Contents

How to use this book ........................................................................................................ xi

About the author ............................................................................................................ xiii

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ xv

Introduction ................................................................................................................... xvii

Part One: Getting started .............................................................................................. 1

Chapter 1: The scoop on nursing .................................................................................. 3
  Why nursing is hot ...................................................................................................... 3
  LPN vs. RN: What’s the difference? ......................................................................... 4
  More career choices than stars in the sky ............................................................... 6

Chapter 2: Is nursing for you? .................................................................................... 9
  Student nurse snapshot ............................................................................................ 10
  What makes a good nurse? ...................................................................................... 11
  A day in the life ........................................................................................................ 12
  But what is it really like? ......................................................................................... 13
  Testing the waters before diving in .......................................................................... 14
Chapter 3: First things first ................................................................. 15

Planning your path .................................................................................. 15
Selecting a program .................................................................................. 17
A word on distance learning .................................................................... 18
Entrance exams ......................................................................................... 19
Preflight checklist ..................................................................................... 19
The application process ............................................................................ 20
Writing a powerful entrance essay ........................................................... 22
The interview .............................................................................................. 22
Waiting…and waiting… .............................................................................. 23

Chapter 4: Keeping your piggy bank happy .............................................. 25

Work and school: Can it be done? .............................................................. 25
Paying for college: Myths vs. reality ......................................................... 26
Grants and scholarships .......................................................................... 27
Student loans ............................................................................................ 28
Still more types of aid ............................................................................... 28

Part Two: You’re in! Now what? ............................................................... 31

Chapter 5: Gearing up for student life ...................................................... 33

Tools of the trade ...................................................................................... 35
Meet your new family ................................................................................ 36

Chapter 6: Student survival skills 101 .................................................... 39

Getting organized ..................................................................................... 40
Sharpen your study skills ......................................................................... 42
Procrastination: The 8th deadly sin .......................................................... 44
Chicken scratch ......................................................................................... 47
Study groups ............................................................................................. 49
Chapter 7: A guided tour of your classes ..............................................51

Nursing school horror stories .................................................................51
Core classes ..........................................................................................53
Nursing classes ....................................................................................54

Chapter 8: Front and center: In the classroom .....................................57

Identify your instructor’s style ...............................................................58
Learning objectives ................................................................................60
Taking it all in ........................................................................................61
Reading with a purpose .........................................................................63
Ask and ye shall be answered ................................................................64
Your two cents—it counts! ....................................................................65
The art of public speaking .....................................................................66
The written word ..................................................................................69

Chapter 9: Anxiety-free exams .............................................................73

Strategies for test prep ..........................................................................75
What’s the question? ..............................................................................77
Budgeting exam time ...........................................................................79
Preparing for finals ...............................................................................80
The sun will rise again ..........................................................................81

Chapter 10: Research ..........................................................................83

Finding information ..............................................................................84
Evaluating sources ...............................................................................85
Drawing conclusions ............................................................................86

Chapter 11: The joy of clinicals ............................................................89

What are they like? ..............................................................................90
What will I be expected to do? ............................................................91
Helpful advice .....................................................................................93
Getting the experience you need ........................................................93
Care plans.................................................................94
Nursing diagnoses...................................................94
Holistic care.............................................................95
Cultural issues in nursing ..........................................96
Interpersonal skills................................................97

Chapter 12: Maximize your educational experience........99

Get involved.............................................................99
Give something back ............................................100

Chapter 13: Take care of yourself.................................103

Balancing school, work, and family.........................104
Making time for yourself ..........................................106
Adjust your attitude ................................................107
Be assertive.............................................................108
Motivation...............................................................109

Chapter 14: Graduation day..........................................111

The pinning ceremony.............................................111
Exit exams..............................................................112
What’s next?...........................................................114

Part Three: Beyond the classroom.........................115

Chapter 15: The dreaded NCLEX®..........................117

What is it and how does it work? ..............................118
Test content............................................................120
NCLEX myths.........................................................127
Getting ready for the big day.................................129
If you don’t pass....................................................132
Chapter 16: Graduate school ..............................................................135

Chapter 17: Transitioning to work .....................................................139

Finding your dream job................................................................................140
Résumés.........................................................................................................142
Interviewing ..................................................................................................145
Salaries, benefits, and perks ........................................................................148
Evaluating job offers ....................................................................................149

Chapter 18: The first six months.........................................................151

You really are ready......................................................................................152
The preceptor relationship...........................................................................153
Legal mumbo jumbo ....................................................................................154
I wish they had told me... ...........................................................................156
More things you need to know...................................................................161
Nursing superstitions ....................................................................................163
Final words of advice....................................................................................163

Resources .............................................................................................165

Glossary ...............................................................................................173

References ............................................................................................177
Before you invest significant time and money into any educational program, it’s always a good idea to do a little field homework. Will there be jobs for you after you graduate? What level of education and experience is required for new job seekers? What can you expect, in terms of income and advancement potential? What is the job really like?

We know you want to help people, and perhaps you’ve dreamed about nursing since you were three years old. But will it put food on your table? As an occupation, can you depend on it? Absolutely! Nurses are in demand and will continue to be so, long into the future.

**Why nursing is hot**

As a career, nursing promises three things: portability, flexibility, and ironclad stability. Wherever you go, however your needs change, nursing has a job for you.
Fact: The healthcare industry is booming. There were 2.3 million registered nurses (RNs) employed in 2002. Nursing is at the forefront of the healthcare industry, with the most jobs and the most growth:

- Registered nursing is the largest healthcare occupation in the U.S.
- The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics lists registered nurses as the number one occupation with the largest projected 10-year job growth
- Projections put the demand for RNs at 2.9 million by the year 2012

If you are looking for a profession with a promising future, nursing can’t be beat. For more information, check out the U.S. Department of Labor’s Occupational Outlook Handbook (www.bls.gov/oco).

