Advancing Your Nursing Degree

The Experienced Nurse’s Guide to Returning to School

Debra A. Wolff
Advancing Your Nursing Degree
Debra A. Wolff, DNS, PCNP, RN, is president/chief executive officer of NURSES-Ready for the Next Step, a business launched in 2013 to help prepare nurses for success in the next step of their education and career. She also teaches online at Empire State College. During her 38-year career in nursing, she has been a lifelong learner. Dr. Wolff earned a bachelor’s degree from the State University of New York, Plattsburgh; a master’s degree and a certificate as a nurse practitioner in community health from Binghamton University, and a doctoral degree in nursing science from The Sage Colleges, where she was inducted into the Phi Kappa Phi Society. Her dissertation, Registered Nurses Return to College: Lessons Learned From Hindsight, is the basis for much of this book’s content. Currently, she is an active member of the New York Organization of Nurse Executives and Leaders, American Nurses Association—New York, Capital District Nursing Research Alliance, Northeast New York Professional Nurses Association, and the Albany Chapter of the American Statistical Association. From 2011 to 2013, Dr. Wolff was the project coordinator for the newly established Future of Nursing—New York State Action Coalition. In this capacity, she traveled throughout the state and interacted with nurses in all areas and at all levels of practice. She was the guest speaker at several nursing schools and professional organizations as well as the coauthor and data analyst for the New York State Nursing Schools and Faculty Report: 2010–2011. Before 2010, she was the project director for a cancer research project that enrolled 115 sites nationwide and collected data on over 4,500 patients receiving chemotherapy. She had the privilege of being the only nurse working with this interdisciplinary, multicultural team. She has published extensively in Cancer, Journal of Clinical Oncology, Journal of the National Comprehensive Cancer Network, Annals of Oncology, American Journal of Managed Care, Academic Medicine, Journal of Rural Health, and Clinical Orthopaedics and Related Research. In 2010, Dr. Wolff completed a program as a certified synchronous learning expert and, in recent years, has been an abstract, journal, and textbook reviewer as well as a Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) grant reviewer.
Advancing Your Nursing Degree
The Experienced Nurse’s Guide to Returning to School

Debra A. Wolff, DNS, PCNP, RN

SPRINGER PUBLISHING COMPANY
NEW YORK

©Springer Publishing Company
This book is dedicated to my dear friend Arlene Roush, who supported me through this project and spent hours proofreading, editing, and helping select the “right words.” Arlene passed away unexpectedly on July 22, 2016, which left a void for all her family and friends. May this book serve as a lasting legacy to her memory.
Contents

Preface xi
Acknowledgments xv

Unit I: Starting the Journey

1. Introduction—The Initial Steps 3
   Why Wait? Make the Decision 3
   What Is Behind the Impetus for Advanced Education? 4
   You Are Not Alone 5
   Stages of Change 6
   You Can Do This! 8
   Summary 8

2. The Decisional Balance 11
   What Motivates Nurses to Return to School? 11
   What Barriers Do Nurses Encounter? 19
   What Fears Do Nurses Express? 30
   What Facilitates a Nurse’s Return to School? 31
   Weighing the Pros and Cons 32
   Tipping the Decisional Balance 33
   Summary 34

3. Choices, Choices, Choices 39
   Selection Process 39
   Selecting a Nursing Program 59
   Course Selection 68
   Communication 72
   Clinical Experiences 73
   Summary 75

4. The Application Process 81
   The Application 81
   Admission Selection Process 83
viii CONTENTS

Transcript 85
Accepting Previous Credits/Transfer of Credits 87
Letters of Recommendation 89
Entrance Tests 91
Curriculum Vitae/Résumé 92
Cover Letter or Personal Statement 92
Essay 93
Interview 94
Other Requirements 96
Acceptance or Nonacceptance Into a Program 97
Summary 99

Unit II: Preparation—The Key to Success

5. Mental–Emotional Preparation 105
   Change 105
   Approaches 107
   Attitude 112
   Negative Thoughts and Behaviors to Avoid 118
   Stress-Management Strategies 121
   Summary 121

6. Financial Preparation 125
   Financial Planning 125
   Title IV of the Higher Education Act 128
   Free Application for Federal Student Aid 129
   Scholarships 130
   Grants 134
   Loans 135
   Veterans’ Benefits 137
   Work–Study 138
   Personal Assets 138
   Cost-Saving Measures 139
   Tax Credits 140
   Summary 141

7. Computer and Technology Preparation 143
   Basic Computer Components 144
   Operating Systems 145
   Keyboarding 145
   Computer Skills 146
   Internet Skills 151
CONTENTS ix

Netiquette 151
Communication Tools and Social Media 151
Learning Platforms 155
How Technology Is Used in Academia 156
Summary 161

8. Academic Preparation 167
   Characteristics of Adult Learners 167
   Learning Styles 168
   What Academic Skills Will You Need to Be Successful? 168
   Writing Skills 170
   Reading Skills 185
   Note-Taking and Study Skills 188
   Test-Taking Skills 190
   Physical Examination Skills 192
   Information Literacy Skills 192
   Referencing Skills 202
   Presentation Skills 205
   Project Completion Skills 209
   Statistical and Research Skills 211
   Summary 212

9. Family/Social Preparation 219
   Family Support 219
   Social Support 233
   Summary 235

10. Physical Preparation 237
    A Place of Your Own 237
    Shopping for School 240
    Setting Up Your Area 248
    Getting Around 250
    Staying Healthy While in School 251
    Summary 253

11. Work Preparation 257
    Employee Benefits 257
    Time Off for Classes 259
    Prepare What to Say 261
    Combine Work With School 263
    Work at School 266
    Summary 267
Unit III: Back in School

12. Take Action 271
   Get Organized 271
   Managing Time 275
   Learn to Connect 276
   Locating What You Need 284
   What to Do if . . . 286
   Summary 293

13. Enjoy the Journey 297
   Find Balance 297
   Keep Motivated 298
   Celebrate Successes Along the Way 299
   Enhance Your Professional Role 300
   Be a Role Model 300
   Pass It Forward 301
   Final Message 301

Appendix: Barriers-to-Participation Survey 303
Index 307
The fact that you are reading this page tells me you are interested in going back to school. That is a great start! I hope you take the time to read this book and make a commitment to further your education. The path ahead will have its share of challenges; however, it will also expose you to some amazing faculty and colleagues, open doors to unique opportunities, and encourage you to look at health care and nursing through a different lens. What you learn from these pages will help make your journey a memorable one.

A question you may ask is, “What makes you qualified to write such a book, and what prompted your interest in this topic?” To begin with, in recent years I have been both a student and an instructor, which helps me understand both roles. As a student, I faced many of the challenges presented in this book. At present, I teach online and work with doctoral students to complete their dissertations, so I am aware of what each of these entail, too.

What sparked my interest in this topic initially was my own experience returning for a master’s degree. It had been over 16 years since I was in school, and I did not feel confident in my writing, presentation, or research skills. For several years, I vacillated about a return to school because the only available master’s degree program was 80 miles away, which did not seem feasible. I also worked full time in a very demanding job. However, the desire was always there.

Consequently, to feel better prepared to reenter the academic world, I took a writing course, learned how to create a PowerPoint presentation, and found a research mentor who included me on a research project, all of which gave me the necessary boost in confidence. Fortunately, around that time, an opportunity emerged to take courses at the facility where I worked. The nurse educator formed a cohort of nurses and brought courses on site as a convenience. I jumped at the chance, especially because tuition reimbursement covered the cost. The school offered one course per semester, yet we knew we would eventually have to travel to campus for some courses. It took me 7 years to complete my degree—one course at a time—but I did it! Moreover, I did not owe a dime! In the end, I was the only student in our cohort to graduate. Along the way, my cohort members dropped out either because they did
not realize the time commitment needed, were unsure of their academic skills, refused to travel, or lacked the stamina for the long haul. When I returned to school for my master’s degree, I had three young children, and during that first semester, my husband and I separated, so I quickly became a single parent. I took an incomplete that semester, which made me wonder whether I was doing the right thing by returning to school. Sometimes I just wanted to quit—but I persevered and thought to myself, “I’m doing this for my future and for my children’s future.” Now, I look back and am so glad I forged ahead. I realize now what helped me successfully complete my degree; I identified my gaps and filled them before I returned to school. In addition, I developed a strong commitment to finish what I had started.

When I returned to school 7 years later for my doctorate, it was in response to a television talk show on which a nurse I knew issued a plea for nurses to go back to school for their doctoral degree. She was the dean of a nursing school and explained that our profession needed more doctorally prepared faculty to educate the next generation of nurses. That was my call to action. The next day I made an appointment with the director of a doctoral program and submitted my application soon afterward. It did not take long for me to decide on a dissertation topic. I wanted to learn more about how registered nurses in bachelor’s completion programs (RN–BSN/BS) prepare to return to school. As part of my doctoral studies, I read extensively on the subject and was surprised to learn there was little out there that addressed the issue of preparation. During the past several years, I have conducted formal interviews with RN–BSN students as well as had informal conversations with students at all levels (diploma, associates, bachelor’s, master’s, and doctorate), who were either thinking about a return to school, currently in school, or recently graduated. Whenever I discuss my dissertation topic or this book, nurses want to share their own experiences. In fact, a good portion of this book contains many of their stories, which are inspirational and, to me, one of the best ways to learn.

As I speak to other nurses on the topic, I sense the same fears I had about returning to school and being successful. From all my research on the topic, I know there are numerous resources available to guide you. Essentially, if no one takes the time to let you know what to expect and how to prepare for school, it is hard to “know what you do not know.” Therefore, I have included ideas and tips on how to prepare for the challenges ahead and how to keep on track. You will also find checklists, resources, web links, and references that may help.

My challenge in writing this book was to appeal to a wide audience—from a 55-year-old nurse going back for a bachelor of science in nursing degree to a 25-year-old millennial nurse starting a doctoral degree, to every nurse in between. As you can tell, I am passionate about this topic, so I hope I have been successful in making this a useful and enjoyable book to read. By planting this seed, I hope you come to realize that going back to school is achievable and worthwhile, as it certainly was in my case. In fact, not a single nurse I have encountered along the way has ever expressed regret about the decision. Instead, nurses often lament they did not do so sooner. Going back to school has many rewards, and I wish you the very best on your journey.
Throughout this book, you will find web links to a variety of online resources. At the time of publication, these were up to date; however, as with many online resources, links can change. If you have the e-book version and find the hyperlink does not work, try typing the web address directly into your browser. If this does not work, there should be enough background information for you to go to the home page of the source and search within that site.

If you have any great tips to share, I would love to hear from you. In addition, if you would like more information about the book, or want to report any corrections, you can reach me at NursesReadyNextStep@gmail.com, or write to me at NURSES-Ready for the Next Step, 732 Madison Avenue, Albany, NY 12208. Also, check out my website at www.Nursesnextstep.com for more resources and tips from students and faculty.

Debra A. Wolff
This is a sample from ADVANCING YOUR NURSING DEGREE: THE EXPERIENCED NURSE’S GUIDE TO RETURNING TO SCHOOL
Visit This Book’s Web Page / Buy Now / Request an Exam/Review Copy

©Springer Publishing Company
Acknowledgments

Many people made this book possible. To begin with, hundreds of students shared their stories, ideas, and challenges with me about returning to school as adults. Whether through formal interviews or informal discussions at conferences, presentations, in parking lots, or at the Future of Nursing booth at the New York State Fair, these nurses were open and honest about their experiences. Several faculty members also offered words of advice and provided insight into what they expect from students. My sincere gratitude to all these students and faculty who contributed to make this book come to fruition.

I am also indebted to my dissertation chair, Dr. Linnea Jatulis, who believed in this topic from the start and supported me along the way. To my friend, Dr. Carolyn Christie-McAuliffe, I owe my sincere gratitude. When she discovered I wanted to write a book on this topic, she quickly connected me with Joseph Morita at Springer Publishing Company. Joe’s thoughtful feedback helped strengthen the finished product. To my nurse entrepreneur mentor, Dave Theobald, I thank you for your encouraging words of advice. The fact that you started your first business in a spare bedroom and now own three successful businesses provided the inspiration I needed to keep moving forward with this book. A big thank you goes to my friends and former colleagues, Dr. Trudy Hutchinson and Dr. Eva Culakova, who have always believed in me. In addition, my appreciation goes to Ann Purchase, RN, MS, and Lesley Cashman-Peck, MS Ed, from Advantedge Education, who proofread and edited the technical portions of the book.

Finally, this book would not have happened without the endless support of my dear friend Arlene Roush and my husband, Patrick. Arlene spent countless hours proofreading and editing each chapter. Her valuable input along with her tremendous moral support kept me on track. From the very beginning, my husband was behind the idea of my writing this book. His love and unflagging support kept me going, and I will be forever thankful for having him in my life.
This chapter explains the diverse choices you have when making a decision to go back to college. It discusses what to assess in a school, followed by what to assess in a nursing program; however, it does not matter which you do first as long as you evaluate both. The chapter introduces some of the terminology you may encounter in your search for the right fit and contains a useful assessment tool (Table 3.1) to guide you on what information to collect and options to consider. Throughout the chapter, there are links to help explore your choices as well as determine the accreditation status of a school or program.

Reading this chapter indicates you are seriously considering a return to school. As Mark Twain (n.d.) once noted, “The secret of getting ahead is getting started.” Examining your options for school takes you further into the contemplation stage and begins the preparation stage of change. The purpose of this chapter is to present potential options in order for you to make an informed choice and start your journey.

SELECTION PROCESS

Selecting the right school and program to meet your educational goals is an important decision. As a consumer of higher education, you may need to consider a number of factors that will influence what choice you make. Table 3.1 utilizes a variety of sources to create a checklist of information you may want to collect when making your decision (American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2016a; Bishof, 2011; Jones, 2009; Nelson, 2007; Smith & Delmore, 2007; Trautman, 2015).
### Table 3.1 College and Nursing Program Intake and Assessment Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COLLEGE ASSESSMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demographics</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of college: ____________________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address: ___________________________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type: □ Public □ Private—nonprofit □ Private—for-profit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Carnegie Classification</strong> (carnegieclassifications.iu.edu) Select “Look up” tab, type in name of school: ____________________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size: Total student population: __________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History: ___________________________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission: ___________________________________________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Accreditation**

- **Regional college accreditation:** □ Yes Dates: ___________________ □ No
  
  - □ Middle States Commission on Higher Education (www.msche.org) Includes: Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, including distance education and correspondence education programs offered at those institutions.
  
  
  

(continued)
### Table 3.1 College and Nursing Program Intake and Assessment Form (continued)

- **Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges** ([www.sacscoc.org](http://www.sacscoc.org)) Includes: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Latin America and other international sites (Mexico, United Arab Emirates, Costa Rica).

- **Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Senior Colleges and University Commission** ([www.wascsenior.org](http://www.wascsenior.org)) Includes: California and Hawaii. International sites: American Samoa, Armenia, China, Ecuador, Guam, Japan, Mexico, Northern Marianas Islands, Nairobi, United Arab Emirates, and other international satellite sites.

  Status of regional accreditation: □ Full accreditation
  □ Conditional accreditation __________________________
  □ No regional accreditation

  **National accreditation** (see database of accredited postsecondary institutions and programs at ope.ed.gov/accreditation/agencies.aspx)

#### Student Services

- Campus tours or orientation: □ On-site □ Virtual □ None

#### Financial

- Tuition/fees per credit hour: __________________________
  □ Option to pay online
- What sources of financial aid are available from the school?
  __________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________
  □ How many credits constitute full-time study for purposes of financial aid? ________
  □ Eligible for federal student aid
  □ Application forms for financial aid available online
- What scholarships are available? __________________________
  __________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________

(continued)
## Table 3.1 College and Nursing Program Intake and Assessment Form (continued)

| |  
| --- | --- |
| □ Scholarship information and applications available online |  
| Are work–study programs available? □ No □ Yes |  
| Are research assistant positions available? □ No □ Yes |  

### Student Learning Center

**Skill assessment**

- □ Writing skills
- □ Study skills
- □ Math skills
- □ Referencing skills
- □ Research skills
- □ Online learning skills

**Tutoring**

- Type (e.g., writing workshops, online learning):  
- Format (e.g., peer tutors, group tutoring, online tutorials, faculty):  
- English-as-second-language assistance:  

**Academic Advisement**

- Advisor assigned: □ No □ Yes If yes, when:  

**Library**

- □ Variety of holdings
- □ Online tutorials
### Table 3.1 College and Nursing Program Intake and Assessment Form (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online catalog</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference support</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Databases—list:</td>
<td>List of databases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to download full-text articles</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library-related instruction</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to library resources (hours, librarian access)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of information literacy</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocal agreements with other libraries</td>
<td>List of agreements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Bookstore

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hours:</td>
<td>Hours of operation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordering procedure:</td>
<td>Procedure for ordering books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent books</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sell used books</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buy back books</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e-books</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mail or deliver books to other sites. If so, is there a charge?</td>
<td>Charge for delivery</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Computer lab

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the hours for the computer lab?</td>
<td>Hours of operation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-site help available</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Technology Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning platform used by institution</td>
<td>Name of platform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operating system, hardware, software, and Internet connectivity (see Chapter 10 for description)</td>
<td>Description of technology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.1  College and Nursing Program Intake and Assessment Form (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minimum requirements listed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ Operating system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Processor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Random access memory (RAM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Hard drive space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ CD/ROM/DVD drive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ USB ports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Monitor resolution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Software requirements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ Spyware</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Virus protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Plug-ins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Browser test</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Ongoing Support**

What level of support is provided for equipment and services not provided or under the control of the university (e.g., firewalls at place of employment)?

__________________________________________________________________________________________

What are the hours of support?

__________________________________________________________________________________________

What is the format of the support?

□ Frequently asked questions (FAQs)
□ Reset passwords
□ E-mail support
□ Toll-free phone number
□ Online instant messaging or chat support
□ Other ___________________________
Table 3.1 College and Nursing Program Intake and Assessment Form (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ Resources for disabled students: ________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>______________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>______________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Military or Veteran Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ Post 911-GI Bill benefits accepted (see <a href="http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill">www.benefits.va.gov/gibill</a>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Dependent’s education assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Counseling services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Employment counseling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Campus Housing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allow families? □ Not needed □ No □ Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow children? □ Not needed □ No □ Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lounge for off-campus students? □ No □ Yes Location: ________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lockers available? □ No □ Yes Location: ________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overnight accommodations for off-campus students? □ No □ Yes Location: ________________ Cost: ________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transportation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transportation to campus (e.g., bus, subway, trolley) ________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus passes at student rate ________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking available on campus: ________________ If yes, cost: ________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location: ________________________________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Security</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crime statistics and types: Check ope.ed.gov/security and select “Get data for one institution or campus” ________________________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
## Table 3.1 College and Nursing Program Intake and Assessment Form (continued)

### Student Health Facilities
- Offer student health insurance
- Days/hours of operation: _____________________________

### Child-Care Services
- Offer child care services. If yes, what days/hours: _____________________________
- Cost of services: _____________________________

### Multicultural Services
- Support services for international students
- Multicultural support groups or clubs
- Multicultural lounge

### Athletic Facilities
- Exercise room
- Pool
- Track
- Indoor
- Outdoor
- Courts
- Basketball
- Tennis
- Racquetball/Squash
- Ice rink
- Playing fields
- Available to other family members? Fee: _____________________________

### Policies
- Tobacco-free policy
- Parking policy
- Social media policy
- Netiquette policy
- Transfer-of-credit policy
- Grading policy
- Academic standards policy (e.g., minimum grades, time to graduation)
- Academic integrity policy
- Student code of conduct policy
Table 3.1 College and Nursing Program Intake and Assessment Form *(continued)*

- [ ] Harassment policy
- [ ] Grievance and appeals policy
- [ ] Tuition liability policy
- [ ] Repeat course policy
- [ ] Add/drop/withdrawal policy. How soon after semester starts? ____________________________
- [ ] Incomplete policy (e.g., extension to complete coursework)
- [ ] Graduation or degree requirement policy
- [ ] Other policies found on website: ________________________________________________

**Calendar Format**

How is the school calendar organized?
- [ ] Semester: How long? ____________________________
- [ ] Term: How long? ____________________________
- [ ] Rolling admission
- [ ] Quarterly start
- [ ] 8-week sessions
- [ ] Other ____________________________
- [ ] Maximum number of credits or units per term/semester/session ____________________________

**Honor Societies**

- [ ] Sigma Theta Tau International (www.nursingsociety.org)
  
  School chapter ____________________________

- [ ] Phi Kappa Phi (www.phikappaphi.org)

- [ ] Alpha Chi National College Honor Society (www.alphachihonor.org)

- [ ] Alpha Sigma Lambda (www.alphasigmalambda.org)

*(continued)*
## Table 3.1 College and Nursing Program Intake and Assessment Form (continued)

### Alumni Services
- [ ] Provide access to clinical settings
- [ ] Act as mentor for current students
- [ ] Support scholarship opportunities
- [ ] Job search

### Notes about the school:

______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________

### NURSING PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

#### Demographics
- Name of nursing school or program: ________________________________
- Year founded: ________________________________
- Nursing program enrollment/year: ________________________________
- Percentage of applicant acceptance: ________________________________
- NCLEX-RN™ pass rates: ________________________________

### Nursing Degrees and Certificates
- [ ] Undergraduate
  - [ ] Associates
  - [ ] Baccalaureate
- [ ] Graduate
  - [ ] Master’s
  - [ ] Doctorate
- [ ] Certificates ________________________________
Table 3.1 College and Nursing Program Intake and Assessment Form (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nursing Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ LPN–ADN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ LPN–BSN (<a href="www.aacn.nche.edu/leading-initiatives/research-data/LPNBSN.pdf">link</a>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ RN–BSN (<a href="www.aacn.nche.edu/leading-initiatives/research-data/RNBSN.pdf">link</a>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Accelerated BSN for non-nurses (<a href="www.aacn.nche.edu/leading-initiatives/research-data/BSNNCG.pdf">link</a>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ RN–MSN (<a href="www.aacn.nche.edu/leading-initiatives/research-data/RNMSN.pdf">link</a>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ BSN–PhD (<a href="www.aacn.nche.edu/leading-initiatives/research-data/RNMSN.pdf">link</a>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ BSN–DNP (<a href="www.aacn.nche.edu/research-data/BACDNP.pdf">link</a>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Nurse practitioner (<a href="nprogramsearch.aanp.org/Search">link</a>)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Areas of practice: ________________________________________________

| □ Certified nurse midwife ([link](www.midwife.org/midwifery-education-programs)) |
| □ Clinical nurse specialist ([link](www.nacns.org/html/careers.php)) Click on the **CNS Program Directory** link on the left side for an Excel file download of programs. |

