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THE ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN AS WRITER

JANET BUTLER MUNCH

Academic librarians with faculty status must accept performance criteria that focus on excellence in librarianship, service, and scholarship. Yearly reappointments and finally tenure provide strong motivation for librarians to write and publish. The “publish or perish” mantra is reinforced in the professional literature. What receives less emphasis, however, is the intrinsic value of active engagement in research and writing for the librarian. These activities not only refine and deepen knowledge of a topic but also sharpen thinking and analytical skills.

The academic environment can be a virtual idea incubator that

- brings together scholars and researchers from a range of areas
- supports collaborative efforts
- presents ongoing lectures and seminars across disciplines
- provides the employee fringe benefit of free classes
- maintains library resources that can be a springboard for research
- has technical expertise to support research and writing

GETTING STARTED

Once the new academic librarian internalizes the library faculty model, the next step is picturing oneself as a writer capable of producing a publication. The impact of seeing one’s name on a first published work can dispel the question “Can something I write be published?” To achieve some sense of oneself as a writer, the following exercise can prove helpful.

Use yourself as the author and write a complete bibliographic citation for an article that you would like to write. Word process the citation, boldface and enlarge it, and put it on your desk. Look at it. Think about it.

You can revise the citation or even change the topic.

Brainstorm and write down, in short phrases, what you know about the topic.

Examine what you wrote and look for connections or patterns.

For a week or two, spend fifteen minutes daily logging what you have done to explore the topic. Did you search for books, skim tables of contents, search databases, or read articles?

Review your log and zero in on what needs to be done.

Write a 100- to 150-word abstract on the article you would write. Ask yourself why this topic is significant and what audience should read it.

Begin a focused literature review. Think about how your proposed publication will expand what is known and contribute to the literature?

WRITING AND THE WORKPLACE

Viewing the workplace as a laboratory for research projects can be played out for any issue affecting the library. In-house research might focus on user satisfaction with a website, evaluating a book jobber, or information literacy assessment. Examining the local situation and reading the professional literature put the study in a larger context. The benefits of research accrue to the library and can make an important contribution to the field.

Many colleges offer professional development funding to faculty that can be used to underwrite travel, manuscript preparation, image digitization, or equipment. Leave time may also be available for faculty working on research and publication. Money and time can be the two biggest impediments to

professional development, and it is important that library faculty use whatever offerings are available. Unless specifically barred, library faculty should claim opportunities to apply for internal grants and leaves.

Librarians should not underestimate their tremendous networking capabilities. They meet campus teaching faculty through committee meetings, departmental liaison work, providing reference services, teaching to course assignments, and assisting in grant literature reviews. Some of these collaborations result in research discussions, joint publications, assistance with research methodology, or even offers to review manuscript drafts. External collegial connections through electronic discussion lists and association work can also pave the way to writing opportunities. Professional conference presentations benefit from audience feedback and can eventually result in manuscript publication.

WHAT COMMITTED WRITERS KNOW

Writing is a creative process and cannot be forced. When not writing, one should be thinking and reading broadly. Good writing is a reflection of concise thinking and analysis.

Carrying a pad and pen allows the writer to think on paper while waiting in lines or for

appointments. Memory fades just like the name scrawled on wet beach sand will gradually disappear as waves roll in. Jotting down thoughts reminds the writer to verify a fact, check a citation, read another article, or change a phrase in a manuscript.

Keeping a daily log of activities is a self-monitoring technique that leads to progress in completing a manuscript within deadline.

Committing to write a certain number of words daily or for a certain amount of time makes sense once the writer is well grounded in the subject.

A writing block might mean that the writer has not sufficiently mastered the topic. The subconscious stews on problems when we do the ordinary things like sleeping. Today's writing snag may flow more easily tomorrow simply by waiting to proceed.

Writers set boundaries. They let the answering machine take the call. They read their e-mail at set times. They close their doors to think, write, edit, and rewrite.

SURVEYS AS A WRITING PROMPT TO GET STARTED IN PUBLISHING

DIANE STINE

As you get involved with professional organizations and begin to write for publication, people sometimes ask you to write an article or a chapter for a book or to work with them on a publication. In this instance, it is harder to get started because you haven't picked the topic yourself, so you haven't been thinking about or talking about the subject.

Devising a survey to gather data on your topic is an excellent way to begin if the topic is amenable. Surveys also give you access to a topic you might

not know anything about and information that is not available elsewhere.

Once I was a member of a committee that was editing an issue of a library periodical. The committee members were all working in or had experience working in the field of technical services librarianship because the issue was devoted to education for technical services. Although I had two cataloging classes in library school, I only had one course on serials librarianship, which was taught during a four-week January intersession and covered all