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WRITING BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

JANET BUTLER MUNCH

College librarians routinely handle requests for biographical information on the famous and obscure. Databases like Master Genealogical and Biographical Index, Marquis Who's Who on the Web, and Biography Reference Bank are mainstays in this research but are just a starting point.

Many specialized reference titles include biographical entries, such as *Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film*, *Encyclopedia of Science, Technology and Ethics*, *Historical Dictionary of the 1940s*, *The Crusades: An Encyclopedia*, and *Latinas in the United States: A Historical Encyclopedia*.

Librarians know these works from reviews in *Choice*, *Library Journal*, and *Booklist*; from browsing "Best Reference" sources; and from perusing catalogs. Other titles come to their attention through mailings, faculty recommendations, wide reading of library and specialized publications, examining reference holdings at other libraries, subscribing to selected electronic discussion lists and blogs, and visiting publisher exhibits at conferences.

Although librarians shape reference collections to meet users' needs, they may not even consider writing entries for works similar to those they recommend daily. Publishers, however, welcome contributions of biographical articles, which generally average 500 to 1500 words.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PUBLICATION

Publication editors notify specialized journals and academic websites of planned reference works and the need for contributors on a prepared list of topics. Entries on notable individuals are generally included in such lists. Reliable websites that regularly feature calls for contributors are the following:

- *A Library Writer's Blog*, <http://librarywriting.blogspot.com>
- H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online, www.h-net.org

Other leads present themselves through

- Referral by colleagues
- Searching for "call for contributors" in search engines
- Networking through professional organizations

WRITING THE BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

After seeing a contributor announcement for biographical entries, the college librarian generally submits an e-mail query to the editor. The editor usually responds with a list of topics (with word counts) that the planned publication will cover. The prospective contributor requests specific assignments and the editor generally asks for a statement

of interest, curriculum vitae, and possibly a writing sample.

When the editor and contributor agree on the entries to be written, a contract is sent explaining the writing particulars (word count, deadline, compensation—if any—and rights). Some editors forgo contracts and just e-mail confirmation of assignments. Publishers can usually provide aspiring contributors with sample written entries for their planned reference work. Authors model their entries on the samples, focusing on writing style, formatting, length, references (not footnotes), and cross-references that are a staple in such publications. Examining imprints produced by the publisher or editor can also be instructive. The contributing author's submissions should be properly credited with his or her name and affiliation in the final publication. Avoid editors who cannot make this commitment.

Once the writing assignment is accepted, the contributor finds relevant source materials, reads them, and synthesizes them. These are the first steps in understanding the individual one is researching. Writing biographical sketches requires interest in the person assigned; ability to write clear, jargon-free, concise prose for informed laypeople; and a commitment to meet agreed-on terms. Writers must provide basic facts about the biographical subject, their main contributions, what propelled them to do what they did, how their work affected society or a particular field, and why their memory endures. Biographical research can be a window to other times, bringing individuals to life through a careful statement of facts, anecdotes, analysis of supporting materials, and interpretation of the person's contributions.

WHY WRITE BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES?

Oftentimes, college librarians have academic or faculty status and rank. Like their teaching faculty colleagues, they are expected to contribute to scholarship and publish. The academic model of librarianship differs from that of librarians working in school, special, or public libraries. Publish or perish, is a reality for library faculty who must survive annual reappointment reviews and ultimately tenure. This is where writing biographical sketches can help.

By writing biographical entries, college librarians have an opportunity to quickly break into print and begin creating a publication record. It is a mistake to think that only scholars or subject experts write

biographical articles in reference works. Reading contributor profiles in specialized encyclopedias and dictionaries, found in typical college reference collections, tells a different story. It reveals that writers are drawn from specialists and nonspecialists, including freelance writers, advanced graduate students, and librarians. Writing short biographical sketches is not easy, but there is a good chance that well-researched and well-written entries will result in publication. This is because the editor or publisher has specifically requested coverage on this person and has a tight publication deadline.

