
Writing for the professional press

Skills for today's information professional



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This article was prompted by three things. Firstly, the editorial board of *SCONUL Focus* was discussing one of our occasional series, 'Skills for today's information professional', and thought that writing for the library and information science (LIS) press was something we should cover ... and that your editor would be well placed to write about it.

Secondly, I was thinking about some reflective pieces for this issue, what with it being our 50th and also marking my tenth year as editor. This is by no means a comprehensive overview of writing for the professional press but it does contain practical observations informed by my ten years at the helm.

Thirdly, I recently came across an e-mail on [lis-link](#) from someone making the following plea:

*'I'm hoping to increase my professional profile by writing articles and presenting at conferences, but I'm a little out of the loop ... Any advice would be appreciated.'*¹

I am sure there are a lot of would-be writers out there who do not know where to turn. Around a third of all the articles you see in *SCONUL Focus* are unsolicited (the rest come from ideas the editorial board have come up with and pursued). Although we do provide general 'Advice for authors',² sometimes I think more guidance is required.

Hence, after 30 issues in the editor's chair, I am going to offer some things to consider before you

press 'send' to fire off your article ... or even sit down to write in the first place.

WHY DO YOU WANT TO WRITE?

Indeed, let's go back to basics, to before you even put pen to paper or finger to keyboard, and think about why you might want to write in the first place. There are several reasons why anyone might consider trying to get published:³

'I need to get some evidence together for my CILIP Chartership portfolio and I am lacking articles.'

This is an all too common reason that hardly fills an editor's heart with joy. It can lead to poorly written submissions on less than interesting themes. There are better reasons.

'I have a desire to develop professionally.'

This sounds a bit more like it. Undertaking professional activity should not be seen as a tick box for chartership. Professional activities can help us grow beyond our formal library-school education, can allow us to develop skill sets that we may not be able to develop in the workplace and can get our name and face out there.

There are various opportunities available to the keen professional, each with its own pros and cons:

Committee work, such as being on the committee for a LIS special interest group or local branch, is great. Taking on an officer role (secretary, treasurer, chair) is even better. This can enable you to develop skills you may not get the chance to develop in your current work role. Managing a budget, organising meetings, writing reports, encouraging people to do things – these usually only come with management responsibility, so what better way of at least getting some *informal* experience of them than committee work? On the downside, this does require an on-going commitment so it is not a professional activity you can really dip in and out of too often.

Presenting papers, giving talks and running workshops are some of the most scary – but fun – things you can do as a professional. Presentation skills are some of the most sought-after skills in librarianship: how many able orators have you come across at conferences or at work? Perversely, it is easier (I think) to present to strangers than to colleagues, so this is another good way of developing a skill set outside the workplace to use in the workplace. On the downside, you may only be shining in front of a small audience (though this may grow as your reputation grows) and it

does require a lot of work – it takes a great deal of practice to look natural, believe me.

Writing for publication similarly can take up a lot of time. But this is time that may be easier to manage. Unless you have been asked to write for a specific issue of a journal, you can often write and refine an article at your own pace and then submit it when ready. Writing is an extremely important skill for the workplace and again it is a skill that many people lack. The other good thing with writing is that there is a permanent record, so if audiences miss your words of wisdom when they come out of a meeting there is always the chance that they can discover them later, especially if others quote you. This is also a very good way of getting your name out there.

So if you are keen to develop professionally, writing for publication may be the route for you.

'I have a burning desire to write!'

I am sure a lot of librarians are frustrated writers. You might have a first degree in English literature and a captivating turn of phrase ... but have you got something interesting to tell us about? And is non-fiction prose the best medium for you, Mr Larkin? Non-fiction writing is as much an art (or at least a skill) as fiction or poetry. Ask Kafka.⁴

'I have just undertaken a developmental project at work and I think the profession could benefit from hearing the results.'

You really are going to an editor's friend! I may be biased because *SCONUL Focus* has always prided itself on being a very practical journal, but for me this is the best reason for writing. If you talk to librarians you soon realise we all have pretty much the same problems and we are all looking for solutions. Of course, your solution may not work for everybody ... but you can bet other professionals will want to find out what you did, what worked for you and what *might* work for them.

SELECTING YOUR TOPIC

Assuming you still want to write after honestly considering the above, what next? The first thing to consider is 'What are you going to write about?'

Philosophical/theoretical articles

Some journals are keen to publish more theoretical pieces. These are especially popular in the US where librarians are more keen to write, to help them secure tenure. In the UK journals may be more inclined to publish a version of a more

philosophical piece of work undertaken at library school.

