

Teaching Effective Writing:

Teaching Faculty Members to Write More Effectively to
Engage, Communicate, and Win Grants

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Overview

- Models
 - Rachel Dresbeck: formal courses
 - Peg AtKisson: short presentation plus feedback
 - Alan Paul: developmental editing
- Take-Home Messages
 - Joanna Downer: key messages and evaluation
- Q&A

Formal Classes and Programs

Why a whole course?

Some kinds of writing instruction can be institutionalized:

- For-credit courses
- Non-credit professional development courses
- Major advantage is repetition and continued contact. You're with them longer, and you develop a relationship—great for long term.

For-credit classes

- These include courses that are part of a program of study as well as continuing education courses (e.g. CME)
- Advantages: can be added as part of the curriculum; potential for revenue (tuition).
- Disadvantages: need to be approved by curriculum committees and accrediting bodies, and other bureaucratic hurdles. Also, it can be a lot of work, depending on how you assess the students. (Hint: participation and peer review are your friends—and they mirror real-world writing evaluation)
- You can also partner with existing courses—that has worked well and doesn't have the bureaucratic hurdles.

Noncredit Professional Development Courses

- Easiest to manage if you can get buy-in from your institution.
- We set our office up as a recharge center; graduate programs, departments, start-up packages etc all support the program.
- You still need to develop learning outcomes and evaluation measures (e.g., successful funding) but you don't need to grade.

Key points with any course

- Keep in mind the principles of adult education: focus on their actual needs.
- Make assignments real. Exercises are ok for class but not for homework or assignments.
- Make sure they have something to write about.
- Use peer evaluation to drive home points about audience.
- Give them practical strategies they can use in the future, like the ones covered in this presentation!

Short Presentation with Follow-Up

Short Presentation with Follow-Up

- Quick presentations that do not repeat the standard “use” vs. “utilize” advice
- Purpose is to give painless advice, but also support with implementation on real document
- Two different models
 - Joanna Downer at Duke: Video shorts and small group follow up
 - Peg AtKisson at Tufts: In-person group presentation and individual follow up

Video Followed by Group Work

- Five short videos (3-5 minutes) to give didactic instruction
- Offered through School of Medicine's "Path to Independence Program" and "K Club", to BIRCHW, and Dept of Medicine Academy (career development for younger Medicine faculty)
- Participants generally will already have had "scientific" feedback on their Aims

Video Followed by Group Work

- Approach is at
 - story-level with instructor's own tips and tricks.
 - sentence-level using George Gopen's approach to considering reader expectations
- The individual's document, usually Specific Aims page, is projected, and leader guides the participant/group through the revision process.

Focus First on the Story

- What's your goal?
- Who's your audience?
- Is your first subject the right “whose story is it” for your project?
- Will that “whose story” resonate with your audience?

Make Every Sentence Support the Story

- What information is at the end of the sentence?
- Is that the new important information you'll go on to discuss or the reader should emphasize?
- Is other new information in this sentence, and if so, is it important and/or necessary?
- In the next sentence, what is your backwards link and/or transition that leads the reader forward and explains the relationship between this sentence and the previous one?

In Person Presentation Followed by Individual Work

- Short session on clarity in writing style, focused on the Specific Aims/Overview section
- Attendees could schedule 30-minute meetings for live critique/editing of a Specific Aims/Overview session

Individual Work

- Cold reading and edit of the Specific Aims/Overview page
- Focus on overall sense and story, as well as line edits
 - Is the hypothesis testable?
 - Do the aims test the hypothesis?
 - Is the reader convinced this is important and doable?

Developmental Editing

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Typically associated with a “special project”

- Junior faculty approaching a tenure decision
- Large multi-investigator proposals
- “Last chance” resubmission

Developmental Editing

Required **output**:

- Produce a more competitive proposal for the current submission

Desired **outcome**:

- Develop the client's capacity to write brilliant proposals

Developmental Editing

Use the Intake Process to Set expectations

- I will completely rewrite your proposal based on what you wrote and what you tell me in our meetings
- I'M GOING TO MAKE MISTAKES
 - We'll treat every mistake as your failure to *make* me understand
 - Your job is to correct my mistakes by refining your story
 - » explain things better or remove them
- You will make the final decisions on everything

Five-Step Process

1. Review and Analysis
2. Interview
3. First Edit – Plot and Prose
4. Oral Defense
5. Exit Interview

1. Review and Analysis

Assess the Funder/Program

- What does it take to win?

