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
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• 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
• 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*  
  https://www.americanscientist.org/issues/feature/the-science-of-scientific-writing/1

• Strunk & White. *The Elements of Style*

• William Zinsser. *On Writing Well: The classic guide to writing nonfiction*


• Tom Sant. *The Language of Success*

• Joseph Williams and Joseph Bizup. *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*

• Jean-luc Doumont. *Trees, Maps, and Theorems*

• Bryan Garner. *The Oxford Dictionary of American Usage and Style*