Areas of practice: ________________________________________________

| □ Nurse educator |
| □ Certified registered nurse anesthetist ([link](home.coa.us.com/accredited-programs/Pages/CRNA-School-Search.aspx)) |
| □ Nurse administrator |
| □ Clinical nurse leader ([link](www.aacn.nche.edu/cnl/about/cnl-programs)) |
| □ PhD ([link](www.aacn.nche.edu/research-data/DOC.pdf)) |
| □ EdD ([link](www.aacn.nche.edu/research-data/DOC.pdf)) |
| □ DNP ([link](www.aacn.nche.edu/research-data/DOC.pdf)) |
| □ DNS, DNSc, DSN ([link](www.aacn.nche.edu/research-data/DOC.pdf)) |
| □ Other non-nursing degrees ________________________________________ |

| □ Average time to complete program(s) |
| □ Full time __________________________ |
| □ Part time __________________________ |

(continued)
I. STARTING THE JOURNEY

Table 3.1 College and Nursing Program Intake and Assessment Form (continued)

Accreditation of Nursing Programs

- Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN) at www.acenursing.us/accreditedprograms/programSearch.htm
- American Association of Colleges of Nurses (AACN), Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) at www.aacn.nche.edu/accreditation/index.htm
- Commission for Nursing Education Accreditation (CNEA), National League for Nursing at www.nln.org/home
- Council on Accreditation of Nurse Anesthesia educational programs (CoA-NA) at home.coa.us.com
- Accreditation Commission for Midwifery Education at www.midwife.org/Program-Accreditation
- Midwifery Education Accreditation Council at meacschools.org

Articulation Agreements with Community Colleges: ___________________________

Program Application Requirements

- Application deadline: _________________________________________________
- Application fee: _____________________________________________________
- SAT
- GRE
- Other standardized tests _______________________________________________
- Essay
- Interview (☐ In-person ☐ Phone)
- Personal goal statement ☐ Writing sample
- Sample of your research experience
- Letters of recommendation. By whom? ___________________________________
- Transcripts
  - International school—need transcript evaluated by a credentialing agency (e.g., World Education Services [www.wes.org] or Educational Credential Evaluators [www.ece.org])
  - Need to have transcript translated
- License information

(continued)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>□ Curriculum vitae (CV) or résumé</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ Test for English proficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) <a href="http://www.ets.org/toefl">www.ets.org/toefl</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ International English Language Testing System (IELTS) <a href="http://www.ielts.org">www.ielts.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Skill assessment ___________________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Basic CPR certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Proof of immunization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Flu shot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Tuberculosis test (purified protein derivative [PPD])</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Background check</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Drug test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Proof of liability insurance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Program Orientation:** □ Department □ Specific program

**How are grades assigned?**

□ Letter (A, B, C, D, F) or number grade

□ Pass/fail

□ Competency based

**Faculty**

□ Faculty bios available

□ Faculty expertise ___________________________________________

**Courses**

□ Course catalog available □ Hard copy □ Online

Method of delivery □ Traditional face-to-face □ Hybrid □ Online

Scheduling options: □ Weekends □ Evenings □ Weekdays
   □ Summer

Formats available: □ Cohort design □ Independent study
   □ Test out of courses

□ What challenge exams are accepted for credits? ____________________________

□ Integration of support services into curriculum (e.g., how to use the library, writing center resources, workshops)

*(continued)*
Table 3.1 College and Nursing Program Intake and Assessment Form (continued)

- What is the academic curriculum for the program of your choice? List courses and credits (see Table 3.3).
- Is there an accelerated option?
- Interprofessional courses available. If yes, list:
  
  ____________________________________________________________
  
  ____________________________________________________________
- Any on-site requirements? (e.g., labs, certain courses, testing)
  _____________________________
  ____________________________________________________________
  
  Is study abroad an option? _____ Where? ____________________________

Clinical Sites (list sites)

- Inpatient clinical ____________________________
- Outpatient clinic ____________________________
- Community health ____________________________
- Mental health ____________________________
- Other ____________________________

Doctoral Programs

- Class size ____________________________
- When did the program begin? ____________________________
- Reputation of the program ____________________________
- Acceptance rates per year ____________________________
- Graduation rates per year ____________________________
- All but dissertation (ABD) rates ____________________________
- Cap for number of years to complete coursework and dissertation ____________________________
- Faculty match for research interest ____________________________

Resources used to compile intake and assessment form:
Adaptation ©2017 by Debra A. Wolff.

ADN, associate’s degree in nursing; BSN, bachelor of science in nursing; CNS, clinical nurse specialist; CPR, cardiopulmonary resuscitation; DNP, doctor of nursing practice; DNS/DNSc/DSN, doctor of nursing science; EdD, doctor of education; GRE, Graduate Record Examination; LPN, licensed practical nurse; PhD, doctor of philosophy; RN, registered nurse; SAT, Scholastic Aptitude Test.

©Springer Publishing Company
3. CHOICES, CHOICES, CHOICES

Types of Schools

One choice to make is the type of school you want to attend: public or private. Public schools receive support through public funds and operate under the direction of a government or state entity. Private schools are either not-for-profit or for-profit. Some may have a religious or other type of affiliation. Private, not-for-profit schools are independent, publicly owned, and directed by a board of trustees. They operate similar to other nonprofits, such as the Cancer Society or Boys Clubs of America, where funds raised circulate back to their infrastructure and programs. Private for-profit schools, also known as proprietary schools, are owned and operated by private corporations or individuals, in which profits may be applied back to the college and/or divided among shareholders.

Be a Smart Consumer

In order to be a smart consumer of higher education, you should be aware of what resources are available in your search for the right school and program. With technology at your fingertips, you can easily collect a vast amount of information on any school or program you want to consider. One important factor you should look for is objective information that comes from a reliable source. For example, a quick way to determine the type of school as well as its size is to use the Carnegie Classifications of Institutions of Higher Education (www.carnegieclassifications.iu.edu; use the “lookup” tab to search for colleges).

To find more in-depth information on a school, check out the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) website (www.nces.ed.gov/collgennavigator). This federal entity, under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Education, collects and analyzes data related to education in the United States and abroad. Go to the site, type in the name of any school you are interested in exploring, and you will find a wealth of information. You can also search for what schools are available within a geographic location or by program type (e.g., health professions). NCES reports on programs and majors, student services, accreditation information, credits accepted (e.g., advanced placement, credit for life experience, dual credits), services and programs for service members and veterans, crime statistics, and Title IV eligibility (explained in Chapter 6). It also has information on the diversity of the student population, admission requirements, student-to-faculty ratio, the school’s mission statement, first-year retention rates, and overall graduation and transfer rates. The site has a net price calculator so you can estimate your costs for attending as well as
web links to admissions, financial aid, and an online application for each school, if available.

The Council on Adult and Experiential Learning is another resource you may want to check out (www.cael.org). This 501(c)(3), nonprofit organization focuses specifically on adult learners in higher education and is known for its prior learning assessment.

The Federal Trade Commission sponsors a webpage on how to choose a college. It provides links to sites on how to finance college, obtain credit for military training, as well as scam alerts (www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0395-choosing-college-questions-ask).

The Better Business Bureau (www.bbb.org) is another place to check. If you plan to apply to a private school, you may want to check this site to see whether there have been any complaints filed against the college.

To be a smart consumer, you also need to be aware of what entities protect and support you along with what rights you have as a student. For instance, the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA; Public Law No. 110-315) outlines how the government protects students in various areas, namely, accreditation oversight, accessibility, disclosure to consumers, and student loan programs. See www2.ed.gov/policy/highered/leg/hea08/index.html for more information on HEOA. Another important law with which to be familiar is the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA; 20 U.S.C. § 1232g; 34 CFR Part 99). This federal law protects student privacy and educational records. For more information, see the FERPA web page at www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html?src=fn. Finally, the Student Right-To-Know and Campus Security Act of 1990 (Public Law No. 101-542) requires schools that participate in the Federal Student Aid Program to disclose graduation rates and campus crime statistics. See www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/STATUTE-104/pdf/STATUTE-104-Pg2381.pdf for more information on this act.

**Compare and Contrast**

There is no right or wrong way to select a college or program to meet your needs; however, one common suggestion is to compare and contrast at least a few schools or programs (Cleary, Hunt, & Jackson, 2011; Trautman, 2015). Spend time collecting information, speaking with faculty and former students, exploring school websites, and asking questions. As several students noted, do not choose a program because you think it will be easy—you will walk away with less. You will invest time and money in this decision, so aim for a quality education.
3. CHOICES, CHOICES, CHOICES

Marketing

In today’s world, marketing a product or service is routine. This holds true for most colleges; many have separate marketing departments and budgets. Many schools promote their programs through print, television, online ads, social media, e-mail campaigns, and booths at conferences and other sites. As a consumer, you need to take on the mantra *caveat emptor* or “let the buyer beware.” Unfortunately, in recent years a number of issues concerning the marketing practices of for-profit institutions, such as false claims and aggressive recruiters, has come to the forefront (Lyttle, 2011; T. L. Murray et al., 2012). A report in the *American Journal of Nursing* on nursing degrees from for-profit institutions indicated a prospective student should thoroughly investigate a for-profit school before enrolling (Lyttle, 2011). The author also cautioned readers to use care when speaking with a college recruiter. Whenever you speak with someone at a college, be sure to get any promises in writing. Although Lyttle noted, “not every for-profit school is risky” (p. 19), she did provide a list of what to examine if you are interested in a for-profit school. For example, she suggested you find out the name of the parent company that owns the school, whether the school is accredited, and if any graduate school you plan to attend in the future accepts degrees from that particular for-profit school.

If you are concerned about applying to a for-profit school, you may want to download and read the pamphlet from the National Association for College Admission Counseling entitled “For-Profit Colleges: What to Know Before You Enroll—A Guide For Students” at www.nacacnet.org/issues-action/LegislativeNews/Documents/For-Profit%20Student%20Brochure.pdf. You may also want to read the article in *The New Yorker* by Surowiecki (2015)—“The Rise and Fall of For-Profit Schools,” which reports on what is currently happening to curtail potential fraud and misuse of federal student loans. Finally, the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) provides information on accreditation and diploma mills at www.chea.org/degreemills/default.htm. CHEA’s site offers a helpful list of questions to ask when evaluating a college or program.

Accreditation and State Board of Nursing Oversight

*Accreditation* of a prelicensure school or nursing program is a voluntary action, one many schools pursue as the U.S. Department of Education requires accreditation of any school that wishes to participate in the federal financial aid program. As a student, be aware that the accreditation
status of a school may affect your ability to transfer credits from one program to another as well as your eligibility for some scholarships. For example, some nursing programs will not accept transfer credits from schools that do not have regional accreditation. The process of accreditation is rigorous, requiring site visits, a review of documents and curriculum, and interviews with staff and students. Its purpose is to ensure the school or program meets certain standards in order for students to receive a quality education. Graduate nursing programs preparing the student for an advanced practice registered nurse (APRN) role must be accredited.

There are three types of accreditation agencies: regional, nationally recognized, and specialized accrediting agencies. Although the U.S. Department of Education is not responsible for accreditation, the law requires it to publish a list of accrediting agencies. Check their website at www2.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accrd/accrdiation_pg5.html#NationallyRecognized.

When you narrow down your choice of schools and programs, start out by verifying the accreditation status of each school and its nursing program you would like to attend. Determine whether the school has regional or national accreditation (see Table 3.1 for web links). The accreditation information will include accreditation status, the date of initial and most recent accreditation or action, and location of branch campuses. For nursing programs, there are two main accreditation agencies recognized by the U.S. Department of Education: the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) and the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN), formerly the National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission (NLNAC; see Table 3.1 for web links). The newest nursing accreditor is the Commission for Nursing Education Accreditation (CNEA). If you plan to attend a midwife or nurse anesthetist program, each of these has separate accreditation agencies that review their programs (see Table 3.1).

State boards of nursing (SBON) also play a role in oversight of nursing education programs within their own states. According to the National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN, 2012), SBONs are often in a position to assist developing programs meet standards, approve and/or register programs within their state, investigate allegations of fraudulent programs, and close nursing programs that do not meet standards. Accrediting agencies do not have the statutory authority to close a program and so rely on SBONs to utilize their legal authority to do so. SBONs approve prelicensure programs, and about half approve graduate nursing programs. To find your SBON, go to www.ncsbn.org/contact-bon.htm and select your state from the drop-down menu.
or map. Most SBONs have a list of state-approved nursing programs on their website. If you do not see the nursing program in which you are interested or the website does not have a list of programs, contact your SBON for any information on the program. You can also search accreditation status on the ACEN, CCNE, and CNEA websites.

If you plan to take classes from a college that is not in the same state where you reside and hold a nursing license, check with your SBON on the implications. APRNs are required to have a registered nurse (RN) license. That license could be subject to discipline even while on clinical assignment as part of an APRN program. For example, if you are an advanced practice nursing student licensed in one state and your program is located in another state or is a distance education program, ask your SBON whether you can fulfill your clinical requirements in your home state. Some SBONs do not allow this if your nursing program is not registered or approved in your state. Unfortunately, some advanced practice nurses have completed a program from another state or online, only to find that they risk not being eligible for a state license because the program they attended was not approved or registered by their SBON.

Lyttle (2011) noted to “keep in mind that accreditation in nursing isn’t mandatory for schools and that approval from a state board of nursing means only that the program has met a minimum standard” (p. 20). In other words, look for a school that is both accredited and has approval from your SBON to get the best quality education and to avoid any problems.

Assess Services

Once you narrow down your list of potential schools, it is time to focus in on the details. Locate each school’s website—you should find most of the information you need there. Navigate around and become an expert on what is available on the website. Follow along the list of services described in Table 3.1. First, locate the history and mission of the college. Do these appeal to you? Because a school’s accreditation status is important, note whether the website indicates the status in a prominent place. Assess whether the school offers campus tours or a virtual tour and consider whether you want to attend one. Check out the financial aid office webpage. Is it easy to find the cost of attending, scholarships and grants, how to pay, how many credits constitute full time, and other questions noted on Table 3.1?

Next, check out the student learning center, writing center, and other student support services. What do they offer? How do you access them? Is there a cost? Are tutors available?
Also, the library should be highly visible on the school’s website, and if it is not, the school may not see this as an important resource. If you are a graduate student, a good library is vital: so you may want to reconsider your choice. Do they have a variety of databases? Can you download full-text articles? Is there access to a librarian via chat, e-mail, or phone? Does the library offer online tutorials or in-person workshops for literature search strategies, bibliographic software, or other information literacy skills? Most nurses agree that a good library can make a big difference in your success. In the end, you get what you pay for.

Assess what options are available to you at the bookstore. Can you buy, rent, or sell back your textbooks? Do they have e-books available? Do they have delivery or shipping options?

What are the technical requirements for school? Does the website indicate the minimum requirements for a computer? Does the school use a learning platform such as Blackboard or Moodle? Is technology support available? This is particularly important if you attend an online program or plan to take online courses. Is there a computer lab? What are the hours of operation? Is onsite assistance available?

If you are disabled, what services do you need and how do you access them? If you are a service member or veteran, what specific services are available to meet your needs?

Are you interested in campus housing or some type of lounge for commuters so you have a place to go when on campus? Will you need overnight accommodations?

How will you get to campus? Does the school help you defray the cost with bus passes? If you plan to drive to campus, where will you park? How much is a parking permit?

Are you concerned about your security? If so, check out the crime statistics for the campus at www.ope.ed.gov/security. Do you need health services or health insurance? Are you interested in child care services?

Are you an international student? Is English your second language? If so, check out what multicultural services the college offers such as support groups, tutoring, a lounge, or clubs.

Do you have an interest in exercising while on campus? If so, check out the athletic facilities, times they are available, and whether they allow your family to use them. This may save you the cost of a gym membership since you pay for these facilities through your tuition.

Check out all the policies available on the website. You may not want to read them in detail at this point; however, it is a good idea to know what is available.

How does the school arrange its calendar? Are there semesters, terms, quarters? Do they have a rolling admissions policy in which students...
3. CHOICES, CHOICES, CHOICES

begin at any time? What is the maximum number of credits you can take per term/semester/session? Peruse the school catalog as schools often post this on their website. Check out the course offerings. Does the school offer evening, weekend, accelerated, or summer courses?

Finally, do they have any honor societies? Do alumni offer networking opportunities, clinical sites, or mentoring services? As a nursing student, you may want to take advantage of these opportunities.

Whatever questions remain unanswered after reviewing the school’s website or catalog, use these when you speak with someone at the college or during your interview. The question to ask yourself is: Does this school have the services I need to be a successful student?

Personal Assessment

It is important to consider your own personal desires too. Does the reputation of the college make a difference? Do you want a degree from a prestigious university? Do you want to attend full time or part time? Be aware how this decision may affect your eligibility for financial aid (see Chapter 6 for more information). Are you able to afford a particular college on your own or will you need substantial financial assistance? Do you want a school that accepts most of your previous credits or allows credit for previous learning experiences? If so, check out more information on this in Chapter 4. Are you looking for a smaller college with a friendly campus atmosphere or a large one with research fellowships and multiple choices for electives? Do you want to take courses during the summer so you finish more quickly? Are you interested in studying abroad or taking an interdisciplinary course? Use the assessment tool in Table 3.1 to review the options pertinent to your own situation and interests.

SELECTING A NURSING PROGRAM

Today there are numerous choices available when selecting a nursing program. In fact, it can be overwhelming; so how do you narrow down your choices? Perhaps you already know what degree and program you want to pursue. In that case, you are one step ahead. If not, a good place to start is to visit the website Discovernursing.com. This site is an online extension of the Campaign for Nursing’s Future sponsored by Johnson & Johnson, a longtime advocate of nursing. On this site, you will find a list of over 100 nursing specialties with job characteristics
and settings, average salaries, and educational requirements for each. One thing to keep in mind is that nursing specialties expand into new areas of practice every day, and so information may change.

Another vital resource to explore is the AACN (2016a) website (www.aacn.nche.edu). Go to the Leading Initiatives tab and click on the link to Educational Resources. There you will find a link to Nursing Education Programs (www.aacn.nche.edu/education-resources/nursing-education-programs). This site has detailed information on different degree programs, articulation agreements, and fact sheets. In addition, AACN collaborates with Peterson’s, a leading producer of college guides, to publish Peterson’s Nursing Programs each year (2016). This volume profiles over 3,700 nursing programs, including photos, contact information, and detailed descriptions of each school. The book also provides information on degree and career options, costs, and online learning. It is not within the scope of this book to summarize everything you can find on the AACN website or Peterson’s book, so it is worth your investment in time to check them out on your own.

A third site to review is ExploreHealthCareers.org where you will find a detailed list and description of various nursing specialties. This site also includes the latest news on financial tips, application strategies, and career information.

**Types of Programs**

When selecting a nursing program, your first decision is to determine what type of program you want, depending on what degree you want to pursue. Examine what your goals are for a degree. For example, do you want to secure your current position, teach, go into administration, become an advanced practice nurse, conduct research, or something else? Do you want an undergraduate or graduate degree or do you want to receive a certificate?

The three basic degrees are bachelor’s, master’s, and doctorate. The bachelor’s degree with a major in nursing—BSN or BS depending on the program—is an undergraduate degree. The BSN/BS builds on the content delivered in diploma and associate degree (ADN) programs and is a generalist degree, meaning you do not specialize in any particular area of expertise. For example, topics, such as community and global health, research basics, health assessment, ethics, nursing and learning theories, concept development, leadership theory and styles, and nursing roles, are common in many BSN/BS programs. You also have the opportunity to take electives, which are courses of your own choosing. The goal of a bachelor’s degree is to provide a well-rounded
education and develop critical-thinking skills. If you are already an RN, you have several choices (Amos, n.d.). You can enroll in an RN–BSN/BS program. According to the AACN website, there are currently 679 RN–BSN/BS programs available nationwide (Rosseter, 2015). Over 400 of these programs offer online options, either courses or the entire program. Credit hours in an RN–BSN/BS program average 120 to 130 overall, including credits transferred in from an ADN program, with a designated number of those credits in nursing courses (McEwen, White, Pullis, & Krawtz, 2012). A second option is an accelerated RN–BSN/BS program, which condenses the curriculum to one calendar year on average (Brown, Kuhn, & Miner, 2012). These programs have a rigorous curriculum in which a student must commit to regular class and clinical requirements. The third choice is to obtain a bachelor’s degree in another field. Some nurses obtain a degree in areas such as psychology, health education, public health, or history, depending on where they see their career heading. One cautionary note with this decision—you may not be eligible for military positions or entry into nursing graduate school unless your bachelor’s degree is in nursing. If you are not an RN but have a BS or higher degree in another discipline, you may be eligible to enroll in an accelerated or second-degree RN program (Cangelosi, 2007; Cangelosi & Whitt, 2005, Rosseter, 2013). The length of time to complete each of these programs depends on the design of the curriculum, whether you go full or part time, and whether the program is year round.

Over the years, a trend has evolved in which nurses advance through one degree and into the next in one single program. For example, 214 nursing schools now offer a program in which nurses with diplomas or ADNs complete the coursework for a BSN/BS and then move right on to a master’s degree—MSN, MS, or MN depending on the program (Rosseter, 2015). These RN–MSN/MS/MN programs have become quite popular with experienced nurses who want to advance their education. Table 3.1 offers links to a nationwide AACN list for these programs.

If you already have a BSN/BS and are interested in a graduate degree, either master’s or doctorate, you may want to check out the brochure issued by the AACN (n.d.) on how to select a graduate school in nursing. This in-depth publication covers the types of graduate-level programs, areas of specialty for advanced practice nurses, suggestions on how to choose a program, and how to finance your graduate education. It also has an extensive list of resources. See: www.aacn.nche.edu/publications/brochures/GradStudentsBrochure.pdf.

A master’s degree in nursing prepares you to be an advanced practice nurse, typically with advanced knowledge in a specialty area. Most
programs take approximately 2 years if you attend full time. A more in-depth curriculum includes “courses in statistics, research management, health economics, health policy, health care ethics, health promotion, nutrition, family planning, mental health, and the prevention of family and social violence” (Dracup, n.d., para 18). In addition, many master’s degree programs require a thesis, capstone, or comprehensive examination in order to graduate. According to AACN (n.d.), APRNs “provide primary, preventive, and specialty care in a variety of roles in acute and ambulatory care settings” (p. 7) and include four roles: nurse practitioner, clinical nurse specialist, certified nurse-midwife, and certified nurse anesthetist. Other master’s programs prepared nurses to focus on such roles as nurse educator, nurse administrator, clinical nurse leader, nurse researcher, public health nurse, or nurse informaticist. Although this is not an exhaustive list, it gives you an idea of the breadth of areas in which you can specialize.