There is quite a spectrum of pieces like this. These can range from the 'erudite' (I was once asked to write a quite lengthy article on the principles of modern librarianship⁵) to the more 'popularist' (my CV also includes a piece on the image of librarians as portrayed on various web sites, called 'Wear lipstick, have a tattoo, belly-dance, then get naked: the making of a virtual librarian'⁶). Generalist essays by their very nature have the potential of attracting a wide audience. They are also undeniably fun to prepare if you are a frustrated researcher: my 'erudite' article involved much reading of library history and philosophy books; my 'naked' article involved trawling some rather bizarre web sites aimed at very special interest groups. It does, however, involve a huge amount of work ('The creed of the librarian' involved more reading than I recall doing for my LIS qualification) and you may question the usefulness of the outcome.

Pure research pieces

Some articles outline the results of research undertaken. These are not purely philosophical but neither do they relate to any practical application. The research could be undertaken as part of a LIS qualification and then written up. It could alternatively be some research undertaken in the workplace that *may* then lead to application. There are several benefits to this type of article. For the author, he or she has probably written a report for internal use already, so a bit of tweaking to change the style will not be too onerous. For the profession as a whole, this saves us all from reinventing (or rediscovering) the wheel. However, you may want to keep your research to yourself until you have applied it and are the first to market, otherwise 'competitors' might just take your competitive advantage away from you.

Practical experience

As I have mentioned over the previous pages (not to mention the previous ten years) my personal preference – and the preference for *SCONUL Focus* – is for practical articles that describe a project in detail: why it came about, external drivers, objectives, practical considerations, what worked, the outcomes and next steps. Really honest authors will also say what went wrong and what they will never do again. Although you cannot just drop projects from one institution into another and expect success every time, these articles can provide practical tips that take the profession forward in an efficient and cost-effective manner.

Having said this, you do need to ask yourself if others will care or benefit from your paper. What may seem universal or novel to you may seem wilfully obscure or old hat to others. Do the intricacies of the committee structures at your institution bear relevance for others? Is your theme in fashion? From my own experience I know that a few years ago you could purposefully write articles trying to convince colleagues to market their services. Today that battle is largely won and other themes need to be sought to provide useful additions to the literature.

CONSIDER YOUR AUDIENCE ... AND JOURNAL

Once you have decided upon the theme and approach you wish to take you can start thinking about the journal to which you may want to submit and the likely audience.

Young professionals writing for other young professionals (for example, providing reflections on the CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) chartered process) have usually turned to CILIP's career development group's journal, *Impact*. This is a good place to establish yourself as a LIS author.⁷ For shorter pieces, branch newsletters may be the answer, especially if you want to develop your network locally.⁸

For specialist pieces, the journals of the CILIP special interest groups may be worth considering.⁹ For example, if you have undertaken a project to convert analogue technologies to digital, *MmIT* may be your best bet, as you will have an audience who are likely to be interested in your activities and will understand any technical language you use.¹⁰

For more general pieces, the CILIP flagship journals should be considered: *Library and information update*¹¹ and *Library and information gazette*.¹² *Update* will run fuller and sometimes more theoretical articles whereas the *Gazette* takes shorter and more newsy pieces. Both attract a lot of copy so your submission may not be successful.

Research pieces often require would-be authors to go through the peer review process. This approach might be more attractive to academics than practitioners. Example journals include the *LIBRI international journal of libraries and information services*, *Library and information research* and *The journal of information science*.¹³

For detailed and practical articles of relevance to member institutions, *SCONUL Focus* is (of course) my recommendation.¹⁴

If you have not got a target journal but are looking for inspiration, a staff library (physical or virtual) containing LIS titles is always worth browsing to see where you think your article will best fit. Alternatively, a search on *LISA: library and information science abstracts* may give you clues about which titles would be most appropriate for you.

WRITING: THE JOURNAL

This leads us to the needs of the journal. This stage is really about relationship-building.

As we have seen, different journals will demand different approaches to writing. The tone, level of detail, use of technical language and assumptions about readership will differ from title to title. Is your article going to fit in with the journal? What is the style of the journal – formal, academic, technical, popular? What pre-knowledge is expected of its readership? Do you need to explain technical terms or will your specialist readership know what is meant by LIS, IT, HTTP, RFID, AACR2, Web 2.0 etc. etc.?

Does the journal provide advice for authors on length, style, copy deadlines and so on? Instead of consulting this – or, even better, in addition to this – why not talk to the editor of your target journal? Explain your proposed topic to see if it fits in with the journal: in my editor role I politely turn down theoretical pieces, welcome most other ideas but sometimes give advice on how to redirect articles to make them even more relevant to *Focus*. You may also need to discuss timing. If *Focus* is just going to bed but someone contacts me with a newsworthy article we can negotiate deadlines. Alternatively, we may have a themed copy planned for the future and – if an article can wait – it may be better placed in a later issue.

