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Introduction

So, you want to be a nurse? That’s a great ambition and one that many people aspire to. So many people, in fact, that nursing is one of the most popular courses at UK universities. But there are many more applications than places available, and ultimately, each year many candidates are disappointed.

That’s why, if you’re to succeed in your nursing application, you need help and advice to plan your way forward. And that’s what this book is all about – clear, practical guidance from an experienced nursing admissions tutor that helps you make your application stand out from the rest.

A nursing application can take many years to prepare, and the application and selection processes are only the first stages in your long journey to become a qualified nurse. If you’re ready to take on this challenge then read on . . . and welcome to nursing.

About This Book

This book is born of my experience as both a nurse lecturer and an admissions tutor:

✔ Selecting candidates: I spend a considerable part of my working week selecting future nursing students, and over the years I have seen many thousands of ambitious and eager candidates. Some of the candidates have gone on to be highly successful nurses, such as ward managers and senior nurses. Others missed out on opportunities and never made it past the interview stage.

✔ Teaching students: A registered nurse, I spend the other part of my week teaching students at university and supporting them while in clinical practice, so I know a lot about students and how they cope with the nursing course.

These combined experiences have given me an in-depth understanding of what draws people to nursing, why some do well while others fail, and how to differentiate between the excellent, the good and the not-so-good candidate.

In this book, then, you get an insider’s perspective into what it takes to succeed in an application. I lead you through the whole
process of getting into nursing school, from preparing your application through to getting that all-important offer letter, showing you the different aspects that you’re likely to encounter – and, crucially, how to handle them.

**Conventions Used in This Book**

Throughout the book I use a few conventions:

- I use *italics* for emphasis and to highlight new words or concepts.
- **Boldfaced** text indicates key words in bulleted lists or the key steps of action lists.
- **Monofont** indicates internet and email addresses. If you’re reading this book on an enabled device, the web addresses are hyperlinked.
- Sidebars, the shaded grey boxes that you occasionally see, give examples to support the discussion, handy tips and background information.
- In the interests of balance, I alternate male and female pronouns between chapters.

**What You’re Not to Read**

Whether you’re completely new to nursing or have many years of nursing experience, this book offers all you need to make that all-important good impression on admissions tutors. But candidates who arrive at the decision to apply for nursing come from a wide variety of backgrounds, and so following the logical order of chapters doesn’t necessarily suit your need for information. Well, that’s okay, because each chapter of this book is self-contained and gives you the relevant information and advice for that particular topic. So don’t feel that you need to read the entire book from start to end: if you already have a good knowledge of the subject that I explore in a chapter then just move on to the next one.

**Foolish Assumptions**

Having been an admissions tutor for many years and seen many candidates in that time, I have come to understand what the usual
candidate is like and what draws them to nursing. With this in mind I have made a few assumptions about you, the reader.

Well, the first assumption is actually not to assume too much! Candidates come from all walks of life and I am always surprised at just how diverse the backgrounds of nursing candidates are. With this in mind there are a few things that I don’t assume:

- That you are of a particular age or gender. Whether you’re a young woman or a middle-aged man has no bearing on my consideration about you. Age and gender don’t influence your suitability to nursing.
- Your cultural influences, spiritual beliefs, ethnicity or nationality. None of these make you better or worse than any other candidate and so I take no regard of these.

I’ve given much consideration to why you’ve picked up this book and where you’re coming from. With this in mind I assume that:

- You want to become a nurse and have a real interest in succeeding with your application. This book gives you the advice you need to improve your chances. However, I assume that you’re motivated and will put some hard work in preparing your application.
- You have some understanding of nursing. Although I explain in some detail what nursing in the UK is about, you need to have an appreciation of the basic role of the nurse.
- That you appreciate the importance of education in preparing for your application.
- You like being around people! Nursing is about people and you need to want and like to be with people. Being highly intelligent with a great academic profile doesn’t necessarily make a good nurse. You must want to work alongside people to succeed with your application.

How This Book Is Organised

This book contains six parts, each of which breaks down into a number of chapters. Each part explores an important aspect of planning your application, and the chapters develop in more detail the various considerations relating to that part. Here’s a summary of each part.
Part I: Getting Started with a Career in Nursing

If you're going to spend the rest of your working life as a nurse, the first step is to understand what nursing is. The nursing profession is a national institution that underpins all healthcare within the UK and it’s regulated to ensure that citizens are offered top-quality care. This part helps explain how nursing has developed into the profession it is today, and it offers you insight into the different types of nursing and the opportunities available to you after you qualify.