Within the nurse practitioner or certified clinical nurse specialist role, you also choose a track. For example, nurse practitioners can focus on adult, pediatric, geriatric, family, community, or psychiatric tracks to name a few. Check out which tracks the nursing program offers to see if any align with your career goals. Also, determine whether the APRN program qualifies graduates to take a certification examination from one of the national certification entities. Check the American Nurses Credentialing Center website (www.nursecredentialing.org) to learn more about certification in the specialty area you want to pursue.

To be more in line with other health care disciplines, many schools now offer a BSN/BS–PhD (Ellenbecker & Kazmi, 2014) or a BSN/BS–DNP option. These options facilitate a quick educational advancement and have a seamless design. In fact, many of these programs strongly suggest or require students go full time and not have outside work commitments because of the rigorous curriculum. Depending on the program, it may or may not require clinical experience prior to admission. The advantage of these programs, similar to doctoral programs in other disciplines, is you avoid a stepped progression. For example, many nurses with master’s degrees opt to wait over a decade before returning to obtain a doctoral degree, thus shortening their time at the doctoral level. If you would like to learn about the experience of other nurses who enrolled in an early entry BS–PhD program, you may want to read the article by Nehls and Rice (2014). As of fall 2015, the AACN lists 85 BSN/BS–PhD and 176 BSN/BS–DNP programs offered nationwide (AACN, 2016b, 2016c).

To expand their choices, many nurses opt to obtain a master’s degree in another field such as business administration (MBA), public
health (MPH), or health administration (MHA). Some choose to obtain a combined master’s such as MBA/MSN, MPH/MSN, or MHA/MSN. These combined degrees can be very marketable, especially if you plan to pursue career options within administration, business, or public health.

If you already have an MSN/MS/MN, you may want to obtain a postmaster’s certificate. A certificate requires participation in certain educational courses, which build on your previous master’s education, and is different from certification. Many schools offer certificate programs as an option. For example, many clinical nurse specialists opt to return for a post-master’s nurse practitioner or nurse educator certificate. Some MSN/MS/MN nurses obtain certificates in informatics or leadership, whereas some nurse practitioners, whose initial focus was adult health, opt to return to get a certificate as a psychiatric nurse practitioner. A certificate program is a good option to expand your area of practice and expertise.

If you are interested in a doctoral degree in nursing, you have the choice of a doctor of philosophy (PhD), doctor of nursing practice (DNP), doctor of education (EdD), or doctor of nursing science (DNS, DNSc, or DSN; AACN, 2016d; Megginson, 2011; Waldspurger Robb, 2005). An article by Smith and Delmore (2007) outlined the focus for each of these degrees. A PhD focuses on research, public policy, and administrative roles. An EdD focuses on education and administration. A DNS/DNSc/DSN concentrates on clinical practice and research, whereas a DNP focuses on advanced clinical nursing practice. Only DNP programs need apply for CCNE accreditation. Other doctorates in nursing (PhD, EdD, DNS/DNSc/DSN) rely on the accreditation process of the school to ensure the program meets standards (CCNE, 2012; Edwardson, 2010). Nurses may also obtain a PhD in a specialty area outside of nursing. An informal survey of nurses with PhDs in New York State noted these examples: epidemiology, learning and technology, educational administration and policy, health psychology, biostatistics, social welfare, cultural anthropology, health policy, rehabilitation sciences, educational psychology/testing, public health, social work, and international health. Check out the AACN list in Table 3.1 to see what choices are available nationwide for doctoral programs in nursing.

Because a doctorate is the terminal degree in nursing, expect to take courses that emphasize leadership and in-depth research and/or clinical knowledge. “Doctoral nursing programs traditionally offer courses on the history and philosophy of nursing and the development and testing of nursing and other health-care techniques, as well as the social, economic, political, and ethical issues important to the field. Data management and research methodology are also areas of instruction”
I. STARTING THE JOURNEY

(Anderson, n.d., para 7). Generally, doctoral degrees require 2 years of didactic followed by independent work on a dissertation or DNP project. A dissertation is generally required for a PhD, EdD, or DNS/DNSc/DSN. A dissertation is a scholarly research study that adds to nursing knowledge. A DNP program typically requires a DNP project (some programs still refer to this as a capstone project). For more information about a dissertation or DNP project, check out the resources listed in Table 8.2. Recently, the AACN Task Force on the Implementation of the DNP issued a white paper that provided a good description of the DNP program, including suggested length, practice experiences and hours, and requirements for the DNP project (AACN, 2015a). Another resource to review about the differences between a PhD and DNP is the article by Melnyk (2015).

Depending on the graduate program, there may also be a qualifying or comprehensive examination (Q/CE), also referred to as “comps,” prior to the dissertation stage. A nationwide survey of nursing PhD programs conducted by Mawn and Goldberg (2012) found considerable variability of implementation methods for the Q/CE: take-home written examination with/without oral defense, onsite timed examination with/without resources or notes, or oral examination. The survey also found some schools have modified the requirements. Instead of a Q/CE, these schools require publishable papers, a portfolio, or the first three completed chapters of a dissertation with/without an oral defense. Check what the requirements are for the program you plan to attend so you can prepare early.

There are several important questions to ask when evaluating doctoral programs (see Table 3.1). For example, is there a cap on the number of years to complete a dissertation, capstone, or DNP project? What are the acceptance and graduation rates for the program? What is the “all but dissertation” (ABD) rate for the program? In other words, you want to look for a program with a good record of supporting students through the final phase and onto graduation!

Location

The location of classes is another consideration. Some nurses prefer an academic environment and opt to enroll in a program where they can attend classes on campus. Others like the convenience of working from home and choose an online program where they do not need to travel. A third option is to take courses at a satellite site. For instance, many colleges have conveniently located branch campuses. In addition, some employers bring courses onsite so their nurses enjoy a familiar...
environment while attending classes (T. A. Murray, Palmer, Wunderlich, Giancola, & Shaw, 2014). Decide what option appeals to you.

**Delivery Method**

There are three basic delivery methods found in most nursing programs and courses: traditional face-to-face (FTF), hybrid, or online. Table 3.2 outlines basic pros and cons of each delivery method. Online courses usually have 80% or more of the content delivered online, whereas hybrid courses provide one third to three quarters of the content online (Sherrod & Sherrod, 2013). Learning strategies for online courses may be synchronous, asynchronous, or both. *Synchronous* means a student is online at the same time as other students and/or the instructor, similar to sitting in a classroom. Examples of synchronous delivery methods are online chats and live online presentations or video broadcasts. *Asynchronous* means each student participates in class assignments when it is convenient; however, completion of assignments must be within a certain time frame. Examples of asynchronous delivery methods include online discussion posts, readings, YouTube videos, or recorded webinars or podcasts. The advantage of asynchronous assignments is they allow you time to construct and proofread your work before submitting as well as time to formulate a response.

Online programs and courses offer several advantages; however, if you consider this choice, other students suggest you have adequate computer skills and are self-motivated and self-disciplined. In discussions with nurses who took online courses, many admitted they took their first online course as a test to see whether they would like it and if they had sufficient self-discipline. The flexibility and convenience of online courses and programs is what attracts many students. If you travel, plan to move, work nights or rotating shifts, are in the military, or have obligations that make it difficult to attend onsite classes, this might be a good option for you. Nurses in rural areas, who have limited access to onsite nursing programs, also find the online option valuable. The geographic diversity of students who take online courses is an added bonus, because this provides an opportunity to learn from peers in different locations and work settings.

The downside of online learning is the sense of isolation, lack of personal contact with peers and the instructor, and lack of immediate feedback (Halter, Kleiner, & Hess, 2006; Reilly, Gallagher-Lepak, & Killion, 2012). If the online option appeals to you, it is imperative you have reliable Internet and computer access. Some nurses equate online with “easy”; however, online courses must meet the same standards as in-person courses and require the same workload. Even though you log on when convenient, you still need to have an online presence and be an active participant. In
Table 3.2  Comparison Among Traditional, Hybrid, and Online Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Face-to-Face</th>
<th>Hybrid</th>
<th>Online</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pros</strong></td>
<td><strong>Pros</strong></td>
<td><strong>Pros</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Interaction with peers and faculty</td>
<td>• Both in-person and online components</td>
<td>• Flexible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In-person socialization</td>
<td>• Flexible</td>
<td>• Work at own pace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Structure and schedule</td>
<td>• Meet faculty and peers in person</td>
<td>• Available anywhere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Verbal and nonverbal cues</td>
<td>• Semi-structured</td>
<td>• Allows time to plan your response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Immediate feedback from peers and faculty</td>
<td>• Save on transportation costs</td>
<td>• Increase access in rural areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Easier to work on group projects</td>
<td>• Possibility of interdisciplinary courses</td>
<td>• More program choice as not limited by geography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Possibility of interdisciplinary courses</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Sense of safety because of anonymity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Cons</strong></th>
<th><strong>Cons</strong></th>
<th><strong>Cons</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Must be physically present</td>
<td>• Need to be somewhat computer savvy</td>
<td>• Requires significant self-discipline and time management skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Attendance necessary</td>
<td>• Attendance required for in-class sessions</td>
<td>• Need to develop skills for self-motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Scheduling courses may be limited</td>
<td>• Need for reliable transportation for in-person meetings</td>
<td>• Feelings of isolation or disconnection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Need for reliable transportation on a regular basis</td>
<td>• Technology issues with course</td>
<td>• Need to be fairly computer savvy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parking availability and cost</td>
<td>• Need for reliable Internet connection and service</td>
<td>• Must have visible participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Travel time</td>
<td>• Need for reliable Internet connection and service</td>
<td>• Lack immediate feedback</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Resources used to compile comparison:

In fact, many nurses do not realize learning platforms have the capability to monitor when and for how long a student logs onto a course, making it easy for online faculty to assess a student’s degree of participation. In addition, the program will log out after a period of inactivity.
Trautman (2015) recommended, “if you’re considering an online program, use the same selection criteria you’d use to choose a traditional program” (p. 10). Also, look for classes where faculty post material ahead of time, provide clear directions, and have a frequent presence. If you would like a detailed resource for online learning, consider obtaining the book The Student’s Quick-Start Guide to Successful Online Learning by Ward (2013). Another book that contains specific information for nursing is Distance Education in Nursing, edited by Frith and Clark (2013). Although this book targets faculty who teach online, many of the resources would be of value to students.

Hybrid programs or courses utilize both FTF and online delivery methods. The advantage of this design is students and instructors meet in person, at least occasionally. Because less travel is required with this type of delivery method, transportation costs, parking, and meals away from home are less. With a hybrid design, courses or activities that may not lend themselves well to online delivery can occur in a classroom setting. For example, advanced physical assessments may be difficult to perform and evaluate remotely. Interestingly, an editorial by Zerwekh (2011) evaluated a published meta-analysis conducted by the U.S. Department of Education on online learning and concluded, “the best learning outcomes were demonstrated when online and face-to-face methods were blended (hybrid)” (p. 179).

Traditional FTF programs or courses are still readily available for students who enjoy and learn best in a traditional classroom setting. Gruendemann (2011) conducted a study with students who had experience with both online and FTF courses and found students valued the social interaction with their peers and instructor as well as the ability to note their body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions in FTF courses. Overall, these students felt being present made it more real. In addition, many students note it is easier to work on group projects in person. If you would like to study abroad or take some interdisciplinary courses, FTF is the option you probably want. The downside of FTF is your required presence for classes. If you or someone you care for is sick, you have trouble with your transportation, or work obligations prevent you from attending, you may miss class. You also need to factor in transportation and parking costs, commuting time, and meals away from home.

Bottom line: There are many options available to you as a student in today’s academic environment. Evaluate what is important as well as what you need to be successful as a student. What amount of structure do you need? How technologically savvy are you? Can you work independently? Alternatively, do you work better with some peer pressure?
Do you enjoy the social aspect of attending classes? How self-directed are you? Do you have any problems asking questions if you do not understand directions?

**Capacity**

Just a quick note here: Consider the capacity of the program you wish to attend. Is there limited program capacity because of a faculty shortage or lack of clinical placement sites? In her report on the Annual Survey of Schools of Nursing, Kaufman (2013) suggested these two issues affect the expansion of many nursing programs. Ask questions on these two points.

**Miscellaneous**

Some programs, even online ones, may require some type of onsite presence at some point. It may be for testing purposes, labs, oral defense, or other reasons. Check with the program in advance, so you can arrange for time off from work and make travel arrangements.

Some schools have a dress code or other student requests. For example, the program may not allow you to wear perfume or you may need to cover any tattoos or piercings when you attend clinical rotations. Ask whether there is a policy regarding dress code if this is a concern.

**COURSE SELECTION**

Once you have selected where you want to go, sit down with an advisor and map out your whole program. Use Table 3.3 to keep track of your courses and costs. When you enroll, the school should provide you with an outline of courses required to complete your program. Keep this list in a safe place. In some instances, the curriculum and requirements for a degree may change. This list verifies your original degree requirements and acts similar to a contract. For example, one NP student went part time, whereas many of her peers went full time. As per her original program outline, she took advanced pharmacology and two semesters of advanced pathophysiology. A few semesters later, the curriculum changed and the school informed her she had to take two semesters of a combined pathophysiology/pharmacology course. She argued this was not part of her original plan, which she produced as evidence. The school honored this agreement and grandfathered her in with the old curriculum.
The sequence of courses is also an important consideration. Many courses have *prerequisites*, meaning you must take and pass certain courses before you are eligible to enroll in that particular course. The purpose of this sequencing is to enable courses to build on one another, also called *scaffolding* in educational terms. Some courses are available only at certain times of the year or by certain faculty; so plan and know when the best time to take those courses is. Some courses also require a corresponding laboratory course. Make sure you sign up for both. Also, be aware of any course that has a clinical component. For more on that topic, see “Clinical Experiences” in this chapter.

Some programs allow you to test out of certain courses. Perhaps you took a research course several years ago, yet it does not qualify as a transfer credit with the current program because it is too old. You may be able to take an examination and receive credit. See Chapter 4 for more information on challenge exams.

If you have an associate’s degree, your ADN program may have an *articulation agreement* with the program you wish to attend. If so, they may allow transfer credits for many of the courses you took in your

### Table 3.3 Program Courses and Costs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course #</th>
<th>Course Title</th>
<th>Course Description</th>
<th>Books for Course (Cost)</th>
<th>Tuition and Fees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

©Springer Publishing Company
ADN program (AACN, 2014; Spencer, 2008). Ask the school or check the AACN website for more information on articulation agreements.

If it has been some time since you were in school for your diploma or ADN, some schools offer a bridge course. This course focuses on the role transition from the diploma/ADN role to the BSN/BS professional role (Spencer, 2008). It often has content to help you refresh outdated academic skills, orient to the college’s learning management system, and become familiar with available resources. It may also cover time-management skills.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, one common theme noted during discussions with students at all levels was to take a computer course early in your program if you are not computer savvy. You will need to use a computer throughout your program, even if you take FTF classes; so it is worth the investment in time. Chapter 7 provides more detail on this subject.

Today’s courses reflect the change in society as well as technology. Returning to school gives you the opportunity to broaden your horizons and increase your knowledge base by taking advantage of courses where you learn outside your comfort zone and obtain new skills. Courses in telehealth, genetics, informatics, global health, public policy, health care systems, and social media are just a few examples.

Because many programs allow you to take at least a few elective courses, consider taking one outside of nursing. For example, one RN–BSN student took Geography of Southeast Asia, while another took Consumer Psychology. One MSN student took Immunology; another took a graduate-level writing course. If you want to learn a foreign language, now may be the time. Perhaps you want to learn how to play an instrument. One nurse took a piano course in which she learned basic music theory as well as rudimentary piano skills. She thoroughly enjoyed it. Explore the college catalog and see what looks interesting!

For doctoral students, Cohen (2011) suggested, “Choose a topic for your dissertation early and gear all of your student papers toward the dissertation... choose electives carefully to fill in the gaps of your knowledge” (p. 67). For example, if you plan to use feminist theory in your dissertation, look for an elective in women’s studies or feminist theory. If you do not feel comfortable with your statistical or qualitative data-collection skills, take courses that emphasize these. If you do not find what you need in the college catalog, look outside your own school for possible electives. Elective credits are generally easier to transfer than credits for core courses.

Many programs offer interprofessional classes, which help eliminate the silo effect of educating disciplines in isolation (Thibault, 2011).
multiple health care disciplines work and learn together in a classroom setting, it facilitates the type of teamwork required in real-world situations. Discussions that revolve around professional responsibilities and roles, ethics, legal issues, problem-solving strategies, and health care delivery options provide opportunities for students to learn about their health care peers. Examples of interprofessional educational types of learning include, “lectures, small group tutorials, project work, simulated patient experiences, and supervised patient encounters in a variety of settings” (Thibault, 2011, p. 315).

Some nursing programs offer an international nursing experience. It may be for a full semester or during a summer or winter break. These are often intense experiences, in which nursing students focus on a specific project within the cultural context of a foreign country. This type of immersion provides students with a lived experience and helps them develop skills in cultural competency (Long, 2014). Another way to acquire cultural-competency skills is to ask for a clinical assignment that immerses you in a specific culture within the United States. For example, some nurses work with migrant workers, homeless populations, foreign refugees, transgender populations, or religious sects. If your program offers these unique opportunities, consider signing up for them as they expose you to how individuals from other cultures manage their health and life situations.

When selecting a course, check to see who the instructor is for each section and ask around for recommendations. Check faculty bios along with their educational background, publications, and joint appointments to clinical facilities. It is important to get a good fit, not only with the courses you take but also with whoever teaches them. In addition, have a backup course in mind in case one of the courses you want is full or gets cancelled. Schools require a minimum number of students to offer a course; they also cap the number of students per class. A word of advice here—register early so you get the courses and instructors you want.

Evaluation methods for courses vary. In a nationwide survey of RN–BSN/BS programs, McEwen and colleagues (2012) found didactic courses used rubrics, case studies, quizzes, discussion boards, reflective journaling, portfolios, community assessment, change project, leadership simulation, and completion of continuing education certification (p. 377). Methods used for clinical courses included papers and projects, clinical logs, preceptor input, case studies, conference attendance, simulation, discussion boards, and service-learning projects (p. 377).

Registration for classes often occurs several weeks before the end of the current semester or term. Most schools allow you to register online.
Keep the course name, number, and section for each course ready so you can enter them easily. If you have any questions or difficulties with registration, check with the registrar’s office. Also, find out whether you need to pay at the time of registration or if you can defer payment until you confirm your financial aid or tuition reimbursement status.

**Syllabus**

The *syllabus* is your guide for each course. Once you enroll in a course, study the syllabus carefully. You should find an overview of the course, goals/objectives, required or recommended readings or textbooks, assignments along with due dates, and grading criteria. It should also indicate what writing style manual to use (e.g., American Psychological Association [APA], Modern Language Association [MLA], Chicago) and the technical requirements for the course (e.g., software, plugins). Many syllabi provide a weekly schedule for readings or assignments as well as what percentage of the final grade each assignment carries. A *rubric* may be part of the syllabus or a separate document. A rubric outlines how assignments are graded and gives examples of the categories and points awarded for each category. For example, a common category for a paper on a rubric is the proper use of APA format. You may receive 10 points for no errors, 8 points for two to three errors, and so on. Another document that may be part of a syllabus is the school’s academic integrity policy. Some schools have you sign a copy as proof you reviewed the contents. Read this policy carefully and know what constitutes academic dishonesty.

**COMMUNICATION**

Once you have enrolled and checked out the syllabus, if your course has an online component, check out the course home page. Tour the site and locate information on how to contact your instructor, where to post assignments, and how to check your grades. Learn to locate the calendar and announcements for the class so you keep well informed. If you take a FTF class, ask how students receive communications from their instructor. For example, will the instructor send out e-mails or make announcements at the beginning or end of class?

If you need to set up a student e-mail, do this as soon as possible. Some schools provide you with a student e-mail account; others expect you to set up your own. Remember e-mails can be printed and forwarded; so take care with what you write in an e-mail. It can also serve as a permanent record of a discussion (see Chapter 7).
Besides e-mail and announcements, the three main types of online communication are chat, discussion boards, and journaling. The chat function allows students and instructors to communicate in real time (i.e., synchronous). This equates to a live conversation and is similar to an in-class discussion. Discussion boards typically pose a question, which students answer and then must respond to a certain number of their peers. This creates a discussion thread, which mimics a conversation with back and forth communication. Finally, journaling is usually an independent activity, read only by your instructor. A journal assignment may ask you to document your observations, feelings, or findings on a particular topic or situation. For example, you may need to keep a journal about your clinical assignments.

**CLINICAL EXPERIENCES**

Clinical experiences are integral to nursing education; therefore, when it comes to your own clinical experiences take an active part in the decision process. Larger nursing programs often have a clinical coordinator who arranges clinical placements for all students. Other programs ask faculty who teach courses with clinical components to arrange clinical assignments. Either way, find out how clinical placements are arranged where you plan to enroll. Get to know the clinical placement coordinator and let him or her know what type of clinical experience you would like to gain.

Begin the process by finding out what facilities or sites the nursing program already uses as clinical sites. Use course assignments as an opportunity to get an in-depth look at possible career options. This can work both ways. For example, one RN–BSN student, who wanted to go into administration, completed a clinical assignment with a nurse administrator. What the student experienced was not what she expected, and so she decided to look at another career path. She was grateful for the experience. On the other hand, an MSN student, assigned to work with a research nurse on a project with pregnant women, had such a positive experience that she decided to pursue a PhD. Even if you do not want to pursue a particular career option, clinical exposure will give you insight into the pros and cons of different settings and positions so you can better understand the challenges faced by your nursing colleagues.

Because you are an experienced nurse, you probably do not want to waste your time and money on clinical assignments in which you already have expertise. The idea is for you to expand your knowledge.
and expose yourself to new and different situations. If you have an idea for a clinical placement site that would work for you, meet with the clinical placement coordinator to discuss it. For example, one RN–BSN student knew of a nursing home for ventilator-dependent pediatric patients and asked whether she could set up a clinical placement there. She wanted to become a pediatric nurse practitioner and thought the experience would be valuable. Another NP student inquired about fulfilling some of her clinical requirements at the school-based health center in her community. She planned to go into community health and wanted to understand how health care delivery occurred in the school setting.

Often, for legal and insurance purposes, the school must have a contract in place with a clinical site before they can accept students. The requirements for supervision vary by state, so get to know what your SBON requires (AACN, 2015b). For example, some NP programs require the onsite presence of a physician. Another regulatory challenge with clinical placements is access to electronic medical records by students. Some facilities require a background check before students can access patient records. Find out what the process is where you enroll.

