must be embedded throughout the student's academic program. While this can occur through embedding writing proficiency evaluations in all graduate-level assignment rubrics and courses, curriculum committees can develop a standard writing rubric that defines graduate-level writing proficiency. Faculty could then embed a rubric of this type in all graduate-level courses, thereby providing continual guidance to students and faculty regarding graduate-level writing standards. Curriculum committees can invite faculty perspectives on student academic writing improvement and identify areas requiring attention in supporting student writing proficiency. What might an academic graduate-level writing course include? What course components would best assist nursing graduate students in improving writing proficiency?

### Writing Course Format

One effective course format may be found in a traditional online 8-week writing course designed to refresh student knowledge of effective writing techniques by focusing on crucial writing

strategies proven effective by several experts.<sup>23,25-26</sup> Effective writing principles may include constructing solid complex sentences, using the active voice rather than the passive voice, selecting strong verbs, and crafting effective, logically flowing paragraphs. “Scrubbing” exercises (consistent, periodic review and revision) embedded throughout the course and in each week's assignments engage students and familiarize them with the rigors of scholarly writing at the graduate level.<sup>23</sup> Scrubbing exercises orient students to the importance of repeated review and revision in constructing solid narratives and preparing them to meet rigorous course expectations. In addition, throughout a writing course, students can refresh their proficiency with technical writing mechanics such as manuscript formatting, authorship, and relating scientific and healthcare information for non-nursing readers.<sup>23</sup> Course methods likely would include video lectures, quizzes, and editing exercises, including the opportunity to edit another student's work.

Content for a writing course should amplify and operationalize course outcomes that can easily translate to the scholarly writing expected in graduate-level nursing programs. These outcomes include but are not limited to articulating core writing concepts and appreciating why good writing matters in nursing today; synthesizing course expectations with doctoral-level performance requirements; articulating personal writing proficiency expectations and initiating the process of writing mastery at the doctoral and post-graduate levels; defining “good writing” in academic graduate programs; appreciating the importance of the reader or audience; and, recognizing the benefits of “scrubbing” draft documents until the narrative emits logical flow clarity and adheres to doctoral-level writing mechanics and defined formats such as APA and MLA. Based on Johnson and Rulo's textbook, *Write!* (2020),<sup>6</sup> Table 1 offers a sample of selected course content suitable for an eight-week intensive writing course.

**Table 1: Suggested Course Content**

<b>Class 1 – Introduction and Baseline Writing Proficiency Testing</b>	
<b>Class 2 – What is Good Graduate-level Writing?</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Rhetorical Triangle</li> <li>• The Audience, Purpose, Subject</li> <li>• The Writer and the Dynamics of Ethos</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is Scrubbing? Why Is It So Important?</li> <li>• Practice Exercises</li> </ul>
<b>Class 3 – The Tools and Rules of Writing</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active vs. Passive Voice</li> <li>• Parallel Construction</li> <li>• Restrictive vs. Non-Restrictive Clauses</li> <li>• Subject-Verb Agreement</li> <li>• Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement</li> <li>• Who vs. Whom</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Modifiers</li> <li>• Punctuation</li> <li>• Transitions</li> <li>• Scrubbing Revisited</li> <li>• Practice Exercises</li> </ul>
<b>Class 4 – The Messy Writing Process</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stages of Writing</li> <li>• Creating an Outline</li> <li>• Developing the Narrative</li> <li>• Writing the Introduction</li> <li>• Using Source for Evidence</li> <li>• Logical Flow</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing the Conclusion</li> <li>• Scrubbing: Revise, Revise, Revise</li> <li>• Writing to “Impress” vs. “Express”</li> <li>• Editing: The 4th Stage of the Writing Process</li> <li>• Practice Exercises</li> </ul>
<b>Class 5 – Word Choice and Techniques to Immediately Improve Writing Rigor</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accurate Word Selection</li> <li>• Learning New Words</li> <li>• Diction and Syntax</li> <li>• Using Too Many Words When Few Will Do</li> <li>• Avoiding Cliches</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overuse of “Big” Words</li> <li>• Passive vs. Active Voice Use</li> <li>• Eliminate the Use of “Be” Verbs</li> <li>• Importance of Scrubbing</li> <li>• Practice Exercises</li> </ul>
<b>Class 6 – Organizing and Developing the Manuscript</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spinning or Finding the Angle for the “Story”</li> <li>• Audience Analysis</li> <li>• Framing</li> <li>• Voice and Tone</li> <li>• Developing the Manuscript</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beginnings and Endings</li> <li>• Transitions</li> <li>• Scrubbing and Revising; Again!</li> <li>• Practice Exercises</li> </ul>
<b>Class 7 – Academic Writing at the Apex: Capstone Projects, EBP Projects, Dissertations</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commonalities &amp; Differences</li> <li>• APA Format</li> <li>• Responsible Scrubbing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Common Errors Made by Graduate Students</li> <li>• Practice Exercises</li> </ul>
<b>Class 8 – Translating Academic Papers into Publication-ready Manuscripts</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Final Writing Proficiency Testing</li> <li>• Successful Writing Interventions</li> <li>• Writing for Publication</li> <li>• Publication-Ready Manuscripts</li> <li>• Collaborative Writing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working with Professional Editors, Librarians, and Journal Editors – Scrubbing, Editing &amp; Revising!</li> <li>• Practice Exercises</li> </ul>