Part II: Focusing on Your Personal Development

Nursing attracts people from all walks of life and this diversity is one of its strengths. Identifying what qualities and experiences you have that support your application can make you a strong candidate. But equally, you need to identify which areas you need to develop. This part explores what it takes to be a nurse – from qualifications and care experience through to meeting professional requirements and demonstrating the necessary skills and qualities.

Part III: Preparing to Apply

Higher education is a whole new world, and with so many universities and courses on offer, the task of making suitable choices can be daunting. In this section I explain how university nursing programmes work, to help you select the right course. I give you a helping hand in exploring universities to see which best suit your requirements and offer some helpful tips for attending open days. I round off with a look at financial affairs – so you can be sure you can afford to study.

Part IV: Perfecting Your Application

After all your preparation, you don’t want a poor application to let you down. The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) process can appear complicated and difficult to navigate should you not be aware how it works. This part explains in detail how the UCAS application process works and the tasks you need to carry out. I give specific advice for two key features of your application: the personal statement and the references.
Part V: Attending Selection Days . . . And Beyond

If a university likes the look of your application, you’ll receive an invite to a selection day, where you attend an interview and may sit a test. For many candidates, this is a stressful time. So in this part you’ll find plenty of information on what to expect on the day, and how you can make the most of these events and show yourself to be an excellent candidate. I also offer useful advice for the aftermath of the selection day, on how to manage your offers and deal with any disappointments.

Part VI: The Part of Tens

Each chapter in the Part of Tens offers a succinct list of hints, tips and helpful guidance. Head here for quick-grab info on how to make your application stand out and how to avoid common pitfalls throughout the process.

Head to www.dummies.com/extras/getintonursingschooluk for a free bonus Part of Tens chapter. In the bonus chapter, I offer advice on how to stay on top of the associated stress that comes with making a nursing application, to ensure you’re in a good position to accept any offers made.

Icons Used in This Book

I use icons throughout the book to draw your attention to information that deserves special attention.

This icon highlights useful ideas or information that can add extra gloss to your preparations and application.

I use this icon to draw your attention to something you should keep in mind.

The Warning icon highlights errors and mistakes that can be very costly and possibly ruin your whole application. Take note!
Where to Go from Here

This book is full to the brim with useful information. Have a flick through the pages and get acquainted with the different sections, and you'll soon appreciate what stage of the application process you're at. You can then decide which chapter to read.

I recommend that you give Part I a go first. You may well know some of this information already, but it does no harm revisiting just who nurses are and what they do – after all, that information forms the very foundation of your application to nursing school.

Remember, you can find free bonus material specific to this book at www.dummies.com/extras/getintonursingschooluk.

Good luck!
Part I

Getting Started with a Career in Nursing

getting started with a career in nursing

Go to www.dummies.com/extras/getintonursing schooluk for free online bonus content created especially for this book.
In this part . . .

- Delve into the history of nursing.
- Understand the four different types of nursing: adult, child, mental health and learning disabilities.
- Find out about the Nursing and Midwifery Council.
- Get familiar with the different places nurses work – from the NHS to the armed forces.
Welcome to nursing! In this chapter I familiarise you with the nursing profession, delve into a little history and explain the wide-ranging roles nurses carry out. I explain exactly how you train to become a nurse. I also introduce you to the Nursing and Midwifery Council, which crops up frequently throughout this book, the National Health Service and the Royal College of Nursing.

Read on too, to discover how you can travel the world with your valuable nursing skills . . .

Defining the Nursing Profession

What is nursing? Although this looks like a straightforward question, very few candidates can actually answer it well.

The admission tutors expect you to have formed some opinion of what nursing is and how it differs from other healthcare practices. Defining nursing can be difficult because one of its strengths is that it draws together knowledge from many other disciplines, such as the social and biological sciences. The essence of nursing practice is how it utilises a wide range of sources and a mixture of knowledge to create an entirely individual and distinct profession.
Here’s an illustration of what nursing is, based upon the Royal College of Nursing’s definition:

*Nursing is [. . .] the use of clinical judgement in the provision of care to enable people to improve, maintain, or recover health, to cope with health problems, and to achieve the best possible quality of life, whatever their disease or disability, until death.*

These are the characteristics that support this definition:

- **Purpose.** Nurses promote health and wellbeing, minimise suffering and encourage patient understanding. When death is inevitable, nurses offer best-quality care during the end of life.

- **Intervention.** Nurses encourage patient empowerment and independence by using a unique process to identify nursing needs and offer direct nursing care.