For APRNs, the AACN issued a white paper on clinical education, which noted the severe shortage of clinical placement sites as well as preceptors (AACN, 2015b). It also highlighted the competition between nursing programs for adequate clinical sites. Proposed in the white paper were several creative strategies to counter these shortages. Many programs now have simulation laboratories, which help fill the void of clinical placement experiences in certain situations. (Simulation is covered in more detail in Chapter 7.) Pooling resources, including preceptors, is another strategy used by some nursing programs (AACN, 2015b). In addition, some programs “develop interprofessional or team-based practical experiences, which expand clinical opportunities but also facilitate the acquisition of interprofessional and role specific competencies” (AACN, 2015b, p. 7).

Some nursing programs offer service-learning experiences, which are different from the traditional clinical experiences. “Service-learning is an educational pedagogy that provides students with an opportunity to apply classroom learning to real-world situations, while meeting a specific community need” (B. S. Murray, 2013, p. 621). In other words, service-learning projects help students assess community needs and develop a sense of civic duty. In a literature review conducted by B. S. Murray (2013), sites used for service-learning projects included schools, college campuses, homeless shelters, domestic violence programs, Head Start and youth programs, refugee populations, and churches. Students learned
about social justice issues such as substance abuse, housing and food insecurity, poverty, and mental illness.

Whatever opportunities are available to you for clinical or service-learning experiences, make sure they facilitate your educational goals. Use these encounters to broaden your knowledge and gain a new perspective on health care in different settings.

**SUMMARY**

This chapter set forth many of the choices available to you in your decision to return to school. Ideas were outlined as to what to assess in a school and a nursing program, as well as links to help evaluate various aspects of both. The importance of finding a good fit in terms of the program’s location, delivery method, and clinical experiences offered were highlighted.

The next chapter covers the various components of the application process. You will find preparation is key to submitting a successful application and being accepted into the program of your choice.

**REFERENCES**


©Springer Publishing Company
I. STARTING THE JOURNEY


3. CHOICES, CHOICES, CHOICES


©Springer Publishing Company
I. STARTING THE JOURNEY


3. CHOICES, CHOICES, CHOICES


Chapter 6: Financial Preparation

This chapter examines the financial aspect of preparing for college. It contains a number of online resources regarding college financing options such as loans, scholarships, grants, tax-advantage savings plans, veterans’ benefits, and work–study programs. A special section outlines potential funding for doctoral work. In addition, the chapter covers ideas on cost-saving measures as well as information on available tax credits.

Do not interpret information in this chapter as financial advice. The aim is to provide resources so you can determine what financing options are available and might work for your own situation. If financial planning is a concern, consult with an expert at the financial aid office of the college you plan to attend or from another reputable source such as a credit union. Because funding for nursing education has specific options not available to other disciplines, you may want to speak with someone who has specific knowledge on the topic.

FINANCIAL PLANNING

Financial concerns are common among those who consider a return to school. As an adult, you work hard for your money, so any investment you make toward furthering your education should entail a thoughtful plan. Understandably, the possibility of incurring any debt may be emotional. To alleviate some of these concerns, it is important to analyze your present financial status, research all the options available, and make a decision based on the information. You may find many of your concerns addressed in this chapter.

In a study, Munkvold, Tanner, and Herinckx (2012) reported the major reason associate degree nurses did not transfer immediately into a...
bachelor’s program, despite the availability of an academic progression model, was financial concerns. These concerns, in order of importance, included the cost of tuition, need for family income, and concern with current debt load. Another factor mentioned was limited tangible support in terms of salary increase for advancing their nursing education. Yet the study did not report whether these nurses sought any type of financial aid counseling to explore ways to prevent further debt load.

In discussions with nurses at all levels, financial concerns were evident. One nurse found financial terminology confusing and stated, “everybody kind of speaks a certain language” (Wolff, 2013, p. 150). In addition, nurses did not understand what, when, and/or how to fill out various forms, apply for a loan, or locate potential scholarships. Unfortunately, these nurses were not aware of the vast number of resources available to guide them with financial planning as well as help pay for their education. This chapter clarifies some of the terminology and points you toward resources that will explain many of the options available to you.

For an overall review of financial aid options, eligibility criteria, application process, how to avoid scams, and repayment of loans, visit the U.S. Department of Education’s (ED; 2016a) website at studentaid.ed.gov/sa. The U.S. Department of Education (2014) also published a pamphlet entitled “Funding Your Education,” which is updated periodically and available at studentaid.ed.gov/sa/sites/default/files/funding-your-education.pdf. Check for the most current issue when it is time for you to check out financial aid options. In addition, explore the financial aid resources provided on the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN; 2016) website at www.aacn.nche.edu/students/financial-aid.

**Gather Financial Information**

Before you apply for any type of financial aid, you need to gather some personal documents as well as financial information. Specifically, you will need your Social Security number, driver’s license number, Alien Registration Number if you are not a U.S. citizen, and your most recent tax return, including W2 information. You may also need information on other income or financial resources such as child support, interest income, investments, financial gifts, value of property you own excluding the home you live in, veterans’ noneducation benefits, business and investment farm assets, unemployment benefits, and savings and checking account balances. If married, you may have to disclose your spouse’s or partner’s financial information; if your parents claim you as a dependent, you may need to provide their information, too.
In addition, it may be helpful to set up a financial file to organize the information you collect.

If possible, attend a financial aid session to learn more about the process, preferably at the college you plan to attend. As an alternative, the National College Access Network sponsors College Goal Sunday programs at various locations throughout each state. Colleges, credit unions, libraries, and high schools often host these free sessions. To find one near you, go to www.collegegoalsundayusa.org and locate your state on the map.

In addition, if your employer or union hosts an informational session on tuition reimbursement benefits or other financial options available to employees, take advantage of this opportunity. Find out your eligibility and amounts these options provide.

**Estimate Costs**

To get a better idea of how much school will cost, you need to gather some information first. The total cost can vary significantly among colleges and the types of program you plan to attend, and so it is worth your time to do a little homework. Do not be put off by the “sticker” price of a college. The published costs you see on the school’s website are before the application of any financial aid, such as scholarships, loans, grants, work–study, or tuition reimbursement. The federal government, through the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, has made it easier to calculate your cost to attend school by mandating colleges post a net price calculator on their website. To locate the net price calculator for a college, go to its home page and search for “net price calculator.” Another way to access it is to go to the National Center for Education Statistics website and type in the college you want (nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator). Click under the “Tuition, Fees, and Estimated Student Expenses” tab. Scroll down the page and you will find a net price calculator for the school. This will give you an estimate for earning your degree (e.g., 4-year costs for a bachelor’s degree). A third option is to use one of the calculators featured on the College Board website at bigfuture.collegeboard.org/pay-for-college/tools-calculators. This site has several types of calculators from which to choose such as a college savings calculator, a student loan comparison calculator, and a net price calculator.

Most net price calculators have you fill out some basic questions, such as how many people are in your household, how many dependents, your taxable income, your living arrangements, and so forth. Once you hit the “calculate” button, you will see the largest cost is for tuition and
fees, referred to as direct costs. Other costs include books, room and board, supplies, transportation, parking, and other personal costs, referred to as indirect costs. Using the net price calculator gives you only a rough estimate so you can compare programs. For example, you may be able to exclude the room and board cost if you plan to live and eat at home. Once you know about any tuition reimbursement benefits, scholarships, grants, and so on, you can go back to the calculator and run the numbers again. In addition, many calculators ask whether you have an estimated family contribution (EFC) amount. This topic is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

There are a few things to keep in mind when examining the costs of college. For instance, out-of-state tuition is often more expensive than in-state tuition, although this varies by college. Some colleges may have a per-credit-hour tuition fee, whereas others have a set price for full-time students regardless of how many credits they take per semester. Transportation costs can add up, and so you may want to calculate these depending on what mode of transportation you plan to use—car, bus, train, taxi, or subway. If you expect to drive to campus, factor in the parking fees. Some campuses have parking meters; others make you purchase a parking decal or tag. Other costs you may incur depend on the program you plan to attend. For example, you may need to purchase uniforms, lab coats, or scrubs for clinical rotations. Some programs may require you to have equipment such as a stethoscope, otoscope, reflex hammer, calipers, or pen light. Many of these things you may already have or could borrow. Another expense to factor into your calculations is any computer equipment or software you may need. If you plan to study abroad, that can add another layer of costs. The cost of books can also add up. Chapter 12 has an entire section on options for obtaining books that could save you a considerable amount of time and money. Finally, if you are a doctoral student, D. G. Smith and Delmore (2007) cautioned the need to factor in dissertation costs. These may include costs for surveys, printing, statistical software, postage, travel for data-collection purposes, incentives for study participants, transcription, consultation fees, editing/proofreading, and thesis or dissertation publication.

**TITLE IV OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION ACT**

A major source of federal student aid for postsecondary education comes from programs authorized under Title IV of the Higher Education Act (Hegji, 2014). Check to see whether the school you plan to attend is
Title IV eligible as this may affect what financial aid you can receive. The programs most applicable to nursing students under Title IV include the following: Federal Perkins Loans, Direct Loans, Federal Pell Grants, Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants (FSEOG), and Federal Work Study.

FREE APPLICATION FOR FEDERAL STUDENT AID

To receive any type of financial assistance from federal or state grants, loans, or work-study programs, you will need to complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid application, commonly referred to as “FAFSA.” The results from your FAFSA application help determine your eligibility and amount you may receive from federal and state programs. In addition, many colleges use information from the FAFSA to decide on college aid. No matter what your financial situation status, you may want to complete a FAFSA application.

To apply, visit the website at fafsa.ed.gov and download an application or complete it online (ED, 2016b). Gather the personal and financial information noted previously in this chapter before you begin. If you have not completed your tax return yet, you can enter your estimated taxes and then return later to update the information. Because some schools allocate student aid on a first-come first-served basis, try to complete your FAFSA as soon after January 1 as possible. Also, have available a list of schools you want to receive your FAFSA information.

The first thing to do is to create an FSA ID, which consists of a user-created username and password. Keep this somewhere safe in case you need to correct or add any information later on. Make sure you are honest with all your answers, because the government can audit the information on your FAFSA at any time. In addition, do not leave any questions blank. If you do, an error message will appear. If you file your taxes online, you may be able to save some time by electronically linking your tax return to your FAFSA application. Finally, the application will ask whether you have ever been convicted of a crime. When you click on an answer to that question, the following will appear:

If you are convicted of possessing or selling drugs after you submit your FAFSA, you must notify the financial aid administrator at your college immediately. You will lose your eligibility for federal student aid and will be required to pay back all aid you received after your conviction. (ED, 2016b)
Once you complete your FAFSA, you will receive a student aid report (SAR) as will all the schools you indicated on your application. The SAR provides your EFC, which is the amount the college expects you to provide for your college expenses, whether through loans, scholarships, tuition reimbursement, or other forms of financing. Each school you apply to is then able to put together a financial aid package. You may want to ask for two estimates—one with loan amounts and another without loans. Once you have the information, you will know how much to aim for with scholarship, grant, tuition reimbursement, work–study, or personal finances. States also use information from your FAFSA to determine eligibility for state financial aid. This should be included in your SAR.

Because the EFC bases its estimates on your previous year’s income, what should you do if your financial situation changes? For example, if you lose your job because of a merger, or you get a separation or divorce, or your spouse becomes disabled and is out of work, you may want to find out how this affects your financial aid. It is up to you to discuss this situation with the financial aid office at each school and send a letter with a detailed description of how this change in circumstance has affected your finances. Work with the school to come up with a plan.

You must submit a new FAFSA each year you plan to attend college. When it is time to submit for the next year, use the renewal feature to save time. Keep track of due dates—each state sets its own for purposes of state financial aid. If you have any questions, contact the Federal Student Aid office through e-mail, chat, or phone 1-800-4FED-AID or 1-800-433-3243.

SCHOLARSHIPS

Most scholarships and grants do not require repayment; therefore, it is a good idea to check your eligibility and apply for as many scholarships and grants as you can. In general, scholarships can be merit- or need-based or made available to members of an organization, whereas grants are mainly need-based. Although many adult students associate scholarships with high school students, you may be surprised at how many are available to adult students once you start searching. Sometimes, just knowing where to look and taking the time to complete an application can make the difference between easily affording college or not. It will take some work to investigate scholarships and complete applications, but it should be worth it in the end. Unfortunately, if no one applies, a scholarship often goes unused. So be the one to apply!
6. FINANCIAL PREPARATION

Where should you search for scholarships? Check out both national and local sources. Some may be specific to nursing; others may be for adult students in any discipline. You may want to apply for both types to improve your chances of success. A good place to start is the website www.Discovernursing.com/scholarships sponsored by Johnson & Johnson. This site allows you to sort by type of degree, location, and requirements (e.g., gender, ethnicity, grades). It also lists scholarship amounts, deadlines, and contacts. The AACN also offers numerous links to nursing scholarships (www.aacn.nche.edu/students/scholarships) as well as funding resources for future nurse educators at www.aacn.nche.edu/media-relations/fact-sheets/funding-resources. Another resource to explore is the U.S. Department of Labor site. Its scholarship search feature “Career One Stop” allows you to narrow down scholarships by state, award type, study level, and affiliation restrictions such as minority group, religious affiliation, or veteran status. Use the keyword “nursing” to locate specific scholarships: www.careeronestop.org/toolkit/training/find-scholarships.aspx. Peterson’s, well known for their test preparation courses and publications, has a scholarship search function for both college scholarships and graduate school scholarships at www.petersons.com/college-search/scholarship-search.aspx.

If you are a minority student, additional scholarships may be available to you. For example, the Accredited Schools Online website has an extensive list of scholarships for minority and specialty groups. See www.accreditedschoolsonline.org/resources/college-scholarships-for-minority-students. Peterson’s search function allows you to search by ethnicity, disability, veteran status, or religious affiliation (see link above). The American Assembly for Men in Nursing offers several scholarships to its members and lists scholarship winners along with their winning scholarship essays at aamn.org/scholarships. The Minority Nurse newsletter, a publication by Springer Publishing Company, also has a list of available scholarships at minoritynurse.com/nursing-scholarships. The National Black Nurses Association also offers several scholarships (www.nbna.org/content.asp?contentid=82). If you belong to a specialty nursing organization, investigate any scholarship opportunities they provide.

Associations and professional organizations are another place to search for scholarships. Explore any organizations you belong to, at both national and local levels. For example, Sigma Theta Tau International has a list of scholarships at www.nursingsociety.org/advance-elevate/careers/nursing-scholarship-opportunities, as well as scholarships offered by individual chapters. The Association for Non-Traditional Students in
Higher Education also has several scholarships. See www.myantshe.org/ANTSHE-Scholarships. In addition, you may want to check out other national nursing organizations such as the National League for Nursing (NLN), American Nurses Association (ANA), American Association of Nurse Practitioners, American Association of Nurse Anesthetists, National Student Nurses’ Association (NSNA), and American Organization of Nurse Executives (AONE). Several of these affiliate with a nonprofit foundation that offers scholarships and/or grants. For example, there is the AONE Foundation (www.aone.org/aone-foundation) an affiliate of AONE, the American Nurses Foundation (www.anfonline.org) an affiliate of ANA, NLN Foundation for Nursing Education (www.nln.org/giving/overview/nln-foundation-for-nursing-education) an affiliate of NLN, and the Foundation of the National Student Nurses’ Association, Inc., an affiliate of NSNA (www.forevernursing.org). Check whether there is a not-for-profit foundation affiliated with any organization to which you belong. You may want to consider joining an organization so you can apply for a scholarship; however, check the eligibility requirements. Some organizations expect you to be an active member for a certain amount of time before you are eligible to apply for a scholarship. Think ahead as this could be an option for subsequent funding.

Not-for-profit organizations or foundations are another source to explore for scholarships. For over 100 years, the Nurses Educational Funds, Inc., has provided educational scholarships for nurses www.n-e-f.org. In fact, their primary function is to raise funds for nursing scholarships. Another source is the Jonas Center (www.jonascenter.org), which focuses its efforts on developing nurse leaders and educators. Many corporations set up foundations to carry out philanthropic efforts, such as Pepsi, Johnson & Johnson, and Uniform Advantage, so make sure to check these out too.

If you are interested in working in a critical shortage facility (CSF) or a health professional shortage area (HPSA) in exchange for a full scholarship along with a monthly support stipend, you may want to apply to the Nurse Corps Scholarship Program. These scholarships, administered by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), support nurse practitioner students through college in exchange for service. See www.hrsa.gov/loanscholarships/scholarships/Nursing for details on this program.

So that you do not leave any stone unturned, investigate all local scholarship opportunities too. Check your local Chamber of Commerce or public library for a list of local civic organizations such as Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions, or women’s clubs. They often offer scholarships. If not, suggest they start a scholarship fund for nurses going back to
school. One nursing program director of a community college was a member of her local Rotary Club and petitioned the membership to set up a nursing scholarship. Also, explore local hospitals, auxiliaries, and other health care-related organizations in your area. Banks and credit unions may be another source to check as donors often set up scholarships in honor of a loved one. The same holds true for funeral homes. One nurse discovered a scholarship posted on a local funeral home website in honor of a nurse who passed away several years before. If you belong to a fraternal order, honor society, or alumni association, check whether they have any scholarships available. If you or a family member belong to a union, check whether you qualify for any scholarships. Finally, do not forget local chapters of professional nursing organizations. Nurses on scholarship committees for these organizations often commented on how it was difficult to locate and encourage applicants. Often, scholarships are held over until the next year because no one applied!

Do not forget to search for scholarships at the college where you plan to apply. The financial aid office will have information on many of the scholarships; however, do not rely on them to know about every scholarship on campus. Check with the alumni association and any student clubs or organizations. These may require a separate application. In discussions with many nurses, it was surprising to find that not many nurses connected with financial aid or any other office to discuss what was available through campus scholarships.

Finally, you may want to search through a book on scholarships. Go to your local bookstore, library, high school guidance office, or college financial aid office where you will likely find such resources. Spend time perusing these books to get ideas on what is available. For example, Tanabe and Tanabe (2016) publish an 800-page volume each year with scholarships of all kinds.

Now that you have a long list of possible scholarships, you may want to organize yourself. Make a spreadsheet to keep track of the name of each scholarship, where and how to apply, due dates, contact information, correspondence, scholarship amount, and expectations of award winners. Make a note as to when you expect to hear about a decision. Read the scholarship application carefully and gather all the information you need to complete it. Many scholarships require an essay and/or interview. Use some of the tips mentioned in Chapter 2 to help write the essay or prepare for an interview. Since you may be able to use the same essay for several scholarship applications, it is worth your investment in time to write a good one. You may also want to read a few examples of winning scholarship essays in the book by Tanabe.
II. PREPARATION—THE KEY TO SUCCESS

and Tanabe (2014). In addition, check out past scholarship recipients to get an idea of what the scholarship committee looks for in a candidate. Lastly, find out how the scholarship committee disperses the money. Does a check go directly to the school or do you receive it?

If you receive a scholarship, you may have a few things to do. Some entities require something from you in return for the scholarship such as your presence at an awards ceremony, a presentation, an interview for their newsletter, a copy of your grades, or a progress report. This is a small price to pay for receipt of financial support. You also need to report the amount to the financial aid office, as they may need to adjust your financial aid package.

One last word on scholarships—be aware of potential scholarship or financial aid scams. The FinAid website (www.finaid.org/scholarships/scams.phtml) provides detailed information on the warning signs to look for such as paying money up front to apply or receive information about a scholarship, wording that indicates you are eligible or guaranteed to win, offering to complete the application on your behalf, and unusual requests for personal information. If in doubt about the legitimacy of a scholarship, bring the information to a financial aid officer who can investigate it for you.

GRANTS

Grants are usually need-based and depend on your FAFSA information. Most grants do not require repayment unless you drop out of college before you finish your degree. Federal Pell grants are awards for undergraduate students who have never earned a bachelor’s degree. The amount usually depends on family income and the amount has a cap each year set by the federal government. In addition, Pell grants go to every eligible student. For more information, check studentaid.ed.gov/sa/types/grants-scholarships/pell. A second federal grant is the FSEOG, which is for students with exceptional financial need. Each school receives a certain amount of FSEOG funds. So, distribution of FSEOG is on a first-come first-served basis. This is one more reason to complete your FAFSA as soon after January 1 as possible. To learn more, see studentaid.ed.gov/sa/types/grants-scholarships/fseog. A third federal grant is also available to students whose parent or guardian died of military service in Afghanistan or Iraq. If this pertains to your situation, check out the details at studentaid.ed.gov/sa/types/grants-scholarships/iraq-afghanistan-service.
HRSA also offers grants specifically for nursing students at all levels and areas of study. Check out their website at bhpr.hrsa.gov/nursing/index.html. Another resource to investigate is www.hrsa.gov/about/organization/bureaus/bhw, which is HRSA’s Bureau of Health Workforce site and covers scholarships, grants, and loan forgiveness programs.

In addition to federal grants, there are state grants, which vary widely by state. Check with the financial aid office at the college you plan to attend to learn more about what is available.

LOANS

Unlike scholarships and grants, student loans often require repayment. However, there are exceptions to this rule, especially if you plan to go into nursing education or work in an underserved or shortage area such as a HPSA or CSF.

The federal government has four basic types of direct loans under the William D. Ford Federal Direct Loan Program (ED, 2015a, 2015b). The first is a Direct Subsidized Loan, which is for undergraduate students who demonstrate financial need. Funded by the ED, this loan usually does not charge interest during certain times. In other words, the federal government subsidizes the loan by paying the interest while you attend school at least half time. Low, fixed interest rates are typical. The next type of loan is a Direct Unsubsidized Loan, which is for both undergraduate and graduate students. You do not need to demonstrate financial need for this type of loan. Also funded by the ED, interest rate charges accrue during the entire time you are in school and are fixed. Both these loans are also referred to as Stafford Loans. Direct PLUS Loans are a third type of loan funded by the ED. These are for graduate or professional degree students and the applicant must not have a negative credit history. Interest accrues during all periods. Finally, the Direct Consolidation Loan allows borrowers to consolidate eligible loans into a single loan. Again, low fixed rates apply.

Federal Perkins Loans are another type of loan (ED, 2016c). The difference between the Perkins Loan and the direct loans described previously is that the college is the lender for Perkins Loans instead of the education department. Both undergraduate and graduate students are eligible for Perkins loans depending on their financial need and availability of funds from the college. Remember, federal financial aid is not available at schools that are not accredited.
Read up on all the loan possibilities so you understand for which loans you are eligible, what the interest rate is, when your first payment will be due, and what your monthly payment will be once you begin payments. Often, repayment is deferred until you graduate or drop down to a certain number of credits or hours per semester. There may also be a grace period of 6 months or so before you must begin repayment after graduation.

