

Teaching Aid—Overview
Critical Care: A New Nurse Faces Death, Life, and Everything in Between
by Theresa Brown

Contributed by John Ruff
Walter G. Friedrich Professor of American Literature at Valparaiso University

I have been teaching a course called “Writing in the Health Professions” at Valparaiso University since the fall of 2017 and in that time my students’ response to Theresa Brown’s book *Critical Care* has been overwhelmingly positive and their engagement deep and abiding.

I chose it at the recommendation of a friend who is herself an RN with experience in bedside nursing who went back to school mid-career, earned her Ph.D., and became a professor of nursing. I judged rightly that she knew what she was talking about: *Critical Care* seemed written expressly for me and for my students.

Why expressly for me? I am principally a literature teacher and I planned this course with no experience teaching technical or professional writing and no first-hand knowledge of health care. To teach with authority I would need to borrow it, and that is how Theresa Brown came to my rescue. My students find her credible, as do I. Though she is a new nurse, she is not your typical recent college graduate. Prior to getting her nursing license she earned a Ph.D. in English from the University of Chicago, taught writing at Tufts and elsewhere, and is a wife and a mother of three. Thus, she brings to the page personal and professional resources that are not common.

So why does *Critical Care* seem to be a book written expressly for my students? My students are typically nursing students in their second year, college pre-meds, students majoring in health administration or public health, or students preparing to become physician assistants. All these students find Brown’s work and workplace interesting, and they identify with someone doing something new, important, and challenging in the health sciences. They find the chapters very readable and very engaging; I find them a perfect length to discuss in a class period and I love the trajectory they trace from the beginning of Brown’s first year on the hospital floor to the end. I do not teach every chapter, but those I do teach stand on their own as distinct narratives from which one can draw a variety of lessons about patient care, therapeutic communication, and how the health care system works or fails to work. Before students begin clinicals, and while their education principally comes from textbooks and lectures, Brown, the “nurse who writes,” puts them face to face with real patients and real problems (while always observing HIPPA, of course) and my students like reading how everything in hospitals really gets done. On the page with Brown, my students learn that health care is truly a team sport, that no one can do it alone, and that navigating the bureaucracy and managing the inherent hierarchies are among the most important skills they need to acquire to be good health care providers.

In addition to having students read *Critical Care*, I occasionally assign opinion columns Brown has written for the *New York Times*, CNN.com, or *The American Journal of Nursing* to demonstrate how “the nurse who writes” is herself also a reader and reviewer who engages with others publicly and in print on matters important to the profession. Brown thus models what it means for a nurse to be an educator and advocate both on the floor and on the page.

Teaching Aid—Suggested Paper Topics
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1. Have students write a personal narrative that explains why they are taking the class, including some version of their interest in health care or their own medical history (if they want to share) that explains why they want to become a nurse, or a physician, physician assistant, etc.
2. *Critical Care* can be successfully paired with Tracy Kidder's book about Paul Farmer and Partners in Health called *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, and with the film *Wit*, directed by Mike Nichols and starring Emma Thompson. Bring in Rita Charon's notion of "Narrative Medicine" (download from TheresaBrownRN.com) and have students explicate the notion of narrative medicine by comparing *Critical Care* with Kidder and/or *Wit*.
3. Ask students to pick a clinical episode from *Critical Care*, briefly summarize the events, and then do a literature review relevant to the clinical episode. The lit. review could include articles about nursing, or treatment options, or health care administration and should include a brief summary of the article as well as a description of its relevance to the incident they picked from *Critical Care*. (Individual professors can determine how many articles to require for the review.)
4. The chapter called "Openings" begins as a story about a young male patient needing wound care. The chapter is all about openings in communication and shows how rules about "appropriate" communication may exclude openness in the clinical setting. Pick several incidents in *Critical Care* where good communication is essential, and/or where communication goes wrong and analyze the successful and/or ineffective patterns of communication depicted.
5. In Chapter 4, "Benched," Brown narrates her own experience as a patient following a serious knee injury. The nurse becomes the patient and suddenly has to deal with doctors, nurses, and the healthcare bureaucracy, including the human resources department of her own hospital, that almost fired her. Interweave your own story of being a patient, or someone else's story, with Brown's experiences. What do these depictions reveal about our health care system?
6. In "A Day on the Floor," Brown recounts from beginning to end an eight-hour shift where she cares for four oncology patients with a variety of medical needs. Use this chapter, and other incidents from the book, to outline everything that a nurse's job entails. Be specific and clear.

7. Patient education is an essential part of a nurse's role. Pick moments in *Critical Care* where Brown performs patient education, or moments when she is educating readers. Give details about how Brown teaches and discuss how effective her methods are.

8. In *Critical Care*, Brown is twice tasked with religious requests: to call a priest and to find a Bible. She satisfies both requests, addressing patient's and family member's spiritual needs. Using supporting literature, discuss the role of spiritual care in nursing.

Teaching Aid—Suggested Discussion Topics

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1. Discuss the cover of *Critical Care*. Ask students to consider the photographic image of a nurse wearing a surgical mask (not Theresa Brown). Why is the image cropped? Why masked? Why female? Consider what the title and subtitle imply. Notice the diagram at the bottom of the page that resembles a heartbeat on a screen, likely an EKG. The cover is trying to make an emotional connection with readers. Why is that important for a book on health care?

2. The preface to *Critical Care* is called "The Nurse Who Writes" and in it, Brown reveals how and why she become a nurse, and also how she become a nurse who writes. Ask students to think about how writing about their work, or simply talking about it in an honest and deliberate way, might positively affect them as health care practitioners. Do they see any downsides?

3. Brown says that her original purpose for writing was to try and recover from the sudden and terrible death of a patient. A lot of very difficult challenges arise in health care. Discuss how hospitals might help clinical staff deal with on-the-job stress.

4. Have the class watch excerpts from the documentary film produced by Carolyn Jones titled *The American Nurse*. Use the portrayals in the film, combined with the depiction of nursing in *Critical Care*, to elaborate on what makes "a good nurse." That is, outline the nursing ideals they see expressed. (This discussion question will work with *Critical Care* alone, too.)

5. At the end of the 1st chapter of "Critical Care," Brown stays late at her last shift as a nursing student to help a child who is extremely sick. Meanwhile, her own eleven-year-old son is wondering whether his mother will arrive home too tired to make his birthday cake. Work/life balance and selfcare were revealed as huge issues for nurses during the pandemic. Talk about why caring for oneself is integral to being a good nurse.

6. When the patient's back splits open, Brown writes that everyone on the floor played down the strangeness of it. Discuss whether this seems like a helpful or unhelpful coping strategy for dealing with the stresses of a job where lives are literally on the line.
7. Think about the patient deaths in *Critical Care*. Are they "good deaths" or "bad deaths"? Do you find the concept of a "good death" useful when thinking about clinical care, and especially about end-of-life care?
8. The chapter called "Poison" makes clear that chemotherapy is toxic. Discuss the difficulty of navigating the ethical tightrope of hurting patients in order to heal them.
9. Talk about bullying and the idea that "nurses eat their young."