- **Domain.** Nurses understand how people respond to health and illness, both in the physical and psychological sense but also in social, cultural and spiritual terms too.

- **Focus.** Nurses focus on patients as a whole and care for all human responses rather than caring for particular conditions or illnesses.

- **Values.** Nursing is based upon a set of ethical values that respect dignity, autonomy, individuality and the nurse–patient relationship. Nurses accept professional accountability.

- **Partnership.** Nurses commit to working in partnership with patients, relatives, carers and the multidisciplinary team.

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**A brief history of nursing**

Nursing has been with us through the ages. It may not have been called nursing centuries ago, and it has been associated with wise old women, tribal leaders and even witchcraft at some points in history. However, there have always been individuals ready to come to the aid of others when they are unwell or in distress, and it was often, but not exclusively, women who took on this role of caring.

Nursing is seen as a social construct, responding to current events of the time. Sometimes nursing was the domain of the religious, while in other times it was delegated to the more lowly characters in society. Slowly, nursing became more organised, and although there was little formal education, it was influenced by religious, military and hierarchical structures – which is why nurses have titles such as ‘matron’, ‘sister’ and ‘staff’.

Prior to the 19th century the portrayal of nursing was one of lower-class women who undertook rather remedial roles in the support of the medical profession, often
with little or no training. But modern nursing is, of course, very different (although some modern nurses do use maggots, but that’s a story for another time!). So why and how did nursing change?

Today’s nursing has its roots in the 19th century and the turbulent times of the Crimean War. Britain was at war with Russia, and as in all wars there was much injury, illness and death. The military had its own medical team made up of doctors and nurses; however, there was much disquiet about the high levels of death among the soldiers. Enter Florence Nightingale – ‘the lady with the lamp’.

A truly remarkable person for her times, Florence Nightingale (1820–1910) came from a wealthy family and was very highly educated. She rebelled against conforming to expectations of the well-bred, and instead studied medicine and became renowned for her knowledge of nursing.

She arrived at the British military hospital in Scutari and took over the management of the nurses. She reorganised the care of the wounded and implemented infection control measures such as hand washing with such incredible success that death due to infection was virtually eradicated.

Florence returned to Britain as a national heroine and dedicated the rest of her life to the promotion of nursing. She is recognised as the pioneer of modern nursing and she made a career in nursing respectable for the upper classes. Florence is seen as one of the first nurse researchers and, most importantly for you, championed the formal training of nurses. In 1860 she set up her own nurse training programme at St Thomas’s Hospital in London, and much of the training, education and professionalism accepted as normal today is attributed to her vision of nursing.

Florence Nightingale is the most well-known nursing figure, but she is not the only one who has made an impact on nursing. Mary Seacole is well worth researching, as she too nursed during the Crimean War and has been recognised as a nursing pioneer. She was even voted the ‘Greatest Black Briton’ in 2003.

Nursing is a profession, an occupation that requires prolonged training and a formal qualification in a specific subject or science. Professions:

- Develop specific theoretical knowledge relevant to each different field.
- Have their own culture.
- Introduce codes of ethical practice and have legal reinforcement of standards.
- Offer a service to society and receive public recognition.
- Receive formal training and have a system of qualification.
- Require personal autonomy and accountability for practice.
So a professional nurse:

- Has undertaken formal education and has achieved a recognised qualification.
- Upholds the professional, ethical and legal requirements expected of the profession, and is regulated to do so.
- Acts in the best interests of patients and accepts personal accountability for his or her own conduct and behaviour.

**Understanding the Role of the Nursing and Midwifery Council**

The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) was first set up in 1919 by Parliament (then named the General Nursing Council). The Council:

- Works to protect the public and consider their health and wellbeing in all it does.
- Sets the standards for education, training and conduct to ensure that nurses deliver high-quality care.
- Ensures that nurses continually update their skills and knowledge in order to uphold the professional standards.
- Investigates when nurses fall short of meeting the professional standards.

All qualified nurses must register with the NMC in order to practise, and the NMC also plays a role in the selection and education of student nurses. The NMC set the standards for pre-registration education that all universities must comply to. These standards are very lengthy and outline:

- Assessment methods to be used to test students.
- Different clinical specialities that students must experience.
- Guidance on professional expectations of how students should behave.
- Principles for the selection of student nurses.
- Rules for the length and time that students must be taught.
- Skills students must develop (these are grouped into *Essential Skills Clusters*).
You’re not expected to fully understand the role of the NMC, but it’s highly likely that the admission tutors will refer to them at some point during the selection process, so make sure you have a decent understanding of the organisation’s role.