Certain situations may allow your federal loan to be forgiven, cancelled, or discharged (ED, 2015c, 2016d). If you work for the government, a nonprofit organization, teach, or work in a HPSA or CSF, this option may apply. Consider checking your eligibility.

Personal or private loans are another option available for funding. These can be through home equity loans, withdrawal from certain retirement accounts, or personal loans. Just as with federal loans, interest rates and repayment options can vary. You may want to shop around if you consider this option; however, just as with scholarships, be aware of any potential scams. You may also want to consider seeking professional advice before taking out a personal loan.

**Graduate Nursing—Funding Your Graduate Work**

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, if you are a graduate student, you may incur additional expenses. Fortunately, there are many resources available to assist you as long as you are willing to take the time to search and apply for funding. Much of this type of funding will come from research grants. For example, Ellenbecker and Kazmi (2014) mentioned the John A. Hartford Foundation (www.jhartfound.org), the Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need (GAANN) program (www2.ed.gov/programs/gaann/index.html), the Oncology Nursing Society Foundation grants (www.onsfoundation.org/apply/re), as well as university dissertation fellowships, and faculty research grants as possible sources of funding. HRSA has several traineeship grants available too.

D. G. Smith and Delmore (2007) discussed funding for dissertation research in their article and provided a table with web links to various sites. In addition to some of the sources already noted in this chapter, the various regional Research Societies, the American Association for the History of Nursing, the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses, the Association of Nurses in AIDS Care, and the National Institutes of Health were mentioned. These authors also suggested nurses in search of funding routinely review the *Annual Register of Grant Support, The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *Foundation Grants to Individuals*. 

©Springer Publishing Company
As noted previously, you can search the U.S. Department of Labor’s “Career One Stop” site using the keywords “dissertation” or “fellowship” and come up with a list of possibilities for funding. Peterson’s also offers separate information on graduate funding, including funding for fellowships (www.petersons.com/graduate-schools/graduate-loans-scholarships.aspx). Finally, the Jonas Center partnered with the Hearst Foundation to offer scholarships to doctor of nursing practice students. This is just a limited list of all that is out there for graduate student funding, so continue to search for other options and ask questions.

**VETERANS’ BENEFITS**

If you are a veteran, you may be eligible to receive funding for school through the Post 911-GI Bill’s Yellow Ribbon Program. To find out whether you are eligible, check the website at www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/yellow_ribbon.asp. Not all schools participate in this program; to determine whether the school you plan to attend does, scroll down to the bottom of the webpage and click on the link for participating schools. On the map, select the state where the school is located. You will then see a list of all the participating schools in the state. On this list, you will find the maximum contribution per student per year as well as the total number of students each college supports. To apply, contact the school’s certifying official. If you do not know where to find this person, contact the financial aid office or the veteran’s office at the school.

If you are a reservist in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, Army National Guard, or Air National Guard, you may be eligible for educational funding through the Montgomery GI Bill Selected Reserve (MGIB-SR). For more information on this benefit, see www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/mgib_sr.asp.

According to L. S. Smith (2012), if “you’re a spouse or child of a veteran or active duty military person, you may also be eligible for education assistance as a direct or transferred benefit” (p. 33). Check www.benefits.va.gov/GIBILL/post911_transfer.asp to learn more about this option.

If you are a survivor or dependent of a veteran, there are two programs in which you may qualify: The Survivors’ and Dependents’ Education Assistance (DEA) Program and The Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry Scholarship (Fry Scholarship). To learn more about these programs see www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/survivor_dependent_assistance.asp.
WORK–STUDY

Work–study programs are another option for funding part of your education. These programs are available for both undergraduate and graduate students and receive funding from state and/or federal sources. Generally, they base selection on financial need; however, you can indicate your interest in this option on your FAFSA. The salary is typically minimum wage or slightly higher. Although the salary may not be what you could earn working as a nurse, there are some work–study opportunities that might be beneficial. For example, one graduate nurse took a work–study position in the simulation lab and found it gave her the experience she needed to apply for a job as a simulation lab coordinator when she graduated. If you plan to drop down to part time at your regular workplace, work–study might be an option for you to pursue.

PERSONAL ASSETS

Whether or not you believe you have personal assets, consider some of the ideas in this section. Remember, when it comes to financing college, every dollar counts.

*Personal Savings, Savings Plans, Unused Assets, or Credit Card*

Before applying for any loans, you may want to examine your liquid assets, such as savings accounts, stocks, or money market funds, to determine how much you have available. Can you earmark some or all of it for your education? Consider using funds received from an inheritance or life insurance policy to pay for college. Regard a college education as a good investment in your future—something your loved one would have wanted for you.

If you want to save some money for college before you enroll, consider starting a 529 tax-advantage savings plan. Sponsored by states, state agencies, or educational institutions, these plans help reduce your taxable income while saving money for college. To learn more, check the U.S. Securities and Exchange webpage at [www.sec.gov/investor/pubs/intro529.htm](http://www.sec.gov/investor/pubs/intro529.htm).

Another type of personal savings plan is an Individual Development Account (IDA), which helps low-income individuals afford a home, start a business, or fund higher education. The IDA account matches money you deposit with funds from your state’s Temporary Assistance
for Needy Families (TANF) program or other private sector funds. A
Coverdell Account, formerly known as an *education IRA*, is another type
of educational savings account available in some areas. These accounts
allow families to save up to a certain amount each year—tax-free—to pay
for college expenses. For more information on both these savings plans,
see the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration
of Children & Families webpage at idaresources.acf.hhs.gov/page?
pageid=a047000000DfYAiAAN.

Look around and determine whether you have any unused assets. For example, one nursing student owned a three-car garage in which
he used only one bay. He cleaned out the other two and rented them
for enough money to cover the cost of his books each semester. Another
nurse rented a spare bedroom to visiting professors. This brought in
enough income for her to purchase a new laptop. If you do use this
option, be aware that you will have to claim this income as earnings.

Lastly, if you find yourself scrambling to pay a college bill at the last
minute, instead of opting not to enroll, consider charging it to a credit
card. Then, sit down and make out a regular payback plan to pay off
the entire amount by the end of the semester. Care should be taken as
this option may require considerable self-discipline. Try to use a credit
card with a low interest rate and avoid late fees if possible.

**Liquidate Assets**

If you want to pay as much as you can out of pocket, consider selling
items you no longer use or want. For example, do you have an extra
car, motorcycle, snowmobile, boat, or other vehicle just sitting around?
Perhaps you have jewelry, furniture, antiques, or other collectibles you
could sell on craigslist. Could you cash in any savings bonds that have
matured? Have you inherited a house or other property you could sell
or rent? If you are not able to sell something, could you donate it as you
may be able to receive a tax deduction for the fair market value of the
item? For example, fire departments often ask for donations of used cars
for training purposes and provide a letter of donation. Check current
tax laws on these options.

**COST-SAVING MEASURES**

Cutting costs is another way to help your finances. The first place to
start is to limit spending on luxury items such as gourmet coffee, extra
cable channels, expensive vacations, and restaurants. Also, watch your
use of convenience shopping as these costs add up quickly. Look for discounts wherever you go. For example, colleges often offer discounts for computers and software. Professional organizations may partner with corporations to bring members benefits. For instance, the NSNA collaborated with Office Depot/Office Max to bring its members an 80% discount on certain school and office supplies. Check any organizations to which you or your family belong for discounts. Use your student ID for reduced rates on fees or tickets. For example, one student used his ID to get a reduced price on car washes. Develop the habit of asking for a student discount. Also, consider buying in bulk for things like pens, ink, printer paper, notebooks, or other things you use frequently. One student repurposed an old television screen as a monitor as a cost-saving measure. Be creative in how you cut costs and share those ideas!

There are also ways you can reduce school-related costs. Check out your college bill. Are there costs you could negotiate or eliminate such as student activity fees, health services, or campus newspaper fee? Could you take a challenge exam? It costs less than tuition. If you plan to eat on campus, check whether the college offers a commuter or small meal plan. Purchase used textbooks or rent them. Finally, try to avoid additional charges, such as late fees if possible.

**TAX CREDITS**

It is important to educate yourself about what tax credits and tax deductions you may be eligible to use. Start by reading the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) publication 970—*Tax Benefits for Education*. This publication explains the Lifetime Learning Credit and the American Opportunity Tax Credit (formerly the Hope credit), both of which can reduce the taxes you owe. The publication also covers what other eligible expenses may be deducted on your tax return such as tuition and fees, books, student loan interest, and other qualified education expenses. To learn more about tax benefits for education, check the IRS Information Center webpage at www.irs.gov/uac/Tax-Benefits-for-Education:-Information-Center.

Be aware that you must report any taxable income you receive from scholarships, grants, or fellowships on your tax return. Because tax laws constantly change, make sure you understand the current tax laws on this topic. Check out www.irs.gov/Individuals/Education-Credits for IRS forms, definitions, and information. If in doubt, contact the IRS via phone, online, or in person at a nearby Taxpayer Assistance Center.
6. FINANCIAL PREPARATION

SUMMARY

This chapter covered basic information about financing your education such as the FAFSA application, scholarships, grants, loans, work–study, and tax benefits. Because financial resources change constantly, as do websites, become a smart consumer of financial aid by making sure you have the most up-to-date information when it is time to apply. The more proactive you are about financing college, the less you may need to pay out of pocket or through loans. Educate yourself about your options, spend time researching possible scholarships and grants, and think about ways you can cut costs.

The next chapter acquaints you with the use of computers and technology in the academic setting. Nursing students enter programs with a wide variety of experience with computers and technology; therefore, you may need to assess your current skills and knowledge so you are prepared. Even if you believe you are technologically proficient, a review of the next chapter may reveal some things you have never encountered before.

REFERENCES


©Springer Publishing Company
II. PREPARATION—THE KEY TO SUCCESS


This chapter describes the characteristics of adult learners and explains how you can assess your personal learning style. It focuses on the academic skills many faculty and nurses consider essential for success, notably, writing, reading for meaning, note-taking, and study skills. The chapter also reviews test taking, information literacy, referencing, presentation and project completion, along with statistical and mathematical skills. Found throughout the chapter are helpful tips from faculty and students, checklists on how to evaluate papers, as well as several printed and online resources to help you achieve academic success.

Adult learners, like you, enter the academic environment with a range of abilities and skills. Unfortunately, what is needed to be successful is not always obvious, especially if you have been out of school for some time. As you reenter the academic world, you may find yourself on some steep learning curves with all the new material required for each course. Nurses who obtained these academic skills before returning to school usually found themselves with fewer learning curves the first semester or two. So give yourself an advantage and get a head start by learning from your peers’ experiences.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF ADULT LEARNERS**

As an adult learner, you are part of a growing number of adults who find themselves returning to school. The seminal works, *Adults as Learners: Increasing Participation and Facilitating Learning* (Cross, 1981) and *The Adult Learner* (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005), help to paint a picture of adult students and how they learn. Although adult learners
are a heterogeneous group, they have several characteristics in common. Adult learners

- Are autonomous and self-directed. They take responsibility for their own learning and want to have control over what is learned.
- Need to know the what, why, and how of what they are to learn. In other words, they want an identifiable purpose for what they are expected to study.
- Have a wealth of experience to tap into. They bring this experience to the classroom and learn from others’ experiences.
- Are ready to learn because the choice to return to school, in most cases, is voluntary. This promotes active, rather than passive, learning.
- Are motivated by goals. They want to know what the personal payoff is for learning (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Knowles et al., 2005).

**LEARNING STYLES**

Knowing your preferred learning style is one of the first steps you can take to become a successful student. It is important for you to understand how you learn best because not everyone learns in the same way. Typically, an individual uses a combination of learning styles. Although there are several ways to assess your learning style, one based on the senses—visual, auditory, and kinesthetic—is common (Russell, 2006). A quick and simple online self-assessment to determine your preferred learning style is available from EducationPlanner.org, a public service of the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (see www.educationplanner.org/students/self-assessments/learning-styles.shtml). Results from this assessment highlight your preferred style and provide tips on how you learn best. In addition, it provides an overview of all three learning styles. Because faculty may not teach to your preferred style, it is important to advocate for yourself and request materials or activities that will help you understand the course content (Table 8.1).

**WHAT ACADEMIC SKILLS WILL YOU NEED TO BE SUCCESSFUL?**

The following sections are broken down into the skills both nurses and faculty found useful in the academic environment. Although a number of resources are available, many nurses found they wasted time trying
### Table 8.1 Learning Styles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Learns Best By</th>
<th>Study Tips</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visual learner—learns by seeing</td>
<td>• Reading or looking at pictures</td>
<td>• Ask for written instructions or handouts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Visualizing words or mnemonics</td>
<td>• Take notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reading silently</td>
<td>• Highlight important ideas or themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Studying in a quiet location</td>
<td>• Compare notes with other students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Sitting in the front of the class</td>
<td>• Make index cards or flash cards to study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Watching the speaker</td>
<td>• Color code notes or readings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Observing others</td>
<td>• Create or memorize mnemonics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Watching a movie or slide presentation</td>
<td>• Study the lecture outline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Drawing (e.g., concept map, charts, tables)</td>
<td>• Ask for additional reading material that will supplement the course content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auditory learner—learns by hearing</td>
<td>• Listening (e.g., lectures, tapes, discussions, podcasts)</td>
<td>• Ask for verbal instructions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reading out loud</td>
<td>• Relisten to a taped lecture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Tape-recording your notes or other student’s notes and then playing them back</td>
<td>• Create a rhyme or jingle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reiterating what you heard in a lecture</td>
<td>• Repeat directions out loud and confirm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Studying with music or other background noise playing</td>
<td>• Attach a verbal description to pictures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Limiting visual stimuli while studying or reading</td>
<td>• Talk yourself through a procedure or skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Participating in group discussions</td>
<td>• Ask other students to interpret what they learned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinesthetic (tactile) learner—learns by doing</td>
<td>• Acting out or practicing a new skill</td>
<td>• Ask for YouTube or other audio material to supplement course content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Using the keyboard to take notes</td>
<td>• Ask if reading material is in audio format</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Moving while reading (e.g., rocking chair, walking on treadmill, riding stationary bike)</td>
<td>• Ask for hands-on activities to learn new skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Role-playing</td>
<td>• Take frequent breaks so you can get up and move about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Participating in simulations</td>
<td>• Write out flash cards and play a game with them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Rewrite your notes</td>
<td>• Teach content to another student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

©2017 by Debra A. Wolff.
II. PREPARATION—THE KEY TO SUCCESS

to find what was helpful. Often, this occurred at the last minute, when an assignment was due or they ran into problems with their computer. Knowing where to go for answers may play a huge factor in your success.

WRITING SKILLS

If one of your fears about returning to school is the expectation of writing papers, you are among good company. Nurses at all levels expressed this same concern. For example, a nurse practitioner who was going back for her doctorate noted she was so used to writing in shorthand and using drop-down menus that her writing skills had completely atrophied. An RN–BSN student noted, “I mean I’m very computer savvy, but in my personal life I’m not writing papers all the time” (Wolff, 2013, p. 134). Nurses admitted they routinely used an informal writing style (e.g., e-mails, Facebook, texting), so the thought of having to write a paper using correct grammar, proper sentence structure, and appropriate references was intimidating. Yet, many of these same nurses persevered and were successful in learning how to write again. They attributed this success to the help they received along the way.

Faculty have also identified writing as a universal concern among nursing students and, in fact, several programs have implemented strategies to address this issue (Hanson Diehl, 2007; Oermann et al., 2015; Roberts & Goss, 2009). Nursing programs have incorporated writing skills in a variety of ways. Some of these strategies include writing workshops, specific writing assignments, online writing tutorials, and writing across the curriculum (Oermann et al., 2015). As mentioned in Chapter 3, if you are anxious about writing, when you apply to different programs ask questions on how writing is incorporated into the program or what help is available through the college.

So why is it so important for you to know how to communicate in writing? There are many reasons. Academic writing should be clear, logical, concise, and provide a strong argument. In fact, instructors use writing assignments as a way to assess whether learning outcomes have occurred. In addition, the ability to communicate effectively in writing, particularly with interdisciplinary team members, is essential for good-quality patient care (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2008, 2011). Writing is also a way to share information and express ideas with your nursing peers. If you are or aspire to be in a leadership position, writing is a necessary skill to complete reports, write proposals, and publish research findings. If in academia, you act as a role model for your students and need to demonstrate good writing skills.
Arm Yourself With Resources

If writing is a challenge for you, faculty and students have some advice to pass along. First, arm yourself with good resources. When asked what they would recommend to incoming students concerning writing resources, students and faculty responded by suggesting that you purchase a few good reference books or download them onto your computer or mobile device. In particular, they mentioned a dictionary, thesaurus, book(s) on grammar and punctuation, guidebooks on dissertations or capstone projects, and reference style manuals. See Table 8.2 for a list of references/resources suggested by faculty, students, and writing centers.

Table 8.2 Basic Reference Resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dictionaries—General</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Online version of <em>Merriam-Webster dictionary</em>: <a href="http://www.merriam-webster.com">www.merriam-webster.com</a>. This version allows you to look up a word online. When you click on the symbol, you can hear how the word is pronounced. There are also tabs for a thesaurus and medical dictionary. Save this one to your favorites.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dictionaries—Medical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dictionaries—For Multilingual Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grammar and Punctuation Guidebooks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

(continued)
II. PREPARATION—THE KEY TO SUCCESS

Table 8.2 Basic Reference Resources (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Style Manuals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading and Writing References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guidebooks for Theses, Capstones, and Dissertations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online Resources for Style, Grammar, Punctuation, Writing Assignments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Purdue Online Writing Lab: owl.english.purdue.edu/owl. This site has detailed information on APA, Chicago, and MLA format. Go to the site map and review all the resources available on grammar, punctuation, and academic writing skills. It also has information for multilingual students. Check out the Grammar Gang’s Blog for helpful tips. The site also has a frequently asked question section (FAQ).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Center: writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts. This site has both handouts and videos. Handouts include information on such things as how to write an introduction, conclusion, or transitions. Helpful tips on topics such as procrastination, writing anxiety, and understanding assignments are also available. Specific writing assignments such as blogs, annotated bibliographies, literature reviews, compare/contrast, and group writing are also covered. In addition, English-as-Second-Language (ESL) handouts and mobile app recommendations are available on this site.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The University of West Florida Writing Lab: uwf.edu/writelab/aids/minilessons. This site has both handouts and PowerPoint presentations. There are over 100 mini lessons on various topics, so when your professor writes on your paper that you have a dangling modifier, you can check out this site to see what he/she means!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Capital Community College Foundation: grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/powerpoint.htm. This site has a number of interactive PowerPoints on topics such as subject–verb agreement, avoiding run-on sentences, and use of colons. It also has a number of interactive quizzes to test your understanding.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

©2017 by Debra A. Wolff.

©Springer Publishing Company
8. ACADEMIC PREPARATION

Selecting a Topic

Sometimes the topic for a paper is assigned (e.g., health literacy, patient safety, ethics). At other times, students are encouraged to write about something of their own choosing. When this was the case, several nurses acknowledged they felt more comfortable writing about something familiar. Other nurses enjoyed the opportunity to explore a new topic in order to expand their knowledge base. Whichever option appeals to you, nursing students suggested you select a topic you feel is important or interesting. Students and faculty also stressed how crucial it is to read up on the topic. Take notes from your reading because this will help you accurately cite your sources. In-depth reading on the topic will highlight interesting questions, expose potential controversies, and demonstrate gaps in knowledge, which you may want to mention in your writing assignment. One nurse practitioner student told the story of how she chose to write about malaria for her epidemiology class. What she learned from her readings was intriguing, as she had never cared for a person with malaria. Interestingly, the nurse practitioner was able to put her new knowledge to use about a year or so later, when she correctly diagnosed a patient with recrudescence of his malaria.

Types of Writing Assignments

When reading the description for a writing assignment, identify the target audience. Is your professor the only one who will see your paper, or is it for general consumption? Does it need to target patients, or is it a higher-level writing assignment? This will help you identify the level of difficulty (i.e., readability) you can use. Does it need to be objective, or can you be subjective and express your own thoughts or opinions. The reason to ask yourself these questions is that you will need to complete a variety of writing assignments throughout your program. Writing does not come in just one format, and you need to be aware of all the different writing styles. Types of writing assignments may include discussion post, essay, white paper, abstract, annotated bibliography, case study, lab report, reflective journal entry, blog post, letter (e.g., to a legislator), literature review, opinion piece, portfolio, research paper, poster, brochure, handout, proposal, and critical analysis. Examples or tips for many of these types of writing assignments can be found in the online resources listed in Table 8.2.
Ask for Examples

One common complaint among nursing students at all levels was that they wished they had been proactive and asked for examples of various writing assignments. For example, students in one class had to complete an annotated bibliography. Because no one in the cohort had ever done one, they all struggled with what to do. One student remembered that a colleague of hers, who had been through a different program, had completed a similar assignment. She contacted this colleague and asked whether she would share her annotated bibliography. Once the cohort had an example, they were able to complete the assignment successfully.

Other students suggested you ask the professor for an example. For instance, one student had problems with how to write a white paper. The student e-mailed his professor, and she in turn sent the student some links to other white papers so he could see the format and structure. Another resource mentioned by students was the writing center at your college. They often have samples of different assignments they can share with you. The message here is that if you do not know what you are supposed to do, try not to waste time; ask for an example or clarification.

Structure and Organization

Once you know the type of assignment and your target audience, and have read enough on the topic, you can begin to organize what to write. Many students suggest you start with an outline. Before making an outline, some nurses liked to use sticky notes to write down ideas, organize the sticky notes, and then create the outline. Other nurses used concept maps to generate ideas. Look closely at the description of the writing assignment as well as the rubric to give you clues on what to include. As you read about the topic, jot down your thoughts in your outline.

Next, it is important to determine the “tone” for the assignment. Can it be in first person, in which you use personal pronouns (e.g., I, me, my, mine, we, our, us), or does it need to be in third person, in which you refer to individuals by name or with pronouns such as he/she, it, they, and so on? Writing in first person allows you to offer your own opinions and ideas, whereas writing in third person means you need to be the objective narrator on the topic. Many discussion forums and blogs are in first person, whereas most formal papers use third person. Whichever format you use, you should avoid switching between first and third person.

When you start to write, you need to make sure there is a logical flow to your writing. Many writing centers encourage students to use topical sentences in each paragraph. In other words, state the main point of the
paragraph in the first sentence and then fill in the details throughout the remainder of the paragraph. Each paragraph should focus on one topic. Use transition statements to link paragraphs or sections so the reader will know what is to follow.