### The Boiled Frog

*Creeping normality or gradualism* suggests a scenario wherein acceptance of an unacceptable change occurs gradually through little unnoticed increments.<sup>27</sup> Should the exact change occur in a single step or a short period, it would likely be considered significant and offensive. The gradual adjustment to the change without realization may create opportunity or danger. The boiled frog

metaphor brings a similar and exciting aspect of what scientists refer to as “normalization.” Dockrill’s assessment of Moore et al.’s 2019 climate change research revealed that although scientists have discredited the poor boiled frog, the metaphor works today:

As a metaphor for how humans are sailing unfazed into a dire-looking future of irreversible climate

change, it is perfectly apt. In the face of unprecedented climate change, we are normalizing the weather temperatures and not realizing how bad things have become. (p. 2).<sup>28</sup>

Moore and colleagues determined that the gradual normalization of deteriorating weather conditions reflected similar other reports of deteriorating biodiversity and ecosystem health: "The process of normalization can be very subtle, and may mask the severity of the change and weaken both the public's concern and any public policy efforts designed to combat the change." (p. 4909).<sup>27</sup>

Unfortunately, limited academic enthusiasm in graduate nursing programs has generated minimal interest in developing writing courses. Perhaps graduate nursing education has entered a quandary that resembles the well-known metaphor and urban legend of the boiled frog. It is a simple story with a tragic ending—an innocent frog sits in a pot of water where the water temperature gradually increases. The changes are so slight that the poor frog does not try to jump out and hardly notices them until it is too late. If a frog would really stay in a warming pot is debatable, although the metaphor has found wide use in a variety of contexts as a synonym for *gradualism*, the process in which imperceptible changes in a system gradually build up to a significant and potentially disastrous impact at a later point in time. Jaju,<sup>29</sup> for example, cited recent instances of boiled frogs in business: individuals who experienced the stock market crash of 2007–2009 and lost millions because they missed the early warning signs; numerous businesses that ignored evidence that competitors were developing successful alternative products, which eventually led to the closure of businesses that failed to stay abreast of the competitors, such as the use of business cards vs. LinkedIn.

Rivera<sup>30</sup> focused on the boiled frog metaphor and slow response in the face of potential disaster, concluding that leaders reported on leaders who resembled boiled frogs in their slow response to disasters. Rivera<sup>30</sup> concluded that the leaders may have ignored or disregarded signals of upcoming threats, failed to identify their origins, or simply could not overcome the urge to maintain familiar processes and products. In addition, Rivera suggested that leaders may evidence "both a bias toward short-term solutions and an 'illusion of control'" (p. 1).<sup>30</sup> Regardless of the reasons, clearly, leaders were slow to respond to impending disaster. Kak<sup>31</sup> noted that traditional universities have likely become vulnerable to the boiled frog metaphor by failing to notice the decades-long,

gradual success of online universities that offer competitive alternative undergraduate and graduate degrees. These nontraditional programs have quietly drawn students away from conventional campuses, eventually contributing to declining enrollments and weakening the financial health of many well-respected universities.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps "creeping normality" best accounts for writing proficiency shortfalls in graduate nursing programs as it has its roots in decade-old changes in secondary education.<sup>32</sup> High school students today rarely write any narrative of significant length,<sup>33</sup> and the traditional focus on basic grammar, sentence structure, word choice, and usage has shifted to creative writing; less emphasis is placed on basic writing mechanics.<sup>32-33</sup> Today, students who apply to college rarely submit a narrative that discusses a topic, justifies an argument, or offers differing viewpoints on a challenging subject, eventually arriving at a reasonable conclusion.<sup>23</sup> Regrettably, this is precisely what college faculty expect them to do and do it well.<sup>32</sup> The problem is even more complex for nurses because undergraduate nursing programs focus more on basic science technical proficiency and learned knowledge transfer to clinical decision-making, negating the need for lengthy narrative construction.<sup>23</sup> Once they become a graduate student, writing expectations change dramatically, and poorly written assignment scores generate revision after revision. Then, reality shock sets in.