The NMC has specific guidance on how student nurses should conduct themselves. Having some understanding of the professional expectations of students is a good way to impress the admission tutors. Here are some examples of how the NMC expects you to behave as a student nurse, which may be useful in preparing yourself to apply:

- Communicate well.
- Treat people as individuals and respect their dignity.
- Respect a person’s right to confidentiality.
- Treat all colleagues, team members and all those you work with fairly and without discrimination.
- Take responsibility for your own learning.

The NMC website (www.nmc-uk.org) has a section just for student nurses. Use this as a resource.

The Royal College of Nursing

It is worth knowing a little about the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) as, like the NMC, it has a significant role in the support of nursing students. Founded in 1916 as a professional organisation for nurses, the RCN is now recognised as the main trade union for nursing.

The aim of trade unions is to look after the rights and wellbeing of workers, and so the aim of the RCN is to look after nurses, including student nurses. Much of this work is in relation to employment practices such as levels of pay; however the RCN also provides a wealth of other support such as guidelines for practice, a major library of nursing books and journals, financial advice, and, most importantly, support on professional development.

There are alternative trade unions that students can join, but the RCN has been recognised by successive governments (and monarchy, hence the ‘Royal’) as the ‘voice of nursing’.

The RCN website at www.rcn.org.uk is well worth a look. It contains a wealth of information about nursing that can be invaluable in convincing the admission tutors that you understand what being a nursing student means.
Outlining the Role of the Nurse

Nursing is a healthcare profession that focuses on the health and wellbeing of patients, clients and families. But other healthcare professionals, like doctors, physiotherapists and paramedics, do all that too, so what makes nursing special?

What makes nursing a distinct profession with its own identity is that it absorbs elements of all the other healthcare professions and uses them in a unique role. When caring, nurses draw upon knowledge and skill from a wide variety of other disciplines to ensure the patient receives the best care. Nurses spend much more time with patients and clients than any other healthcare professional and they use a range of skills to deliver holistic care. For example, nurses need to know anatomy and physiology in the same way as doctors do, understand and manage medicines like a pharmacist, move and mobilise the patient with similar skills to a physiotherapist, and understand how the client lives in the community like a social worker.

Although nurses don’t specialise to the same depth of understanding as these other professions, they’re expected to have a thorough and broad understanding and appreciation of all the aspects of the patient’s condition. Here are other subjects that nurses need knowledge of to perform their roles:

- **Law and ethics**: Taking into account patients’ rights and beliefs.
- **Pathophysiology**: Understanding the abnormal function of the body.
- **Epidemiology**: Knowing the patterns and causes of illness and disease in society.
- **Politics**: Realising patient choices in a national context.
- **Psychology**: Appreciating the effects of illness on the patient.
- **Sociology**: Understanding how society impacts on patients’ health.

Nurses use their skills to help and encourage patients to live the life that is normal to them within their own limitations, and where necessary, to allow patients to pass away peacefully and with dignity. They also support families and communities, and work to promote good health and prevent illness in the first place.
Four fields exist in nursing – adult, child, mental health and learning disabilities – and I explore the roles of nurses in these fields in depth in Chapter 2. Depending on their specialty, nurses undertake a wide range of tasks. Here are some you’re likely to do as a student nurse:

- Apply nursing knowledge to the clinical situation.
- Assess patients using nursing models and frameworks.
- Deliver nursing care:
  - Administering medication
  - Bandaging
  - Basic life support
  - Giving injections
  - Recording vital signs such as blood pressure and pulse
  - Using technology
  - Wound dressing
- Give hands-on personal care:
  - Bathing and washing
  - Eating and drinking
  - Moving and walking
  - Toileting
- Implement care plans and evaluate outcomes.
- Offer health promotion.
- Plan care that’s individualised and appropriate for the patient.
- Work with other healthcare professionals.

Within each field the scope of the nurses role and the development of skills and practices are ever-increasing and no two roles are the same. Nurses now have the autonomy and responsibility to care for patients to the level that a few years ago only doctors could do. It is possible today for nurses to have roles that include having their own clinics, making diagnoses of illnesses, undertaking minor surgery and procedures, and prescribing medication.

How your nursing skills and roles develop is dependent on your own career aspirations, your motivation to continue your education and the service development of your field. Table 1-1 shows how a career in nursing can develop. It’s based on my own career, and you can see how academic and clinical development has led me to many different roles.