Parsimony is another aspect of formal writing you will need to learn. One student admitted, “And my problem always was, making them too big, my papers too big . . . just going on and on and on and on. You know, that was always an issue, wanting to fill everything in” (Wolff, 2013, p. 134). Students suggested you get things down on paper first and then go back and pare down long sentences and phrases. Look for redundancy. Learn to be succinct!

If you are unsure of your writing abilities, use short simple sentences instead of longer, more complicated ones. Writing centers and workshops commonly suggest this tactic, particularly to English-as-second-language students, who may find it difficult to write in formal academic language (Weaver & Jackson, 2011).

Some students admitted they liked to experiment with different techniques to make their writing interesting. Some of their suggestions are included in Table 8.3. In addition, faculty spend much of their time reviewing various writing assignments and wanted to share what they considered some of the most common pitfalls to avoid when writing (Table 8.3).

---

Table 8.3 Writing Tips

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideas to Make Your Writing Interesting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Use metaphors or analogies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provide some historical background on a topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cite a startling or significant statistic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Pose a provocative question, and then address the various viewpoints on the topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use a quote or short poem that exemplifies the topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Illustrate a point of view with an example.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tell a short story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use humor to describe a situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Compare similar experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use graphics such as tables, pictures, concept maps, decision trees, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Vary the length of your sentences.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Tips on What to Avoid When Writing**

| Avoid the use of absolutes (e.g., none, all, every), unless you can justify them. |
| Do not overuse particular words or phrases. Use a thesaurus to find different words. |
| Do not indicate something is conclusive or proven. Instead, use the words “may” or “might.” |
| Avoid judgmental or biased statements, including gender bias. |

*(continued)*
II. PREPARATION—THE KEY TO SUCCESS

Table 8.3 Writing Tips (continued)

- Avoid overly dramatic words. Instead, use words/phrases like interestingly, it is relevant to note, or of concern.
- Do not overuse adjectives (e.g., fine, new, fluffy blanket).
- Do not preach or pontificate on a subject.
- Avoid run-on sentences (e.g., over 4 lines) and long paragraphs (e.g., more than 1 page).

Common Grammar and Punctuation Errors
- To review the parts of speech, see: www.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/definitions.htm.
- Check for noun/pronoun agreement. If the noun is plural (e.g., nurses), use a plural pronoun (e.g., they, them, their). If the noun is singular (e.g., student), use a singular pronoun (e.g., he/she, him/her, his/hers). See APA 3.20.
- Check for subject–verb agreement. Single subjects use a single verb (e.g., the patient walks). Plural subjects use a plural verb (e.g., patients walk). See APA 3.19.
- Affect as a verb means “to influence”; affect as a noun means “a feeling or emotion.” Effect as a noun means “result”; effect as a verb means “to make or accomplish.” Use the word effect when followed by the words a, an, any, the, take, into, or no. If you substitute these meanings in place of affect/effect and read it aloud, you can usually tell which one to use.
- Check for missing articles of speech (e.g., a, an, the). Use these with nouns.
- Whenever you write about a published article or study, put it in the past tense. Alternate the verbs you use to describe the contents or results of an article or study. For example, use reported, discussed, noted, stated, surveyed, found, described, observed, commented, examined, remarked, or suggested.
- Check for the correct placement of apostrophes for possessives. The s comes before the apostrophe in single possessives (a patient’s pulse) and after the s in plural possessives (patients’ rights). See APA 4.12.
- Use apostrophes for contractions (e.g., it’s for it is, they’re for they are).
- Use the correct homophone—words that sound alike but have different meanings. Common homophones are (to, too, two), (there, their, they’re), (principle, principal), (capitol, capital), (our, are), (accept, except), (your, you’re), (complement, compliment).
- Limit the use of the word that. Read a sentence in which you use the word that, then take the word that out and reread the sentence. If the sentence still makes sense and sounds grammatically correct, you can probably eliminate it.
- i.e. means in other words, in essence, or that is.
- e.g. means for example.
- et al. means and others. (Notice there is no period after et. in this construction)
- Use a block quotation for 40 words or more. APA 4.08
- Know when to use commas (APA 4.03), semicolons (APA 4.04), and colons (APA 4.05).
- Try to use the active voice when possible. See APA 3.18.
- Cite the page number(s) for quotes. If the reference is an Internet source, cite the paragraph number.
- Define acronyms the first time they appear in the text. After that, be consistent with using the acronym throughout the remainder of the paper.

Grammar, Spelling, Punctuation

Many students voiced fear when it came to using proper grammar and punctuation; however, if you want to communicate in an educated and
8. ACADEMIC PREPARATION

scholarly fashion, you will need to know the rules. See Table 8.3 for common grammar and punctuation errors. This is where it is valuable to have some writing resources on hand (see Table 8.2). In addition, the resources below are free and readily available:

- Spell-check, on your Microsoft program, is free. Many students and faculty use this feature as an initial review of their work.
- The American Psychological Association (APA) has a free website (www.apastyle.org) with tutorials on grammar and format, frequently asked questions, examples, and a search feature.

Another source is an online tool that can help you with your grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Keep in mind that none of these programs will catch every error. It is always a good idea to proofread your own work. However, these tools are a good way to help highlight some errors. Some programs have free versions; others require a subscription. Some have mobile app versions. A word of caution, however: Read reviews of any product before you decide to purchase. Below are some suggestions from writing centers:

- Grammarly (www.grammarly.com) has four main products: a grammar checker, a plagiarism checker, a proofreader, and a Microsoft Office add in. You download these onto your computer.
- Ginger (www.gingersoftware.com/grammarcheck) is another downloadable online tool. It markets itself to multilingual students because it also has a translator. It has a free trial period.
- 1Checker (www.1checker.com) is a free online tool; however, you do have to register.

**Check Formatting**

Proper formatting is often part of your grade for writing assignments. Faculty complain that although they provide information on the proper format, students seem to either ignore these instructions or be unaware of what this means. Unfortunately, faculty are left in a difficult position because they have to lower your grade if the proper format is not used. A simple solution is to know the appropriate format (e.g., APA, Modern Language Association [MLA], or Chicago) and how to format your paper correctly. Common formatting instructions include title page, page numbers, margins, spacing, font type and size, headings/subheadings, and a reference list. See Table 8.4 for a checklist on what to check before submitting a paper in APA format (APA, 2012a).
## Table 8.4 Checklist for Papers Using American Psychological Association (APA) Format

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Follow assignment instructions</th>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Mechanics—grammar, spelling, punctuation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Have you addressed all the major points in the instructions?</td>
<td>See: <a href="http://www.apastyle.org/learn/quick-guide-on-formatting.aspx">www.apastyle.org/learn/quick-guide-on-formatting.aspx</a></td>
<td>• Did you proofread your document?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Have you clarified any questions about the instructions?</td>
<td>• Are the margins set at 1 inch?</td>
<td>• Did you spell-check your document?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Have you reviewed the rubric to verify how the assignment will be graded?</td>
<td>• Are the font type and size as instructed (Times New Roman, size 12)?</td>
<td>• Are any sentences more than four lines long? If so, could the sentence be broken down into 2 or 3 sentences?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Does the length of the paper comply with the instructions?</td>
<td>• Are there page numbers on each page (Header—top right)?</td>
<td>• Are apostrophes used correctly (e.g., it’s—a contraction; its—possessive)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is the writing assignment presented in the correct format (e.g., essay, white paper, proposal, annotated bibliography)?</td>
<td>• Is there a title page (e.g., APA 8.03)?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For more detailed assignments:
- • Do the appendices follow the reference page?
- • Are the appendices labeled correctly?
- • Are the appendices arranged in the order they are referred to in the text (e.g., A, B, C, D)?
- • Did you include an abstract if one is required?
- • Does the abstract conform to the word limit (e.g., 150–250 words)?
- • Did you include a Table of Contents if one is required?
- • Is the Table of Contents in the format requested by your professor?
- • Did you check the page numbers in the Table of Contents against the page number where the content is located?
Table 8.4 Checklist for Papers Using American Psychological Association (APA) Format (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure and organization</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Do nouns and pronouns agree (e.g., the patient: his/her; or patients: their; e.g., APA 3.20)?</td>
<td>• Do you have the minimum of references required for the assignment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• When you use the words <em>it</em> or <em>this</em>, is it clear to whom or to what you are referring?</td>
<td>• Are your references recent or considered seminal or classic works?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Are tenses consistent and appropriate?</td>
<td>• Is each of the references cited in the text found on the reference list?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do subjects and verbs agree (e.g., John sits; John and Mary sit; e.g., APA 3.19)?</td>
<td>• Are in-text citations in the proper format (e.g., APA 6.11)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Are acronyms spelled out in full and identified the first time they are used in the text?</td>
<td>• Is each of the references on the reference list cited in the text?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Are the words <em>effect</em> and <em>affect</em> used correctly?</td>
<td>• Is the reference list in the proper APA format (e.g., APA 6.2)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is the word <em>data</em> used as a plural? (Datum is singular.) A good way to check this is to substitute the word <em>clues</em> for <em>data</em> in the sentence, and read it aloud. Does it sound grammatically correct (e.g., APA 3.19)?</td>
<td>• Are quotations provided with a page number in the in-text citation (e.g., APA 4.08, 6.03)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is your paper gender neutral?</td>
<td>• Are Internet sources from reputable sites? Is the information accurate, unbiased, and current? (See: <a href="http://www.library.illinois.edu/ugl/howdoi/webeval.html">www.library.illinois.edu/ugl/howdoi/webeval.html</a>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is there an introduction?</td>
<td>• Did you include doi numbers for references, if available (e.g., APA 6.31, 6.32)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Does the introduction highlight the purpose of the paper?</td>
<td>• If you provided a URL (uniform resource locator) for a reference, did you check that it works (e.g., APA 6.31, 6.32)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is the central idea of your paper appropriate to the purpose of the assignment?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Essentials of Proofreading and Editing

According to many faculty, the need to proofread and edit is not stressed enough. Most rubrics grade on spelling, grammar, and mechanics. Tips from both faculty and students include the following:

- Read what you wrote aloud, either to yourself or to someone else. You will be surprised at the number of mistakes you can “hear” when you do this.
- Use spell-check routinely; however, do not rely entirely on spell-check. Spell-check does not pick up mistakes like *beast cancer* for *breast cancer*.
- Turn on your show/hide (¶) command to see returns, extra spaces, tabs, and so forth so you can check spacing.
- Enlist other readers. Ask friends, family members, or other student colleagues to proofread your work before submitting it. Give them a red pen to mark your work.
- Let your work sit, and reread it a day or 2 later. Sometimes when you give your brain a rest, it works subconsciously and comes up with a better way to word things.
- Use grammar software to notice spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors.
- In discussions, blogs, e-mails, or other types of communications, take the time to write out your thoughts on a Word document, then proofread/spell-check. After that, copy and paste it into the discussion, e-mail, and so on. This will save you the embarrassment of seeing your mistakes out there for others to critique. In addition, if you construct your reply directly onto the program or platform, you risk losing it if interrupted for some reason because the computer or learning platform may time out before you finish.

Ask for Feedback

Many seasoned nurses described how difficult it was to go from being an expert in the work setting to being a novice in the academic world. Receiving feedback on their assignments was not always easy or welcome. Several students saw feedback as helpful. Instead of referring to it as negative feedback, they gave it a positive spin and considered it constructive criticism. They wanted to learn how they could improve. The important thing to remember is, do not ignore feedback if provided.

Faculty are not always consistent with the amount or type of feedback they provide (Giles, Gilbert, & McNeill, 2014). In addition, feedback may be given in a number of ways. For example, some faculty use the
track change feature in Word to mark a paper, others use pen or pencil, others write a synopsis of the main points they want you to focus on, whereas a few do not provide much feedback at all and grade using only the rubric. If you have a professor who takes the time to provide detailed feedback, consider yourself lucky. Learn as much as you can from his or her comments and suggestions. Some faculty focus on one thing (e.g., spelling, grammar, punctuation, APA format), whereas others focus on completely different things (e.g., timely submission, convincing argument, quality of your references). Some students found this inconsistency in the degree and type of feedback provided quite confusing; however, it does serve as a learning experience. Take what you can from any feedback you receive.

The following are additional tips from fellow students on how to handle feedback:

- Ask for clarification if you do not understand comments made in your evaluation.
- Request feedback if none is given. Ask what you did right and what you could improve.
- Grow a thick skin, as there will be negative comments. Close the document and reopen it the next day. Read each comment. Look up resources to help you understand how to improve.
- Ask to do a rewrite, if possible.

Get in the Habit

To some, the idea of writing every day may seem overwhelming or impossible; however, for those students who were able to make writing a daily habit, it made quite a difference. Even if you write only a sentence or two, it can sometimes lead to new ideas or make you aware of gaps you need to address. In her commentary, The Habit of Writing, McGuinness (2008) stated writing requires discipline, and suggested you start with writing 20 minutes per day. The following student suggestions to help get you in the habit may also be useful:

- Select a time each day to write, and stick to your schedule. Identify the time when you are most creative and can concentrate.
- Set a timer. Make yourself sit there until it rings.
- Make it a pleasant experience. Have a cup of coffee or a treat while you write.
- Keep a pad handy to jot down ideas you want to pursue.
Another good habit to get into is to save copies of your work on a regular basis, both electronic and hard copies. Some students put reminders on their calendar or sticky notes on their computer to save their work. Others kept a flash drive handy and saved a copy of their work before they shut down their computer. One student sent an e-mail to himself with his work attached so if anything happened, he could access his work from any computer. You can also set up a Dropbox or GoogleDocs account to store all your documents. Also, check the autosave settings for each of your programs so copies of your work are saved frequently.

Avoid Pitfalls

Plagiarism or academic dishonesty has become a huge problem in the academic world, including nursing programs (Klocko, 2014). In fact, most programs have a policy on academic dishonesty. Some programs even have students sign a contract or pledge to abide by the rules of academic integrity. Many schools use antiplagiarism software programs such as Turnitin (turnitin.com) to assess whether a student’s paper has any plagiarized content. To avoid any issues with plagiarism, here are some suggestions from both students and faculty:

- Learn the definition of plagiarism. It is your responsibility to cite all the references used.
- Keep track of where you extract ideas. Make a preliminary reference list or keep articles or sources together in one place. Write notes on the front of an article to highlight ideas or information you want to cite.
- Learn to paraphrase properly. There are many good resources available on this topic. Connect with your writing center for tips on how to paraphrase or reword.
- Differentiate among a quote, a paraphrase, and an original idea in your notes. For example, one nurse used quotation marks for quotes, parentheses for paraphrases, and brackets for original ideas. For example,
  - For quotes, she noted the first author’s name, year of publication, and page number: Hanson Diehl, 2007, p. 204, “the more one reads research and scholarly articles, the more one naturally absorbs the mechanics of APA citation.”
  - For paraphrases, she noted the first author’s name, year of publication, and placed the paraphrase in parentheses. Hanson Diehl, 2007—(Students may familiarize themselves with APA format and citations by reading scholarly articles.)
For original ideas, she placed the idea in brackets: [Journal clubs may be a good way for nursing students to familiarize themselves with APA style.]

- Use quotes sparingly. Limit quotes to those you are unable to paraphrase or reword easily.
- Learn how to reference Internet sources correctly. APA has a manual specifically for electronic references (APA, 2012b). Avoid copying and pasting content into your paper, because this will show up on the plagiarism check.
- Use the student version of Turnitin, WriteCheck (en.writecheck.com), to assess your work for plagiarism, if needed.

Writer’s block is another pitfall for some nursing students. Graduate students, who were in the process of writing their dissertations, were especially vocal about this issue. On days when it is difficult to put your thoughts on paper, here are a few simple tips from other students:

- Keep a list of mindless tasks to do (e.g., format page numbers, check the reference list against citations in the text, look up doi numbers for the references). In this way, you will still be writing and accomplishing something.
- To get yourself in the mood to start a new paper or chapter, set up the title page, insert page numbers, or format headings. Once something is on paper, it is easier for ideas to flow.
- Because it is not necessary to write your paper or dissertation chapter in sequence, skip to a section about which you feel interested in writing. You can always come back later and edit.
- If you come to a section for which you do not have enough information, stop and do some research to find a few new sources, or move on to the next section. If you move on, leave yourself a note to look up more information on this gap. Furthermore, make a notation in your document so you remember to add what you find. Some students use red font to highlight sections when they need to come back to them later.

Where to Go for Help

Ultimately, you should know where to go for help if you need it. If you are a novice writer, some instructors put the article by Freysteinson (2013), “The Language of Scholarship for Novice Writers,” on their recommended reading list. Besides arming yourself with reference books and online resources, also consider getting help from the following:
The writing center staff at your college often has a wealth of information to share with students. Some writing centers allow students to set up appointments to go over papers.

Your professor may be willing to review your first draft or outline and provide feedback. You may simply have to ask.

If you really struggle with writing, perhaps you should look into engaging a personal tutor. Your writing center may have a list of available tutors.

**Writing at the Graduate Level**

Suffice it to say that as a graduate student, you will spend a considerable amount of time writing. If you are concerned about your writing skills, you have lots of company. In discussions with graduate students, many revealed their fear of writing as well as their lack of skills. The literature confirmed this sentiment too. For example, Cone and Van Dover (2012) noted, “some graduate nursing students have difficulty writing in the formal, professional style required in their academic programs” (p. 272). These authors developed a writing course to address this issue that included APA formatting, discussions on various types of writing assignments, and strategies for overcoming challenges with writing. To deal with a similar situation, Hanson Diehl (2007) developed an early intervention model using storytelling. She wrote,

> five years of data demonstrated that “writing papers” is, by far, the most daunting challenge reported. When pressed to define specific fears about writing the most prevalent concerns were (a) being unfamiliar with the nursing literature, (b) struggling with what to say, and (c) feeling unpracticed in “putting a paper together” and using American Psychological Association (APA) format. (p. 202)

In response to this common theme, the development of a number of writing workshops for graduate students has evolved. The National League for Nursing Scholarly Writing Retreat was one such workshop cited in the literature (Derouin et al., 2015; Oermann, Nicoll, & Block, 2014). For more details on this yearly event, see www.nln.org/centers-for-nursing-education/chamberlain/scholarly-writing-retreat. Many workshops also include a mentoring component for one-on-one consultation. If writing is a weak point for you, you may want to consider signing up for a workshop or writing course. If one is not available at your program, ask whether the graduate school would sponsor one.
Another tactic suggested by several graduate students was to put together a good reference library of your own. Graduate students cited the books listed in Table 8.2, along with many others. These nurses also spent time reading articles and dissertations with an eye toward format, vocabulary, writing style, punctuation, and citations.

Graduate students are typically required to write in many formats such as white papers, editorials, proposals, abstracts, and executive summaries. In addition, writing for publication may be an expectation for some graduate nursing programs (Dowling, Savrin, & Graham, 2013; Kennedy, 2014; Reising & Morin, 2015; Ulrich, 2007). Kennedy cautioned that writing a paper for class is vastly different from writing a manuscript for publication. She suggested some guidelines for converting your paper into a publishable manuscript. Among them were the following:

- Review several articles that are similar to what you plan to submit.
- Select one or two journals and review the submission guidelines—especially how to format and cite references.
- Use your paper as a starting point to write the manuscript. Develop a clear purpose statement and address this throughout your manuscript.
- Use primary sources for any factual statements (Kennedy, 2014, p. 75).

If you find yourself in this situation, there are two excellent resources listed on Table 8.2 (Oermann & Hays, 2016; Saver, 2014). These books walk you through the process of writing and publishing your work. In addition, many nurses suggest you find a mentor who has already published so you can obtain feedback and ask questions.

Finally, as a graduate student you will be expected to complete a thesis, capstone project, doctor of nursing practice (DNP) project, or dissertation. Fortunately, several books are available that discuss these in detail (Bonnel & Smith, 2014; Roush, 2015; Rudestam & Newton, 2014). Your program or chair may also have some suggestions for good resource books. Obtain these books early on, and read them cover to cover so you get an idea of what the process entails. In addition, ask for a template for your thesis, capstone, DNP project, or dissertation. The sooner you review this document and understand what you need to do, the better prepared you will be as you go along with your coursework. Once you start writing, ask your peers to critique your drafts before you send them off to your chair.

**READING SKILLS**

Reading, along with writing, will be the two most time-consuming activities you will invest in as a student. Try not to underestimate the
time you will need to set aside for reading because you will want to get as much as you can out of the content.

If you are concerned about your reading skills, connect with your student learning center early on. They may assess your reading skills and give you some guidance on how to improve. Another resource is the book *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading* by Adler and Van Doren (1972), which describes a systematic strategy for reading. This classic has survived the test of time, and readers have found it quite informative and easy to read.

**Determine Your Best Time and Place**

To get the most out of your reading, it is important to be comfortable and find the time to do it properly. For long periods of reading, find a comfortable chair to use. Look for a place where you will be uninterrupted so you will minimize distractions (e.g., library, home alone, empty office). Keep a note pad or your computer handy for taking notes. Take frequent breaks, and make sure to stretch.

When you have time for only a quick read, look for downtime you could use to read an article or two. Keep some reading with you at all times so you can use this “found” time wisely. For example, students reported reading during halftime at their children’s sporting events, during intermission at a concert, while waiting to have their car repaired, in the bathtub, on a stationary bike or treadmill, under a tree during lunch break, or as a passenger in a car or on a bus. These students wrote notes on the front of the article or used the highlighter in their e-book. Nurses who were auditory learners downloaded audio versions of their text or other reading material and listened while they walked on the track, around the neighborhood, or commuted to work.

Pick a time to read when you are most alert. Some students liked to read first thing in the morning while having their coffee. Others found their most productive time to read was after everyone went to bed and the house was quiet. Some liked to read during lunchtime or while on break, especially if the home setting was a distraction.

**Get the Most Out of Your Reading**

One suggestion many students made was to compile a vocabulary list from your readings. They often kept a separate notebook or file on their computer and logged in unfamiliar words or concepts along with their meaning. Words/concepts such as *epistemology, pedagogy, health literacy, symphonology, herd immunity, scaffolding, scientific rigor, concept analysis,*
and hermeneutics were unfamiliar at first. Nurses commented on how gratifying it was to see their new vocabulary expand with each course. Often they shared these lists with student colleagues.

Writing and student learning centers often suggest you become an active rather than a passive reader. What this means is you need to develop strategies for how you will read and take notes. Develop a pattern to your reading. For example, for an article you plan to use in a paper, read the title first, followed by the abstract, then skip the contents and review the references. This will give you a good idea as to whether or not this article is one you can use in your assignment. Be selective with what you read because you do not want to waste precious time on material that is irrelevant. When reading book chapters, look at the objectives and headings to get an idea of what is covered. This will help you set up an outline for your notes. Check out the vocabulary list, and review questions to determine how much you already know (Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, n.d.). Read a section and then try to summarize it in your outline. Taking notes while you read will help you get the most out of the material.

