



# Method simple: An electronic interactive tool helping nursing students prepare for written and oral presentation



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Developing reflective writing skills is an essential competency in nursing. Nursing schools recognize the importance of promoting scholarly thinking and academic writing amongst their student yet, there is a large gap in the tools and opportunities students receive to help them master these skills during their baccalaureate studies. Method SIMPLE is an innovative and interactive web based tool introduced in first year that can help nursing students prepare university papers both written and oral.

**Aim of the study:** To discover how students learn to use the tool, what barriers affect proper use of the tool, and what role faculty plays in ensuring students' successful use of the tool. The study also sought to explore students' perception in regards to the contribution of the tool to improve their academic work.

**Research method used:** Data was collected using two research methodologies. Method SIMPLE has a built-in satisfaction survey at the end of each of the six modules that provides quantitative and qualitative data about the tool itself. A qualitative descriptive study was chosen to better understand student and faculty's perceptions regarding the tool. Data was collected during three focus groups.

**Conclusions and recommendations:** Students shared their experiences using the tool and talked at length about the importance Method SIMPLE's section "P" which explains in depth how to submit written papers. Participants recognized the benefits of having a web based tool. Results from the built-in evaluation surveys and descriptive analysis of the focus groups data also helped generate three types of recommendations: ways to enhance the tool itself, ways to enhance students' experience when using the tool and faculty's responsibility in helping students learn how to use the tool.

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## 1. Introduction

A lot has been written about the importance of developing academic writing skills in nursing students. In fact, developing writing skills is an essential part of nursing practice (*American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2008*). Encouraging these skills helps enhance critical thinking (*Naber and Wyatt, 2014*) and increases academic success, including practical skills and competencies (*Gopee and Deane, 2013; Naidoo, 2013*). *Bickes and Schim (2010)*, along with *Luthy et al. (2009)*, mention that as academic skills increase, so can the success rates on a national licensure exam such as NCLEX. Preparing academic papers also provides students with the opportunity to develop their professional identity by reflecting on how their experiences, both theoretical and practical, shape their vision of nursing (*Lavelle et al., 2013; Naidoo, 2013*). To encourage deeper reflective writing, academic writing skills need to be developed throughout the nursing program, thus supporting WAC, the American movement that encourages writing across the curriculum (*Andre and Graves, 2013; Naber and Wyatt, 2014; Troxler et al., 2011; Salamonson*

*et al., 2010*). WAC has also been associated with concepts such as writing through learning (WTL), writing in the discipline (WID), and embedded learning, all of which, according to *Luthy et al. (2009)* encourage the "production of clear, accurate and relevant writing" which leads to "an essential competency in nursing" p. 54.

Despite the many benefits of academic writing, there is a decrease in the support given by universities to develop these skills (*Andre and Graves, 2013; Gopee and Deane, 2013; Tarrant et al., 2008; Troxler et al., 2011*). Of the programs that exist, most focus on helping student locate, describe, interpret, summarize, synthesize, and critique credible information drawn from the literature (*Andre and Graves, 2013; Naidoo, 2013*).

## 2. Academic writing skills: Literature review

Recently, two literature reviews were published that looked at how nursing programs encourage writing academic skills, one in Canada (*Andre and Graves, 2013*) and the other in US (*Troxler et al., 2011*). *Andre and Graves (2013)* looked at the websites of 81 Canadian bachelor of nursing programs including collaborative programs but excluding francophone programs and programs for diploma nurses seeking a nursing degree. Almost half (48.1%) did not require English literature

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or writing courses and only 4.9% offered academic writing courses specifically geared to nursing students. Andre and Graves (2013) believe that traditional English courses are less than optimal for preparing nursing students to become reflective writers because they are mostly required to write essays and research papers. After analysing 30 different types of writing approaches offered by the various programs in Canada, they concluded that schools of nursing need to have a discipline specific writing course to help develop “discursive knowledge and writing skills” p. 95. The course needs to expose students to APA document style to help students develop an evidence based nursing practice. They also believe that writing courses that are not discipline specific will be less likely to promote learning opportunities.

As for Troxler et al. (2011), their review of the literature using three search engines produced 421 records, but after applying elimination criteria such as: articles not including nursing students, articles before 1990 and articles focusing on English as a second language, only nine articles looking at how bachelor of nursing programs teach writing in the US remained. They divided the writing programs in two categories: standalone writing programs and writing programs that span the curriculum. After highlighting different examples of the two categories of programs, they concluded that programs integrating the development of writing skills across the curriculum (WAC) are more effective. In general, they need to include five common elements:

- short writing assignments,
- training for faculty in offering constructive feedback,
- sequencing writing assignments that build on prior learning (scaffolding),
- giving samples of successful writing or explaining grading rubrics
- and giving drafts with feedback.