WHAT CAN COLLEGE LIBRARIANS BRING TO BIOGRAPHICAL WRITING?

College librarians are the generalists in the academic environment. In addition to their MLS, they may have special subject interests or other graduate degrees. As the professionals dealing with information in the widest range of areas, good college librarians know the needs of their campuses. They see connections across disciplines and bring insights to research topics that may elude specialists.

Librarians may not think of themselves as scholars or writers. Yet they are highly skilled at finding information, accessing source materials, and determining their research value. Reference librarians are trained to search catalogs, complex databases, and search engines for information on specific topics. Subject experts marvel at the librarian's speed and efficiency in tackling intricate research assignments and gathering an impressive range of resources.

While the usual maxim to writers is "write what you know," librarians can draw on broad general knowledge and research ability to "write to learn." Writing biographical sketches is a way of sharing what is found while also making an important contribution to scholarship. The discipline of writing biography can also develop the budding author's confidence, paving the way for the demands of more in-depth studies published in peer-reviewed publications.

Examining the life of a person can lead to a richer understanding of society, events, and the cultural milieu of the time. Librarians use whatever primary or secondary sources are available to explain and interpret the contributions of their assigned subject. These sources can include diaries, correspondence, archival materials, wills, deeds, newspapers, books, journal articles, or obituaries. Contacting authorities

or institutions with specific questions may also be needed. In using a variety of materials for research, the college librarian has a chance to know sources and repositories in a unique way. This all feeds back into the daily practice of librarianship.

HOW CAN WRITING BIOGRAPHICAL ENTRIES PROMOTE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

The nature of academic librarianship requires continual growth and development. By undertaking research, librarians test their limits and embrace lifelong learning. These efforts enliven professional practice and keep the workplace vital. Through their research and writing, college librarians can

- better understand the publication process
- contribute to scholarship and advance knowledge

- develop a track record of publications
- gain recognition for themselves and their college
- network with those engaging in similar research
- dare to learn and relearn databases and search engines
- discover new resources and repositories
- make more informed collection development decisions
- enhance their reference skills for daily work
- share insights in information-literacy instruction
- satisfy personal curiosity and stimulate new research interests

DO YOU WANT TO BE AN ANTHOLOGIST?

CAROLYN DAVIS

The term *librarian-anthologist* is a snazzy one that, like other composites such as *scholar-diplomat*, is more effective if bestowed on a person by others. I had been a writer, mostly of research topics and op-ed articles, for many years before I answered a call for submissions by e-mail from Carol Smallwood for an anthology that she and Cynthia Brackett-Vincent were developing on innovative experiences in women's lives.

I had had plenty of those, and I am part of the cadre of colleagues who frequently are asked how and if we can be librarians when our work very often is conducted out of the sphere of traditional libraries. I answered the call. The anthology, titled *Thinking outside the Book: Essays for Innovative Librarians*, was published by McFarland Publishers in North Carolina in 2008. It helped that a few months before I had begun a collection of expository vignettes of different stages of my life and had just written some about my research and facilitation experiences as a librarian. Although the editors deemed one of my stories to be outside the realm of traditional librari-

anship, they accepted two others to the developing anthology. Not ones to rest on their achievements, the team planned another anthology shortly thereafter. Its working title is *Contemporary American Women: Our Defining Passages*. My first submission was passed on, but another vignette that I more than doubled in length in three hours was accepted right on deadline, giving a taste of *The Front Page* kind of tension to my autobiographical short story.

Because I had such good luck in the genre, and had many more stories in the electronic chute of a vignette folder on my computer, it was gratifying that there was a demand for them. Carol pointed me to many other anthologies; as a sideline, among those that I investigated was one that I submitted a true story to for the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* folks for a pending anthology of cat stories (www.chickensoup.com/form.asp?cid=submit_story). Many websites host calls for submissions, for example, Growing Great Writers from the Ground Up (<http://marthaengber.blogspot.com/2008/02/ie-10-seeking-essays.html>). The American Library Association