Look for background material to read on your topic. This will help set the stage. For example, if you find a reference cited several times in your readings, even if it is older, try to locate and read it. Reading and immersing yourself in the topic will help you understand the origin of the topic as well as generate ideas.

Reading at the Graduate Level

At the graduate level, you will spend a tremendous amount of time reading; therefore, it is imperative you develop strategies to organize what you read. Some graduate students set up bibliographic software and downloaded each citation they retrieved. Within the software program, they wrote notes. For example, in EndNotes there is a “notes” category as well as a “research notes” category where you can enter your own notes about a reference. You can also develop your own coding system to use in the keyword section. For instance, one nurse used the codes INTRO for introduction, SIM for simulation, and METH for methodology. When it came time for her to write her dissertation, she could sort through all her articles for each keyword. You can use this same method of coding even if you do not use bibliographic software. Simply develop your own codes and place them at the top corner of each article to make it easy to sort. Some nurses used a color-coded system instead to organize categories of references.
II. PREPARATION—THE KEY TO SUCCESS

If something is not clear when you read it, or if you want further information, think about contacting the author directly. Many authors consider it a compliment if you take the time to read their material and contact them. A few nurses voiced great satisfaction when reporting to their professor or classmates that they had corresponded with an author and received a response! In some cases, these authors became informal mentors too.

NOTE-TAKING AND STUDY SKILLS

Note-taking and studying often go hand in hand because you will most likely use your notes when you study. This is where knowing your learning style is important because there are different ways to take notes and study (see Table 8.1). Be prepared to take notes for all the different types of teaching formats such as formal lectures, PowerPoint presentations, simulations, videos, and clinical experiences. In addition, you will need to take notes for various reading assignments (e.g., book chapters, articles, legislative websites, policies, case studies).

Determine Your Best Time and Place

Just as with reading and writing, it is important to have a study space that is conducive to these tasks. You also need to equip yourself with the proper tools (e.g., pen, pencil, note pad, highlighter, index cards). Chapter 10 covers this topic in more detail.

Set up a study schedule and stick with it. Put on the timer if you need to push yourself to study a certain amount of time each day. Similar to reading, pick a time when you can concentrate. One nurse had an interesting story about her best time to study:

Menopause has been great for school!!! [laughs] I can’t sleep anymore so I get up and I study. It’s quiet in the house, you know. I get some of my best papers written between, you know, 3 a.m. and 5 a.m. when the alarm is supposed to go off. (Wolff, 2013, p. 144)

Note-Taking Skills

Some students like to write their notes, whereas other students like to type them on the computer or tablet. Some use paper, some like index or flash cards. Some students like to create their own shorthand, similar
to what they use to text. Some use a different-color highlighter or pen for each course. Figure out what will work best for you. Remember to document the date and subject so you stay organized. Many students like to record a lecture as a backup to their notes. If you are an auditory learner, it is helpful to relisten to these recordings, especially if you do not consider yourself a good notetaker.

Two of the most widely known strategies on note-taking are SQ3R and Cornell Note Taking System. SQ3R stands for Survey, Question, Read, Reflect, Recite. A 10-minute YouTube video by TedEd (ed.ted.com/on/MrAiUh0O) explains how to use this method to take notes and study. The Cornell Note Taking System is another way to take notes. A short YouTube video is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=WtW9IyE04OQ. There is also a free template at www.incompetech.com/graphpaper/cornelllined.

**Study Habits**

If you have been out of school for more than a few years, you will probably find yourself trying to recall how to study. As one nurse admitted, “You know, I hadn’t been in school in 20 years and you know I had no idea of what studying was like any more” (Wolff, 2013, p. 143). Words of advice from nursing students were to develop good study habits early in your program and ask questions until you feel you understand the content. Try out different ways to take notes and read. Review your class notes, or listen to recordings often so they embed in your long-term memory. Use acronyms, alphabet cues, acrostics, or mnemonics to help you remember information. One nurse had a unique way to study. She put sticky notes on either side of her kitchen window. While she washed the dishes or cooked dinner, she read the question on the left and tried to match the correct answer on the right. She used this technique to study medications, lab values, and terminology. Even her children read these and tried to guess the answers.

**Study Group**

Many of the students described how they formed study groups. Places they met included coffee shops, someone’s dining-room table, the library, diners, the multicultural center, student lounge, and off-hours in the cafeteria. Others used technology to meet. They used Skype or FaceTime to study or simply used their phones to talk about the material. There was usually a person designated as the leader or organizer who would coordinate meeting times.
The positive aspect of a study group is it allows students to exchange notes as well as discuss what might be covered on an exam. Students can pose questions to one another and help fill in gaps when one student does not know the answers. The following example shows how joining a study group helped one nurse. “I would read the chapter and read it over and write things down and then I’d totally miss what was going to be on the test, because it would be stuff I didn’t even think to study” (Wolff, 2013). Once this nurse began to study with her group, she noted that it “really opened my eyes as to what I needed to look at that would be tested on. And that was helpful” (Wolff, 2013).

**TEST-TAKING SKILLS**

*Types of Tests and Test Questions*

When a test is scheduled, the first question to ask is, What type of test will it be? It may be multiple choice, matching, true/false, oral exam, fill in the blank, essay, short answer, or a combination of any of these. It could also be open book, in which you can bring reference books to help you look up information. It could be online, take home, or in class. The important point here is to know what kind of test is planned so you can study appropriately and be prepared.

*Preparing for a Test*

As previously mentioned, a big part of preparing for a test is studying your notes. The amount of information you may need to know for a test may be vast, or it may be in small chunks. Therefore, it is important for you to clarify with the professor what will be covered on the test. If possible, ask for sample tests or questions. Use strategies to study that fit your learning style (see Table 8.1). For example, prepare possible test questions from your readings or lecture notes, and then test yourself or other study group members. Some textbooks even have questions at the end of the chapter to guide your review of the content. In addition, some textbooks come with student manuals that have sample questions. You usually have to purchase these separately.

Study groups are particularly helpful, especially if someone has an example to share. As an experienced nurse, you or your student colleagues may have experiences worth contributing. For example, one nurse practitioner student related how she and her colleagues were studying for an essay test on domestic violence. Several nurses in the group told stories of their experiences with patients in domestic violence.
situations. This helped the whole group solidify what they had learned about how to assess for domestic violence as well as about how to create a safety plan for someone, both of which were essay questions.

8. ACADEMIC PREPARATION

Taking the Test

Before you begin your test, make sure you have put your name and any other identifying information on the paper, form, or online screen. Next, take the time to read the instructions carefully. If you have any questions about what to do, this is the time to ask. Then read each question carefully. Try to identify the key words in the question because these often provide clues to the answer. For a true/false test, look for absolutes (e.g., always, never). Usually, these questions are false. If your test is an essay or short answer, reiterate the question in the first sentence, and use that as a guide while you write. Also, look for the verb in the essay question (e.g., compare, explain, give examples) so you know what needs to be addressed. Once you finish writing, reread the instructions to make sure you have addressed all the questions or points.

Manage Test Anxiety

If it has been some time since you took a test, you may experience some test anxiety. This is common. Being mentally prepared for a test is the first step in tackling test anxiety. If you make studying and reviewing your notes a habit, this should help. When you first start the test, go through and answer all the questions you are sure of first. This will help boost your self-confidence. Eliminate obvious wrong answers to questions you are unsure of, and look for clues in the question that might help determine the correct answer.

Not only should you prepare mentally, you also need to be physically ready to take a test. Visit the test site ahead of time so you know how to get there. Try to eat a balanced meal before the test (e.g., avoid carbohydrate loading), and get a good night’s sleep. Some nurses felt they did better on tests if they limited the amount of caffeine intake before the test (i.e., enough to make them alert, but not enough to make them feel jittery).

Where to Go for Help

Most colleges have a student learning center, which is often staffed by individuals who can help you with note-taking, study, and test-taking skills. Find out early what they have to offer. If you need additional help, consider finding a tutor to help you study. This could be a student mentor who has advanced in the same program and volunteered to help, or...
II. PREPARATION—THE KEY TO SUCCESS

a person who tutors for a living. If you are a graduate student, you may want to hire a dissertation doula or coach. Check out all your options.

PHYSICAL EXAMINATION SKILLS

Just a quick note for this section—if you are in a program where you will conduct physical assessments, find a family member or friend who will volunteer so you can practice. Then, practice until it becomes routine. If available, use the simulation lab too. Practice speaking with your volunteer while you perform the examination so you put the person at ease. This technique also helps you prepare for any distractions that occur when a patient speaks to you while doing an assessment. In addition, make sure you have the proper equipment and that it is in good condition before you start any clinical rotations.

INFORMATION LITERACY SKILLS

Similar to cultivating your writing skills, developing proficient information literacy and referencing skills takes time and practice. You will probably not learn these skills overnight or through one session with a librarian. Nor will you learn these by watching a single tutorial. So where do you start?

To begin with, you need to understand why information literacy and referencing skills are important. In essence, information literacy skills help you to explore, access, and evaluate the literature for sources, whereas referencing skills help you credit the information you find. The literature can support your ideas as well as open up new ideas for you to explore. By immersing yourself in the literature, you come away with a new understanding about a topic.

The Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), a division of the American Library Association, recently released the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Nursing (ACRL, 2013; see www.ala.org/acrl/standards/nursing). In short, these competencies include the ability to identify and choose appropriate databases and tools, develop the necessary search strategies to locate and extract sources, select and critically evaluate the selected sources, incorporate new knowledge gained from these sources, and abide by legal and ethical principles for information usage (ACRL, 2013). The college library is where you will develop your information literacy skills, so it is important you know how to access and use the library efficiently and effectively.
8. ACADEMIC PREPARATION 193

Library Access

One of the first steps to take when you enroll in a program is to obtain your library logon or card. Some college libraries also offer a special library card, which provides access to materials from a network of libraries in the area. If you want to access your college library from home, some libraries have a virtual private network (VPN), which is a secure Internet network that permits remote access (Wink & Killingsworth, 2011). This may require additional steps when you log on, so check with your library when you first enroll.

Students and faculty suggest you spend some time browsing the library pages when you first log on in order to become familiar with what is available. Check the library hours, what databases are available, and how to connect with a librarian (e.g., chat, webinar, in person). Ask about the process for interlibrary loans; most libraries allow you to do this online. Some deliver a pdf via e-mail. If you request a book, find out whether you have to pick it up in person or whether they can mail it to you—check the cost of this. Some college libraries offer an orientation, either virtual or in person. Online tutorials may also be available and cover a range of topics. You may want to find out what they have; however, do not overwhelm yourself at first by thinking you need to watch or listen to all of them. Simply know they are there for future reference.

Besides the college library, consider tapping into the main branch of your public library. Many public libraries now have their catalogs online for easy access. If you need help, it might be more convenient to access your public librarian. As a taxpayer, you also have free access to the Library of Congress (www.loc.gov), which is a quick way to retrieve government documents. Lastly, some colleges allow alumni to access their library. You may have to sign up for this benefit, but it can add to your options in case you have trouble locating a resource from your current college library.

Before you start classes or early in your first semester, ask about scheduling an in-depth session with a librarian to go over what databases and other resources are available. You may also want to review your literature search skills. Many nurses cautioned not to wait until your first paper is due to do this, especially if you feel your literature search skills are rusty.

What Are Peer-Reviewed Articles?

If it has been some time since you had to search for articles, you may not be familiar with some of the terminology. A peer-reviewed article is one
that undergoes a rigorous review by experts. The peer-review process may occur in three different ways. The first is a blinded review, in which reviewers do not know the author or the sponsoring agency. The second is a review by the editorial board. The third is an open review, in which reviewers as well as authors are aware of each other. Peer-reviewed journals are ones that publish peer-reviewed articles. However, not all items in a peer-reviewed journal may be peer reviewed. For example, editorials, commentaries, and other columns may not undergo the same rigorous process of review. Be aware of this distinction if you are required to provide peer-reviewed articles for an assignment.

**Databases**

Once you feel comfortable with your library access, you may want to explore the databases available to you. Libraries subscribe to various databases through a vendor. Common vendors include EBSCO, OVID, and ProQuest (Adorno, Garbee, & Marix, 2016a). For tutorials on all three of these vendors, see Table 8.5 for links to YouTube videos. Browse through the list of topics, which include basic searches, advanced searches, referencing, evidence-based practice, and many more. Vendors each have a list of available databases. For example, EBSCO offers the Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), PsycINFO, AgeLine, and Academic Search Complete, to name a few. Some databases are available through several different vendors. Examples of other databases with which you may be familiar include Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Health & Psychosocial Instruments (HaPI), ProQuest Dissertation and Theses Global, Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, and Academic OneFile. In addition to these, PubMed/MEDLINE, produced by the National Library of Medicine, is a free online database, meaning it is available to the public. MEDLINE is the portion of that database that limits itself to peer-reviewed articles (Adorno et al., 2016a).

An advantage with some databases is the option to create an account so you can save your searches. Most of the tutorials cover this topic.

**Literature Searches**

In literature searches, as the name implies, you will search through the literature for articles pertinent to your topic of interest. In fact, Adorno and colleagues (2016a) suggested a stepwise process to follow when doing a literature search. First, identify the problem or topic you want to investigate. Next, decide on what keywords to use. Then select relevant
Table 8.5  Literature Search and Research Resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literature Search and Referencing Resources</th>
<th>Link</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Association of College &amp; Research Libraries—Information Literacy Competency</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/nursing">www.ala.org/acrl/standards/nursing</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standards for Nursing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centers for Medicare &amp; Medicaid Services</td>
<td><a href="http://www.cms.gov">www.cms.gov</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ClinicalTrials.gov—sponsored by the National Institutes of Health</td>
<td>ClinicalTrials.gov</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews</td>
<td><a href="http://www.cochranelibrary.com">www.cochranelibrary.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doi® System</td>
<td><a href="http://www.doi.org">www.doi.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EBSCO Host Advanced Search Tutorial</td>
<td>support.ebsco.com/tutorials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google Scholar</td>
<td>scholar.google.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grey literature publications</td>
<td><a href="http://www.greylit.org">www.greylit.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health &amp; Psychosocial Instruments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Resources &amp; Services Administration (HRSA) Nurses: Estimates of Supply</td>
<td>bhw.hrsa.gov/healthworkforce/supplydemand/nursing/index.html</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Demand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI)</td>
<td>joannabriggs.org</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library of Congress</td>
<td><a href="http://www.loc.gov">www.loc.gov</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Center for Interprofessional Practice and Education</td>
<td>nexusipe.org</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guidelines</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Institutes of Health</td>
<td><a href="http://www.nih.gov">www.nih.gov</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ovid YouTube tutorials (search through the list)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/user/OvidWoltersKluwer">www.youtube.com/user/OvidWoltersKluwer</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
databases you want to search. Once you have a list of possible articles, review each title and exclude ones that do not seem pertinent. Read the abstracts of these titles, and exclude any that do not meet your criteria for inclusion. Take this list of relevant articles, and retrieve the full-text articles. Read these, and conduct a critical appraisal of each. Finally, summarize the main points of each article so you can synthesize the results. This is a very simplistic overview of the process; however, it should give you an idea of the logical sequence of a literature review.

To decide on the problem or topic you want to pursue, use your assignment for guidance. For example, if you need to write a paper on plagiarism, you should focus your attention on that topic. The next step is to search using key words or controlled vocabulary, depending on how in-depth you need to search. Key word searches use common language, search across multiple fields, and allow you to combine other key words. Some databases allow you to enter short phrases using quotation marks, so the search will contain this specific string of words. Key words can also be truncated to allow for multiple variations of the same word. To truncate a key word, take the root of the word and place the truncation symbol at the end of the root. To know what symbol to use, check the database documentation screen, or search the help screen. Common truncation symbols are *, !, $, ?. For example, nurs* would search for the words nurse, nurses, and nursing. Unfortunately, it would also look for the word “nursery.” If you want to eliminate articles with the word nursery, you would use a Boolean operator. There are three Boolean operators—AND, OR, NOT. In the example given, you would use the Boolean operator NOT to eliminate all the articles with the word nursery. Boolean operators allow you to expand or narrow your search. In general, use the Boolean operator AND when you want the results to contain both keywords: for example, plagiarism AND nurse. Use the Boolean operator OR if you want to search for synonyms: for example, domestic violence OR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literature Search and Referencing Resources</th>
<th>Link</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ProQuest YouTube tutorials (search through the list)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/user/proquesttraining/videos">www.youtube.com/user/proquesttraining/videos</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. National Library of Medicine—Medical Subject Heading (MeSH) browser</td>
<td><a href="http://www.nlm.nih.gov/mesh/MBrowser.html">www.nlm.nih.gov/mesh/MBrowser.html</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Foster (2015).
intimate partner violence. Finally, use the Boolean operator NOT if you do not want a particular word or phrase in your search: for example, organ NOT organization. One place to look for key words is near the abstract or top of an article. A good example is the list of key words noted near the top of the Adorno and colleagues (2016a) reference. They are “abstract review, Boolean operators, critical appraisal of articles, key words, literature search, search strategies” (Adorno et al., 2016a, p. 74).

A controlled vocabulary search uses subject headings or descriptors. Assigned by the database, these do not allow for variant forms of any of the words. The Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) is an example of a controlled vocabulary (Robb & Shellenberg, 2014). See Table 8.5 for the link to the MeSH browser. Both key word and controlled vocabulary searches have pros and cons, so it is worth learning how to do both.

Another way to narrow down your search is to use limitations or filters. For instance, you can limit your search by publication dates, language, type of publication (e.g., dissertation, editorial, research). Some databases also allow you to select for categories such as age group (adult, child, infant), level of education (primary, secondary, higher), or gender. You can also filter for peer-reviewed or full-text articles. Each database has its own limitations and filters you can apply to narrow down your search. The database’s tutorial usually covers this topic.

There are several options to keep track of your search strategies. Table 8.6 provides an example of a paper-based method. This grid allows you to see the results of each search and change your strategy once you determine the sensitivity of your key words. A similar method could utilize an Excel spreadsheet to track results. Another option is to set up an account with a database to save your searches. This allows you to run the search again if desired (Wink & Killingsworth, 2011). The advantage of this option is that you can also set up alerts so the database runs the search strategy periodically and sends abstracts that meet the search criteria to a designated e-mail address (Wink & Killingsworth, 2011).

Ancestry searching and hand searching are two other methods to locate pertinent articles. Ancestry searching involves reviewing the reference lists from relevant articles included in your review. Many times, these articles provide background on the topic. With hand searching, you select journals that frequently publish articles on your topic of interest. Search the table of contents of each issue for a certain number of years to locate any pertinent articles.

What if you find an article that is just what you want, but is somewhat dated? One strategy is to locate recent articles that cite the one you like. A simple way to do this is to go to Google Scholar (scholar.google.com), use quotation marks and type in the title of the article in the search
II. PREPARATION—THE KEY TO SUCCESS

Table 8.6 Literature Search Log

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Database (e.g., CINAHL, ProQuest, ERIC)</th>
<th>Keyword A</th>
<th>Keyword B</th>
<th>Keyword C</th>
<th>Keyword D</th>
<th>Keyword E</th>
<th>Keyword F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Keyword A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keyword B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keyword C</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keyword D</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keyword E</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keyword F</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Search parameters (example)</th>
<th>Boolean search</th>
<th>Full text</th>
<th>English language</th>
<th>Time range (e.g., after 2010, between 2000 and 2013)</th>
<th>Manuscript types</th>
<th>Subject areas</th>
<th>Age—all adults</th>
<th>Nurs*—in abstract</th>
<th>“Higher education” or “adult education”—all fields</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

box (Figure 8.1). Usually, the article will be one of the selections. Click on this, and you will see below the reference “cited by” and “related articles.”

**Online Searches**

In most nursing programs, you will need to use database searches as your primary means of accessing the literature. However, there are times when searching the Internet serves a purpose. For example, MEDLINE is fully accessible online without having to access it through
a library. In addition, many professional nursing organizations, governmental agencies, and nonprofit agencies have resources that may be pertinent to your search. For example, the Health Resources & Services Administration has all of the National Sample Surveys of Registered Nurses as well as several other workforce data reports (see link in Table 8.5). Be cautious about the number of online sources you use. Articles have a sense of permanency, whereas web sources can change or disappear easily. For other valuable online resources, see Table 8.5.

If you do find a good source of information online, consider requesting a rich site summary or a really simple syndication (RSS) feed or e-mail notification. This will alert you when new content is added to a website, blog, or news channel. Look for the RSS symbol to set up an RSS feed (Figure 8.2).

![Figure 8.1 Google Scholar Example](image1)

**Figure 8.1 Google Scholar Example**

- Type the article title using quotation marks.
- Click on “Related articles” to find articles similar to this one.
- Click on “Cited by” to locate articles that have cited this article. This technique helps find articles that are more recent.

![Figure 8.2 RSS Feed Example](image2)

**Figure 8.2 RSS Feed Example**

- Set up alert.
- Create RSS feed.
II. PREPARATION—THE KEY TO SUCCESS

How to Evaluate Internet Sources

Because anyone can post information on the Internet, it is a good idea to learn how to evaluate online sources. See Table 8.7 for references on evaluating Internet sources. Even though online sources are easy to access and look reputable, they may not be, so it is up to you to evaluate each source you cite for quality, bias, authorship, and currency. The HONcode (Health on the Net Code of Conduct) certification is one way to identify quality online health information. Information that meets the requirements for the HONcode receives the designated HON symbol.

Evidence-Based Practice

This topic goes far beyond what this book can cover. For a quick step-by-step introduction to evidence-based practice, you may want to read the series of 12 articles published by Melnyk, Fineout-Overholt, Stillwell, Williamson, and Gallagher-Ford in the American Journal of Nursing. The articles were published in every other issue between November 2009 and September 2011. They cover formulating a population/patient problem, intervention, comparison, outcome, time (PICOT) question, searching and evaluating the literature, planning and implementing change, and evaluating and disseminating results. For the first of the series, see Melnyk, Fineout-Overholt, Stillwell, and Williamson (2009).