### Implications for Nursing

At this juncture, has nursing academia failed to address poor graduate nursing student writing skills and instead accepted inadequate writing proficiency at the graduate level as the new normal? Have academicians not noticed a "creeping normality" of poor writing proficiency and its potential impact on the nursing profession? Is there no sense of urgency in academia to address this serious issue now embedded in graduate nursing students and post-graduate nurses prepared with master's, DNP, and Ph.D. degrees?

First, it is extremely difficult to tell when slow, gradual changes become significant and generate a substantial effect, just like the slow, gradual change in temperature failed to become evident to the frog until it became too late. Likewise, the significant and rapid growth in nursing doctoral programs brings with it the potential to diminish program success and preclude the nursing's profession ability to meet its long-term obligation to advance the profession through knowledge dissemination. Second, academic faculty in nursing now has its own struggle with a mounting faculty



vacancy rate that has continued to increase from 6.5% in 2020 to 8% in 2021 and 8.8% in 2022.<sup>34</sup> Third, newer faculty join the cohort, themselves likely lacking proficiency in writing or have relegated student writing proficiency to a lower level due to the overwhelming workload of students and courses.<sup>32-33</sup> As a result, faculty may lack the writing proficiency necessary to effectively guide graduate nursing students as they develop their terminal scholarly papers and dissertations.

Regardless of the challenges and root causes, the reality is that poor writing skills in the nursing profession jeopardize the future advancement of the nursing profession.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, graduate nursing programs shoulder the burden of addressing the persistent dilemma of admitting students into graduate programs and teaching them basic writing mechanics to advance them in academic programs. Identifying effective strategies to improve student writing proficiency may work well in one course, but as a strategy, it fails to address the systemic issue. Therefore, a systematic plan supported by the university is needed for graduate nursing programs to avoid what may be considered a “drift to low performance”.<sup>17,35</sup> In Meadows’s 2008 bestseller, *Thinking in Systems*, Meadows focused on living sustainably on Earth and shaping our understanding of socio-ecological systems to navigate environmental change successfully. Importantly, Meadows<sup>36</sup> focused on performance erosion that results from setting relative goals that one fails to achieve for good or bad reasons and drifts back to the starting point. This, Crittenden<sup>35</sup> suggests, is the drift to low performance because when we set goals, we unwittingly base them on the worst performance we know rather than the best performance we envision. Applied to the writing proficiency dilemma in nursing graduate programs, perhaps faculty improvement goals reflect poor student writing performance rather than the writing expertise faculty expect students to demonstrate. As a result, students continue to perform as predicted and evidence poor writing performance inadvertently in all courses throughout their graduate program journey. Each time faculty attempts to reset expectations, students begin at the original point from which they started to improve writing proficiency, ultimately drifting to low writing performance.

How does nursing academia address this dilemma? First, Meadows<sup>36</sup> suggests the setting of “absolute” goals rather than “relative” goals, such as *eliminating* proofreading errors rather than *reducing* proofreading errors too, for instance, three per page. Setting the goal at the highest level with

no opportunity for mediocre performance communicates the importance of the writing attribute in question. Second, if relative goals are essential, set them based on exhibited performance, such as reducing proofreading errors from three per page to zero per page.

If we believe that humans are wired to adapt to change, particularly slowly unfolding change, then humans somehow get used to the change and deal with it, forgetting how the change unfolded in the first place and largely view it as another part of life.<sup>35</sup> Nursing faculty, journal editors, and others may have already adapted to graduate students’ and authors’ poor writing proficiency. If, however, the Institute of Medicine<sup>37</sup> suggests that nursing’s “golden age” truly lies ahead, the most trusted profession has within its grasp the ability to function as key change agents of the future in advancing healthcare reform and developing policies and practices that elevate the clinical outcomes that patients and families experience today. Nursing academicians must acknowledge the drift to low writing performance in their students as evidenced by student inability to convey logical thought, argue effectively, write clear, concise narratives, synthesize content to topics under discussion, and demonstrate graduate-level critical thinking. Given the enormous progress nursing academicians have contributed to graduate education, the time to advance proficiency in scholarly writing to the top of graduate nursing education is now. Will academicians accept the challenge?

## Conclusion

Poor writing proficiency, evidenced in nursing graduate students, disrupts the academic experience for students and faculty alike. This article discussed academia’s drift to poor performance reflected in the long-standing problem of poor student scholarly writing in university nursing programs nationwide. Academic inaction parallels the metaphor of the boiled frog, where unnoticed incremental change results in disastrous outcomes. By offering a customized writing course as a cognate to improve student scholarly writing skills or integrating its content into existing courses, academia can stem the drift to poor student writing performance. However, nursing academia must first acknowledge the indisputable drift to low writing performance in their students and take action to mitigate the continued decline. If not, nursing’s potential to achieve its “golden age” will likely diminish the profession’s destiny to lead in the transformation of healthcare.

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