Assess the Proposal

- Suitability, Clarity, etc.

2. Interview

- Goal: Distill the story
 - Poor proposals typically emphasize what we're going to do rather than what the funder is going to get
- Process: Probe deeply and challenge in a friendly way
 - What is the problem, where is the novelty, what will be difficult, etc.
 - WHY" and "WHY NOT" questions
 - Make them defend their choices more clearly than they did in the document

3a. First Edit – Plot Structure

- Goal: Create the proposal structure
- Process
 - Move, Remove, Add
 - » Align the proposal to the Funder's review criteria
 - » Create/Improve the story
 - » Reduce length

3b. First Edit -- Prose

- Goal: Improve Readability
- Process
 - COMPLETELY rewrite their prose
 - 3 C's: clear, concise, correct
 - Suitability for the audience

4. Oral Defense

- Goal: Engage and Train the Client
 - Explain the NOSE paradigm
 - Explain changes to elicit reactions
- Process: Review entire document
 - Discuss structural changes
 - Invite them to accept or reject any change but require them to explain WHY
 - Assign them to revise the draft

5. Exit Interview

- Goals: Assess Final Draft and Build Your Relationship
- Process: Discussion
 - Allow them to explain the strategy behind the changes they made and comment
 - Discuss other funders they might approach with this idea
 - If they had to remove ideas, discuss other proposals they might write to do that work

Comments

- Labor Intensive!
 - 10-15 hours for a typical NSF standard grant or NIH R01
- Subject Matter Expertise is not required
 - Process sometimes works better if you're only somewhat knowledgeable and keep forcing them to explain more clearly
- Track Changes?
 - Do preserve their original material but discourage reviewing change-by-change
 - Goal is to create “aha moments” where they see what's possible

Designing and Conducting a Writing Program for Faculty

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- Choosing a format
- Key instructional messages
- Evaluation possibilities

What should your program look like?

- What are your faculty members' greatest needs? What gaps exist in their training or resources?
- How can you help address those needs or fill those gaps given your or your team's skills, experiences, and interests?
- Determine your goal and design your program to achieve that goal.
- Establish a plan and partners for implementation, and get started.
- Evaluate and tweak the program.

Your program should make faculty comfortably uncomfortable

- Effective writing is an iterative process for everyone.
- Participants should be “in this together” by recognizing shared goals and contributing to others’ success if group discussion plays a role.
 - Leader sets the tone and maintains collegial atmosphere.
 - Confidentiality should be explicit.
- Focus the program on people who want to participate in improving their writing, vs. those who merely want editing services.

Our fundamental messages in helping faculty become better writers

- The goal of a proposal is to persuade, not inform: Provide just enough information for a non-specialist reader to evaluate the argument's merits; anticipate reader questions and objections so the argument is clear, linear, and compelling.
- Most proposals contain too much information: at best, this uses space that could be used more effectively; at worst, it obscures the core message.
- Read everything out loud, adapt to your audience, and try to leave out the parts readers skip.
- Every sentence, and ultimately paragraph and grant application, must be written so the reviewer never has to go back and re-read anything to understand content. Be cautious about introducing inadvertent comedy.
- Effective communication comes down to two issues: your goal for that communication and the audience's needs that will allow you to achieve your goal. Address those issues clearly, concisely, completely, and with a consistent and compelling message to improve your chances of success.

1. Convey specific messages

Such as:

- Read the instructions thoroughly and repeatedly.
- Write for your audience(s); make their job easy.
- Don't fear using the first person.
- Vary sentence structure and length.
- Define content organization that works for the type of writing being considered (i.e., Russell & Morrison).

2. Teach a thought process....

Mine is:

- What is your goal? Who is your audience? What will they know? What won't they know?
- Use the framework and tricks of an easy-to-follow story: like Goldilocks, but with science!
- Achieve your goal by revising to meet your audience's needs and readers' expectations (a la George Gopen).
- Make every word work (cut your text in half and half again by word count).
- Practice these approaches in regular communications.

Evaluation

- Evaluation/Feedback to participants
- Evaluation of writing program effectiveness
 - Formal: surveys using Likert scores of utility or expected impact plus open comment; statistics such as number of faculty participants, submission rate/timing, funding success rate
 - Informal: effusive thank you emails and cards; being stopped in the hall by grateful participants; requests to give the workshop to other groups; repeat attendance; referrals
- Use feedback to refine program.

Questions and Comments?

References/Resources

- George Gopen & Judith Swan. *The Science of Scientific Writing*
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