Table 8.7 Evaluating Internet Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author &amp; Resource</th>
<th>Link</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purdue Online Writing Lab</td>
<td>owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/553/04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Evaluating Print vs Internet Sources”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Library, University of Illinois at Urbana</td>
<td><a href="http://www.library.illinois.edu/ugl/howdoi/webeval.html">www.library.illinois.edu/ugl/howdoi/webeval.html</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Evaluating Internet Sources”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgetown University Library</td>
<td><a href="http://www.library.georgetown.edu/tutorials/research-guides/evaluating-internet-content">www.library.georgetown.edu/tutorials/research-guides/evaluating-internet-content</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Evaluating Internet Resources”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia Tech University Library</td>
<td><a href="http://www.lib.vt.edu/instruct/evaluate">www.lib.vt.edu/instruct/evaluate</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Evaluating Webpages for Research”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health on the Internet Foundation</td>
<td><a href="http://www.hon.ch/home1.html">www.hon.ch/home1.html</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HON code—used to evaluate medical and health-related information on the Internet.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8. ACADEMIC PREPARATION

Literature Searches at the Graduate Level

Some nurses enter graduate school and have experience with literature searches, whereas others have not conducted a thorough literature search in years. You probably know where you are on this continuum. Interestingly, Robertson and Felicilda-Reynaldo (2015) conducted a study on the information literacy (IL) skills of family nurse practitioner students, and found that although these students indicated a high level of confidence in their IL skills, they did not perform well on an actual IL skills test. The authors suggested that students may not seek help if they are overconfident in their IL skills. Therefore, a word of caution—it is better to ask for assistance than to sit back and think you know everything there is to know about IL. Because it is such a vast topic, it is nearly impossible to know all there is to know!

When conducting a literature search as a graduate student, you will find you use all of the same strategies as undergraduate students. On top of this, you may need to learn a few additional techniques to add to your skill set. In essence, you will need to learn how to conduct a comprehensive literature review, meaning you need to search beyond the typical database search. Adorno, Garbee, and Marix (2016b), in their article on advanced literature searches, highlighted several higher-level search skills. These included searching the grey literature, evaluating systematic reviews, and searching evidence-based guidelines and clinical trial databases. Examples of grey literature include such documents as government reports, white papers, dissertations and theses, conference proceedings, and meeting reports. To learn more about grey literature check www.greylit.org.

Systematic reviews entail an in-depth literature review on a topic and follow a rigorous standard format used to critique each piece of literature. Common standardized formats include the Cochrane or Joanna Briggs Institute methodologies (Adorno et al., 2016b). Usually, some type of quality appraisal or assessment tool is used to evaluate sources. Examples include the Jadad scoring system, the Cochrane manual, or the Newcastle–Ottawa Scale, which is used for nonrandomized studies. If you need to conduct a systematic review, an excellent source to check is the Duke University Medical Library’s website on systematic reviews at guides.mclibrary.duke.edu/sysreview. Another good resource for systematic reviews is the article by Im and Chang (2012). These authors provide a step-by-step guide along with a flow diagram on the process as well as examples of various search strategies and assessment tools.

Clinical trial information and evidence-based clinical practice guidelines are other sources to search for information. See links for these in
Table 8.5. If you are searching for specific data-collection instruments, try the HaPI database or the National Center for Interprofessional Practice and Education site at nexusipe.org (Adorno et al., 2016b).

Another strategy to consider in your search is that other disciplines might have studies similar to your topic of interest. A good example comes from a graduate student who was researching circadian rhythm disruption. Although there was not much in the nursing literature, she realized that other industries have shift workers, so she decided to search for literature in databases pertinent to those disciplines. She found several articles in the aeronautics and trucking industry literature.

Finally, Conn and colleagues (2003) provided some unique suggestions to add to the search strategies already mentioned. Among them was searching the international literature. This is an especially good technique if your topic is not well studied. The downside is that you need to find a translator. The upside is that it strengthens the description of your literature review if you can indicate you did not exclude non-English literature. Another technique was “contact with the invisible college” (p. 180). What the authors meant by this was you should contact authors who are prominent in the field to see whether they can recommend any literature. Another important reason to connect with experts is they often know about any graduate work or unpublished work on the topic.

REFERENCING SKILLS

In discussions with nurses at all levels, one of the least favorite and confusing aspects of writing was how to reference citations. In fact, one RN–BSN student noted:

APA format. Oh my gosh!! [laughs] I think I used MLA in my Associate’s program and then all of a sudden it was like APA and I had this enormous book and it’s the sixth edition and all these rules and I was very intimidated by that. (Wolff, 2013, p. 138)

Faculty sometimes complain about using APA format because they feel it is a moving target, where the rules constantly change. Still, referencing is a skill that can be mastered with regular practice. To understand why graduate nursing students had poor referencing skills, Greenwood, Walkem, Smith, Shearer, and Stirling (2014) conducted a cross-sectional survey to explore the topic. They found four main reasons. The first was
8. ACADEMIC PREPARATION

a sense of confusion about the citation rules and the interpretation of the APA manual. The second was difficulty in locating formats to reference online sources. The third was the lack of time, because these students were unaware of how much time it took to reference a citation. In addition, they were not well organized and lost track of references. Lastly, students experienced varied expectations from different instructors as to what was required for referencing. All of these points are easy to address if you take the time to learn the process and arm yourself with some good references.

Fortunately, things are a little better these days, and more resources than ever are available to students to help overcome these barriers. To begin, APA has tutorials that walk you through the process and provide downloadable examples. You can print these off and use them as guidelines when you are composing your reference list. The tutorials also cover how to create in-text citations, which are citations found in the body of the document. For example, this book contains reference lists and in-text citations in every chapter. To view the tutorials or check out the frequently asked questions see www.apastyle.org/learn/tutorials/index.aspx. In addition to the tutorials, APA now publishes an e-book specifically for referencing online sources (APA, 2012b).

One of the newer requirements for citations is to include a digital object identifier or doi number in the reference citation. The doi is a unique number assigned to each article by the International DOI Foundation. The purpose is to provide a persistent link for locating the article on the Internet. When you download an article, the doi number is usually located somewhere on the first page. If you cannot locate the doi number, try www.crossref.org/guestquery. You typically get the best search with this site when you use the first author’s last name and title of the article. If you know the doi number and you want to search for the article, try the doi resolver link www.doi.org (Wink & Killingsworth, 2011).

What are some of the common errors students make in APA format? Freysteinson, Krepper, and Mellott (2015) noted the following:

1. On the reference list—incorrect use of capitalization, italics, ampersand, and doi
2. In in-text citations—incorrect use of and, ampersand, and et al.
3. Quotations—incorrect placement of punctuation marks, citing page numbers
4. Reference list and in-text citation congruence—not checking that references cited in the text are on the reference list and that all references on the reference list are cited in the text
Because these are such common errors and this article reviews the correct APA format for each error, it would be worth spending the time to locate this article and keep it nearby.

**Referencing Software**

Referencing software, also referred to as bibliographic or citation management software, is a software program you load onto your computer to store and organize all your references. You can make different “books” or files to store different reference lists. Many allow you to enter your own notes or keywords. Some allow you to attach a pdf of the article into the program for easy retrieval. Another useful feature is the software often permits you to change formats. For example, if you want to submit a paper to a journal that requires MLA formatting, you can change the setting in the referencing software so the references convert to MLA format. You can also embed in-text citations using this tool. When you look up an article on a database, a link will automatically download the reference into your program, saving you considerable time.

Greenwood and colleagues (2014) noted that relatively few students in their study used any type of referencing software. Yet students who took part in discussions and used this type of software felt it made a considerable difference with time management and organization. There are many products available, so you need to shop around. Examples of some of the more popular referencing software programs include EndNote, Zotero, ProQuest RefWorks, and Mendeley. Some are free; however, these have limited storage space; others range in cost—$200 to $300. Be aware that there is a steep learning curve when you first start to use this type of software; however, you can save hours of time downloading references, creating reference lists, sorting articles and so forth once you know how to use it. If you are considering purchasing a referencing software program, talk to other students, faculty, or a librarian, and ask for recommendations. Some schools purchase a license for students and make it available to them at no cost. Other schools give discounts to students. Check to see whether your employer has an institutional license. Several nurses who worked in academic hospitals were able to access EndNotes through their employer. Also, see whether you could have a demonstration or whether the librarian offers sessions on referencing software programs. Once you have the software and load it onto your computer, practice setting up a few folders and downloading articles so you familiarize yourself with the features before you need to use it for a paper. For quick tutorials of some referencing software, see...
8. ACADEMIC PREPARATION

- EndNote—endnote.com/training
- Zotero—www.zotero.org/support/screencast_tutorials
- Mendeley—community.mendeley.com/guides/videos
- RefWorks—www.youtube.com/user/ProQuestRefWorks/featured

One caveat to mention with downloading any citation—these commonly contain multiple errors. No one is sure why. Homol (2014) conducted a study to examine error rates of different web-based citation tools and found none were error free. Common errors included misspelled words, missing authors, dates, volume or issue number as well as formatting issues with capitalization, punctuation, and spacing. Missing doi numbers were also common. The take-home message from this study was that you should exercise caution with any reference citation you download, no matter what tool or program you use. Check the format for each reference manually because it is your responsibility to cite the reference correctly.

PRESENTATION SKILLS

Presentations, both oral and written, are a common way for faculty to assess students’ learning outcomes. Oral presentations usually entail presenting to the class, either online or in person. Written presentations can take the form of posters, brochures, handouts, or other types of written material used to educate patients or an audience. Similar to writing assignments, presentations are often graded using a rubric.

Strategies to Overcome Fear of Public Speaking

One of the fears expressed by nursing students was getting up in front of a class and speaking. Some nurses suggested the following strategies to overcome this fear:

- Take a public-speaking class. Many colleges offer this, and you may be able to use it as an elective. If one is not available at your college, check whether a community college offers one.
- Join a local Toastmasters International group. This nonprofit organization assists members to develop and polish their public-speaking skills. Individuals have the opportunity to practice in front of a non-threatening group and obtain feedback. To find a club near you, type your zip code into www.toastmasters.org/Find-a-Club
II. PREPARATION—THE KEY TO SUCCESS

■ Take an accent reduction class. One nurse, who was multilingual, acknowledged her fear of being misunderstood because English was not her primary language. She found a speech pathologist who specialized in accent reduction, and signed up for several sessions. She was quite pleased with the results, and it helped to build her confidence. If you are not familiar with how accent reduction works, a YouTube lecture on the topic is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkQ7lwEWeGA

■ Practice in front of a friendly audience. For example, several nurses admitted they practiced in front of their pets!

**Tools to Help**

Chances are you will need some tools to help you create your presentation. If you have Microsoft Office on your computer, you probably have access to PowerPoint. This tool will help you create slides. Another free online presentation tool is Prezi. Instead of a slide format, Prezi zooms in and out using different screens. For a simple tutorial by GCFLearn on how to download and use Prezi, see www.gcflearnfree.org/prezi. If you use a Mac computer, try out Keynote (www.apple.com/mac/keynote). For posters, brochures, flyers, and so on, check whether your version of Microsoft Office has Publisher. This tool has templates for all sorts of printed media. You can also download additional templates.

**Ask for Examples**

Depending on the type of presentation, ask for examples. Look at PowerPoint presentations from your professor or from conference speakers. Pay attention to what you like. Download poster examples from conferences to see the various formats. Look at patient education material to see what catches your eye. Notice the colors, font, headings, and so forth.

**Make It Visually Appealing**

For oral presentations, there are some common words of advice. Less is more on slides. Use bulleted lists to highlight ideas, and leave adequate white space. Add colorful pictures or graphics; just make sure you credit the source. Pick a template and color scheme that is appealing to the eye. Make the font big enough so your audience will be able to see your slides from a distance. Brown and Schmidt (2009) suggested you use a font size of 24 points or larger and use a serif-type font.
Serif fonts have lines at the ends of each letter that make them easier to read. For example, Times New Roman (ABCDE) is a serif font, whereas Arial (ABCDE) is a sans-serif font, meaning without the lines. Use a title that is 10 words or less and contains keywords or catches the audience’s attention. Place this on your title slide along with your name, other authors’ names, and affiliations. Some presenters like to put their college logo on the title slide too. Quotations may help drive home a point, just use them sparingly.

For poster presentations, DeSilets (2010) offered some good pointers. Determine the type of poster (e.g., tabletop, easel, or display board) and size. Consider the layout (e.g., portrait or landscape) along with the number of columns. Ellerbee (2006) suggested you use a font size of 96 points for the title (2 to 3 inches) so it is visible from 3 to 6 feet away. For the remainder of the poster, she recommended you use a font size of 24 to 36 points. As with presentations, choose colors that are easy to read and pleasant on the eye. Warm colors include red and yellow, and denote power and happiness; cool colors, such as blue, beige, and pastels, suggest a peaceful topic. Insert tables, graphs, or other graphics to help break up the text. Wording should be clear and simple. Have information flow from left to right, and provide headings that guide the reader.

**Use Props**

Consider using a few props. For example, one nurse brought in a urinary catheter when she presented on catheter-associated urinary tract infection (CAUTI). She used the prop to demonstrate some of the causes of CAUTI. You can also use a handout as a prop. Instruct the audience to refer to something on the handout as you speak. This gives both you and the listener a break. Pass around objects that are pertinent to your topic. For example, one nurse who had a presentation on the history of nursing textbooks passed around a 1931 textbook that had recipes for enemas that nurses made themselves and then administered to patients.

**Importance of Rehearsing**

The most significant advice students and faculty had was to practice your presentation ahead of time. Give yourself time to talk through your presentation. Avoid reading your slides. You should know the material well enough that you can speak to the topic with only a few words as cues. Rehearse in front of your family, friends, or colleagues, and ask
for feedback. Know how much time is allotted for your presentation, and time yourself. Record yourself and listen to the tape. Take note of ums and you know's or other distracting mannerisms. Prepare potential questions from the audience, and rehearse how you will answer them. If you are presenting a poster, put together a script. You will need to be able to present the content concisely, so practice what you will say.

**What Would Make You Comfortable?**

Presenters have different delivery styles, so think about what would put you at ease. Wear something comfortable, preferably something that is not distracting. You want the audience to pay attention to what you say, not what you are wearing. Look for friendly faces in the audience, and give them a glance now and again. If allowed, sit down and present. Sometimes, standing behind a podium can be quite intimidating. Think about what to do with your hands while you speak. Avoid touching your jewelry or hair. To get ideas on what to do with your hands, find a video of your favorite presenter (e.g., diplomat, business leader, nursing professor); turn off the sound, and watch his or her body language.

**Presentations at the Graduate Level**

Graduate students are often encouraged to submit an abstract to a conference or present at a workshop, seminar, or meeting. Often, this is part of a clinical assignment or research project. For example, one graduate nurse conducted a community assessment as part of her experience in public health and presented her findings at a county health department board meeting. Another nurse conducted an action research project at her hospital and submitted an abstract to a national conference, which was accepted for a poster presentation.

If you provide an oral presentation at a conference or workshop, the organizers may want to provide continuing education credits. If so, you will need to provide objectives, a short biographical sketch, as well as an outline of your teaching strategies (e.g., lecture, small group discussion). Prepare as described earlier; however, be very accurate with the timing of your presentation. Find out what the time allotment is for your presentation (typically 15 to 20 minutes) and practice, practice, practice until you know the content of your talk by heart. Have someone time and critique your presentation. Remember to allow a few minutes for questions.

Some graduate students find they need to make an online presentation such as an audio conference or webinar, both of which may require some additional preparation (Ulrich, 2007). Because these types of presentations are technology based and performed remotely, you do not
have the advantage of seeing your audience or their reactions. The first
time you present in this format, it may seem strange. To practice, you
may want to tape yourself because your voice will be the main delivery
tool for these venues. It is better to pause while you compose yourself
than to use fillers such as um or you know.

Many graduate programs encourage students to create posters so they
gain experience with this type of dissemination. Research posters
generally follow a standard format for headings: purpose, methods, subjects,
results, and implications or discussion (Ellerbee, 2006). Quality-improvement
projects or teaching innovation posters often use the headings: trigger
or impetus, decision, and outcomes (Ellerbee, 2006). If you have room on
the poster, you may want to include the abstract and a select number
of references, or use these as handouts. Use a poster template to set up
the contents. These are available online, or your facility may have some
poster templates that it uses.

Find out what type of poster you should develop—tri-fold, foam
board, or paper. Also, ask about the size of the display space. You do
not want to arrive and find your poster is too big or too small for the
space. Remember to bring pushpins or clips to secure your poster.
One thing you need to consider is where you will have your poster
printed. Find out whether your institution or college has printing
services. If not, check out local printing services. Other options are
VistaPrint, FedEx, and Staples, to name a few, which all have online
services for posters. Many of these services have templates and ship
quickly. Poster costs can range from $25 to $500 depending on the
size, quality of the material, number of edits requested, and how soon
you need it (Ellerbee, 2006). Also, consider how you will transport
the poster. Many printing services have cardboard tubes available for
paper posters. You can also purchase a padded tube with a shoulder
strap for easy transport.

Finally, think about what you want to use for handouts. Some nurses
make smaller versions of their poster as handouts, and others use data
collection tools or reference lists. Make sure to bring plenty of business
cards to give out too. If you run out of handouts, collect business cards
from attendees, and send them the information when you return.

PROJECT COMPLETION SKILLS

Projects are another type of assignment commonly used in academia.
They can be individual or group projects. The fun part of projects is they
get the creative juices flowing! Moreover, they tap into your kinesthetic
learning style.
Individual projects are often multifaceted, requiring you to complete a number of activities. For example, one assignment involved developing a mock budget, creating an evaluation form, conducting a focus group, and setting up a mock trial for a new piece of equipment. Determining a timeline and sequencing the activities were part of the learning process.

Group projects are often part of a curriculum too. Because nurses work on interdisciplinary teams, working in a group is good experience. As many students will admit, there are both good and bad sides to group projects. Many students voiced how much they liked the collegiality of working together. Not only did they learn from their peers, but the act of working together turned into a social forum. Sometimes, there can be difficulty within the group, especially if there are disagreements or power struggles. In addition, a phenomenon called social loafing can happen. This is when a student exerts less effort to complete an assignment when working in a group compared with when he or she works alone. In other words, the student may sit back and let others do all or most of the work. To prevent this from happening, use the following tips:

- Have conversations early and often about the project.
- Pick a group leader to keep the project on track.
- Have someone take minutes and assign tasks to each person.
- Develop a timeline for each task.
- Hold group members accountable.

Some group projects entail a group writing assignment. Because students usually have different writing styles, it is important to create a document that flows. To address this issue, White and Baker (2003) suggested you assign a group editor to put all the parts together and edit the document for consistency. For tips on group writing assignments, see the Writing Center at University of North Carolina handout (writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/group-writing).

Projects at the Graduate Level

Graduate-level projects are usually more involved than undergraduate projects. Often, the purpose is to develop a variety of skills. For example, in one master’s degree class, students had to create a product for the future. Students wrote up a proposal, developed a marketing plan, and presented a “sales pitch” for their product. These students came up with some wonderfully creative ideas. For instance, students “developed and sold” invisible gloves, designer shrouds, and virtual anesthesia with trips to exotic places.
Some graduate projects may involve a data-collection component or program evaluation component. For example, one doctoral class had to develop logic models for a community project. Each group selected a topic and conceptual model, and then designed a logic model for implementation, long- and short-term goals, and outcome measurements.

**STATISTICAL AND RESEARCH SKILLS**

During discussions, many nurses voiced their dislike of mathematics and statistics, especially if they were not a strong point in their high school or undergraduate years. Mathew and Aktan (2014) noted this same sentiment in their quantitative, cross-sectional study of both undergraduate and graduate nursing students. These authors also commented on how “faculty may be as uneasy as students in the area of statistics and research” (p. 236). Fortunately, with better resources on hand these days, research courses are more interactive and go beyond simply reading a textbook on the subject. In addition, online statistical calculators and survey tools make conducting research much easier.

The topic of statistical and research skills is broad and beyond the scope of this book; however, it would benefit you to know a little about what to expect. To address the topic of what should be included in statistical courses at all three levels of nursing education—bachelor’s, master’s, and doctorate—Hayat, Eckardt, Higgins, Kim, and Schmiege (2013) conducted an expert panel discussion. The panel concluded that students at the bachelor’s level attain critical-thinking skills and have basic statistical literacy, that is, they understand basic concepts and terminology. The basic concept to learn at this level is the research process. Examples of terms include independent variable, dependent variable, confounding variable, randomization, quantitative research, qualitative research, mixed methods, hypothesis, and sample.

Students at the graduate level need to attain a higher level of statistical literacy (Hayat et al., 2013). For example, students at this level need to read the research literature with a critical eye toward understanding the research methodology used, sample selection techniques utilized, statistical analysis applied, and limitations identified.

If you have qualms about taking a research or statistics class and feel your skills have atrophied, nurses have a few tips to pass along. If you feel rusty about your math skills, a good place to start is to review old Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or Graduate Record Examination (GRE) books. You can find these in used bookstores or the library. These
review books may help refresh your memory of basic math concepts and allow you to take sample tests to evaluate your knowledge. For a higher level review of evidence-based practice and research skills, you may want to listen to the podcasts on the Nursing Education Expert website. These cover a variety of topics, from theoretical frameworks to evaluating the reliability and validity of a measurement tool. Notice the website has the HON code standard (bottom of home page). See nursingeducationexpert.com. In addition, check out the resources listed in Table 8.5. Some of the sources used in creating this table came from the article by Foster (2015).

**Statistical and Research Skills at the Graduate Level**

Again, this is too broad a topic to cover here; however, there are a few things to keep in mind as a graduate student. If you participate in research, one of the first things you will need to do is take some type of course on protecting human research participants. Many colleges now use the one developed by the National Institutes of Health (see phrp.nihtraining.com). Once you complete this course, a certificate of completion is issued. You will need this if you apply to the institutional review board (IRB) to conduct a study. If you are not familiar with what an IRB is or does, read the article by Kawar, Pugh, and Scruth (2016), who outlined the role and legal requirements of the IRB in protecting human subjects.

If you wonder what type of statistical software is on the market as well as what statistical assistance is available, see Chapters 10 and 12.

A survey tool many graduate students use is Survey Monkey, which recently merged with Zoomerang (www.surveymonkey.com). This survey tool has a free version; however, if you plan to have a large sample size or use more than 10 questions on your survey, plan to buy one of the monthly plans.

**SUMMARY**

This chapter covered many of the academic skills you will need for your coursework. Although you can acquire some of these skills ahead of time, much of the chapter reviewed skills you will acquire as you go along. Plan to return to this chapter throughout your program.

The next chapter will provide ideas on how to prepare your family and social circle for your return to school. Gaining and maintaining their support will be important for your success.
REFERENCES


II. PREPARATION—THE KEY TO SUCCESS


Kennedy, M. S. (2014). My professor said to submit my paper (we hope they also told you this). *Nursing Education Perspectives, 35*(2), 75.


Visit This Book's Web Page / Buy Now / Request an Exam/Review Copy

© Springer Publishing Company

8. ACADEMIC PREPARATION 215


Visit This Book's Web Page / Buy Now / Request an Exam/Review Copy

© Springer Publishing Company
II. PREPARATION—THE KEY TO SUCCESS