Why is nursing seeing so much growth? Several factors come into play. The elderly, who typically have more complex healthcare needs, are seeing a faster than average growth rate in population. Baby boomers are following close behind, bringing with them chronic illnesses and the related complications. To top things off, an overwhelming number of experienced nurses are nearing retirement, and as they leave the field, their jobs will need to be filled. The average age of current nursing professionals is now around 44 years old. Finally, medical advances now allow for the diagnosis and treatment of more conditions and illnesses than ever before, thus adding to the demand for qualified nurses.

For the next few years, expect to see

- pay rates increasing
- more attractive benefit packages
- flexible work schedules
- new roles for RNs, such as parish nursing

LPN vs. RN: What’s the difference?

Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs)—also known as Licensed Vocational Nurses (LVNs)—and Registered Nurses (RNs) are both called “nurses,” and both are required to pass a national licensing exam after completing
an accredited nursing program. The difference between the two is in
the scope of practice and responsibilities, as well as the required level
of education.

LPNs undergo one year of intensive training in a state-approved program,
while RNs must obtain a 2- or 4-year college degree. While both provide
basic nursing care, RNs generally have a wider clinical scope of practice
and more managerial responsibilities. Additionally, RNs typically have
higher earnings and greater opportunity for advancement.

You may also come across the term “diploma nurse.” Although many of
these instructional programs have vanished, a diploma nurse is an RN who
has undergone at least 3 years of nursing training. These programs are not
degree granting and are normally associated with hospitals and not college
or university schools of nursing. Diploma nurses must pass the same state
boards as 2- and 4-year degree RNs.

Which option is best for you will depend on many factors that we’ll discuss
in the coming chapters, but for now, here are some basic facts to consider:

- On average, RNs earn considerably more a year than LPNs. (Income
depends on multiple factors, including experience, geographic location,
and employer. However, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the
median annual income for RNs in 2002 was in the upper 40 thousand
dollar range.)
- Employment options for RNs will be greatest, with more available jobs
and more new positions being created.
- Employment for LPNs in long-term care settings is solid, but they will
face stiff competition for hospital jobs.

**Associate or bachelor’s degrees**
Let’s also take a look at the 2- and 4-year RNs. Does it matter which degree
you get? In terms of immediate practice, no. An RN with an associate’s
degree is licensed to perform the same functions as an RN with a bachelor’s
degree. In terms of salary, the difference is not really significant—typically
the amount is a dollar an hour or less difference.

So why bother with the bachelor’s degree? More flexibility and better
opportunities. Depending on your career goals, the bachelor’s degree gives
you more options. Four-year RNs complete the same core courses and
clinicals as their 2-year counterparts, but they also receive a broad liberal arts education to supplement the nursing program. If you want to go into management, research, or advanced practice, the bachelor's degree is the way to go.

More career choices than stars in the sky

Gone are the days of only having ward nursing as a career path. Modern nurses enjoy a wide range of career options with enough variety and flexibility to suit every personality. Here's a peek at just some of the specialty areas in which nurses practice:

- Ambulatory Care Nursing
- Burn Unit Nursing
- Cardiac/Cardiovascular Nursing
- Case Management
- Community Health Nursing
- Correctional Nursing
- Critical Care Nursing
- Emergency Nursing
- Flight Nursing
- Forensic Nursing
- Gastroenterology Nursing
- Holistic Nursing
- Home Health Nursing
- Hospice/Palliative Care
- Hyperbaric Nursing
- IV Therapy Nursing
- Infectious Disease/Immunology
- Lactation Consultant
- Legal Nursing
- Medical-Surgical Nursing
- Metabolic Nursing
- Neonatal Nursing
- Nephrology Nursing
- Neuro-Surgical Nursing
- Nurse Anesthetist
- Nurse Educator
- Nurse Entrepreneur
- Nurse Midwife
- Nurse Practitioner
- Nurse Recruiter
- Nursing Informatics
- Nursing Management
- Obstetrics and Gynecology
- Occupational Health Nursing
- Oncology Nursing
- Ophthalmologic Nursing
- Pain Management
- Parish Nursing
- Pediatric Nursing
- Perioperative Nursing
- Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery
- Psychiatric Nursing
- Pulmonary Nursing
- Rehabilitation Nursing
- Research
- School Nursing
- Sports Medicine Nursing
- Telephone Triage Nursing
- Transplant Nursing
- Travel Nursing
- Urology Nursing
- Wound Care
The range of roles available to nurses allows for unique job opportunities that are compatible with and complement outside interests:

- Need “parent hours,” so you can be home when your children are? Try school nursing.
- Looking for the variety and excitement of the jet-set life? See the world with travel nursing.
- Like detective work? Forensic nursing is right up your alley.
- Interested in law? Legal nursing might be just for you.
- Want to try virus hunting in today’s global potential pandemics, such as SARS or West Nile Virus? Join the ranks of immunology and infectious disease nurses.
- Got sports fever? There are nurse specialists in sports medicine.

You will be exposed to many of these areas during clinicals, where you will have the opportunity to learn firsthand which areas of practice you enjoy. For now, rest assured that there are enough career options to meet your goals and then some. The possibilities are endless—the choices are up to you.
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