Despite discovering six BN programs that adopt an across the curriculum approach in the US, Troxler et al. (2011) believe that more anecdotal evidence is needed to help determine the efficacy of those programs.

In fact, universities offer different programs, which include, but are not limited to, one-on-one tutoring, peer review, writing retreats, English as a second language programs, writing workshops, writing seminars, writing centres, writing tutorials, and writing styles. Some authors believe that by helping students develop writing skills they also develop informational literacy (Andre and Graves, 2013; Bickes and Schim, 2010). Despite the different programs available, several students continue to have a hard time writing; they submit poorly written papers, they have difficulty knowing how to write and how to proceed when writing papers (Andre and Graves, 2013; Bickes and Schim, 2010; Tarrant et al., 2008; Troxler et al., 2011). This can be especially problematic when English is a second language (Salamonson et al., 2010), or a foreign language (Lin and Yang, 2011).

Because writing academic papers can be very overwhelming experiences that cause stress and anxiety in students, it's important to use scaffolding to help break down the writing skills (Lin and Yang, 2011; Horstmanshof and Brownie, 2013; Troxler et al., 2011; Tarrant et al., 2008). To encourage reflective writing, universities need to build on prior learning (Tarrant et al., 2008) and their writing programs need to be intensive, directed experiences that are also structured and flexible (Carroll et al., 2013; Stine, 2010; Wichadee, 2010). Salamonson et al. (2010) believe that helping students acquire writing skills takes time and they require detailed feedback, both formative and summative, by trained facilitators, be it peers or faculty (Andre and Graves, 2013; Bickes and Schim, 2010; Gopee and Deane, 2013).

A review of the literature for the last five years reveals that universities and colleges are increasingly encouraging the use of technology based formats such as wikis (Carroll et al., 2013; Lin and Yang, 2011; Griffiths and Nicolls, 2010; Wichadee, 2010) and discussion boards

(Horstmanshof and Brownie, 2013; Stine, 2010) to promote writing skills. However, of all the studies found, only one examined ways to enhance student nurses' writing by using a blended learning approach supported by an electronic aid, e-Support4U, (Horstmanshof and Brownie, 2013). This approach promoted a “community of learning” during clinicals where nursing students used e-communication tools, blogs, wikis, and discussion boards to share and reflect on written assignments. A detailed review of the literature revealed no other studies where researchers or faculty explored the use of web based tools to help nursing students develop academic writing skills.

### 3. Purpose of the article

The purpose of this article is therefore twofold. Firstly we wish to share our francophone school of nursing's experience in creating and evaluating Method SIMPLE: a web based interactive pedagogical tool helping students achieve better success when submitting university papers, both written and oral. Secondly, we will also share results of a qualitative study describing the lived experiences of nursing students and Faculty who use this tool.

### 4. Creation and evaluation of method simple

#### 4.1. Description of the pedagogical tool

Method SIMPLE was created in 2008 by a group of three professors who taught first year courses in the bachelors of nursing program. All were unsatisfied with the old method used to help students present proper academic papers which consisted of them buying, reading and mastering the content of a brief paper document explaining the proper way to present an academic paper loosely based on a francophone adaptation of APA's methodology. Students had no face to face explanations about the document and it was often misplaced or lost causing students to have to return to the bookstore to buy another copy. The web based tool was created to offer students a readily available and interactive tool that they could access at any time. Students are first exposed to Method SIMPLE in their first year Introduction to Health Science class where they learn how to use it and learn about its content. Faculty members in the following years of the program instruct students to refer to Method SIMPLE when they have difficulty preparing oral and written presentations. Method SIMPLE, like other course content is housed on CLIC, a web-based software learning management system

**Table 1**  
Sections present in Method SIMPLE.

Title of the module	Content found in the module
S: Sorts of information	Different types, forms, sources, and locations where credible information can be found along with information retrieval strategies (ex. search engines, data bases)
I: Information being communicated	Directions on how to collect, analyze, and synthesize the collected information using software such as RefWorks or FLOW
M: My audience	Recommendations regarding how to transmit information based on the audience (ex. general public, other healthcare professionals)
P: Path required (written or oral)	Requirements when preparing an oral or written presentation/paper. Detailed summary of the APA publication guidelines, PowerPoint presentation suggestions, example of a written letter
L: Language required	Examples on how to transmit a clear and precise message that respects the audiences' stage of development (ex. tips regarding Piaget's stages of cognitive development)
E: Excellence	Revision of the key points when presenting an excellent written paper including a printable checklist

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