Some journals have fixed space limits (for example, 8, 16 or 32 pages). These may be dictated by publishing costs or postage issues, so once the space has been allocated for articles no more can be squeezed in. Other journals (such as *SCONUL Focus*) do not operate like that so they can be more flexible with content. Likewise some journals have tighter copy deadlines than others: a quarterly journal will probably have more scope for latitude than a weekly publication.

Copyright is another issue you need to consider. Who holds the copyright in 'your' article? Do you

need to assert copyright ownership or negotiate on contracts on open-access – not to say moral – grounds? Can your article (or versions of it) appear in more than one journal? Some journals will want to ensure you have not published your article elsewhere. Others may be more flexible but will want you to mention that the original/fuller article appeared in their journal first.

For all of these considerations, building a relationship with your editor is essential.

WRITING: THE ARTICLE

So you have selected your topic, found a journal that fits in with your approach and the editor has found you a slot in the next issue. What next?

This brings us to probably the most important part of this article: writing.

From the perspective of both an author and an editor I recommend the following approaches.

Plan it

Think about what your main messages are. Don't worry too much about structure yet. Brainstorm. Just get a few ideas down.

Organise it

After that you can start to create your structure. Put down your headings, sub-headings or whatever structuring devices your journal allows. Then put your ideas or pointers to other sources (your notes, readings, virtual sources) under the appropriate headings. On one side of A4 you can have the plan for your whole article.

Write it

Yes, I said 'Write it'! One of the best pieces of advice I have ever heard is:

'Don't get it right, get it written.'

I used to have this written on my office wall. Too often we put off writing. If we wait another week we might find that perfect article to quote or another piece of research that will make all the difference. The flashing cursor on a white screen is guaranteed to bring on writer's block. The first words will seem clumsy. Halfway through you will get bored.

Just get something down!

Work steadily from your plan and get something down. Then you can start to craft it. The more

practical – and less literary – the article, the more important it is to take this approach. Write it in chunks. These may not necessarily be in the order the article will follow (I wrote the conclusion of this piece before tackling this section). Do not write when you are tired or feeling alienated by the writing process: it will show in your output.

Most people compose directly to the screen but some still write in longhand first. This of course takes extra time but if it is the approach that works best for you – and you can afford the time to do it – do it your way.

Leave it

Once you have got the first or second draft complete, leave it. Walk away from it. Don't look at it for a few days. You get too close to your work to see the trees. You cannot read it with fresh eyes so leave it.

Re-read it

After a few days go back to your draft. You will find that what you have written is either genius or gibberish. I have gone back to some articles and thrown them straight in the bin. With others I have been pleasantly surprised – 'Did I really write that?!'

In truth, you are usually halfway between genius and gibberish: some sections are brilliant, others need more work. Some elements may have been missed out altogether: a key learning point from your project may have been overlooked completely.

'Kill your darlings'

Now is the time to develop and polish your masterpiece. The best advice comes from William Faulkner:

'In writing, you must kill your darlings.'

This is based on similar advice from Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch and Samuel Johnson.¹⁵ I think we can get too tied up in how much we need to take these eminent men at face value (Johnson's advice that 'wherever you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out' sounds ridiculously harsh to me) but the main message is clear: don't get precious about your words – be prepared to cut them. If you don't, your editor might.

Most editors – in my experience – don't want to waste their lives butchering articles. If you have spent enough time discussing your plans with

yours and spent time on this stage, the finished product in print will (most likely) be virtually what you have submitted.

Read again ... out loud

Once you think you have got your final draft, read it again (perhaps again giving yourself a few days between re-writing and re-reading). My top tip here is: read it out loud. By doing this you can see if the text makes sense and hear the flow of the words properly. Sentences can mean different things depending on where the emphasis is placed. Paragraphs that make sense on the page can sound nonsensical when read out loud, and often it becomes clear that shorter sentences are needed.

This will often lead to more re-writing.

Give it to a loved one to read

Finally – and I don't always inflict this on my partner – you might want to give your article to a loved one to read. Probably they will not be too close to the project so they won't be mentally filling in any gaps in it with their knowledge. They should, hopefully, be able to highlight any areas for revision ... and you will, also hopefully, still be talking to each other in the morning.

SUBMISSION OF YOUR ARTICLE

As I may have mentioned once or twice already, part of the process involves building a relationship with your editor. Again, more talking may be needed at this stage. Check in what format you need to submit your article. I don't just mean 'Word' or 'rtf'. Do you need to supply 'value-added' elements, such as an abstract or keywords?

Do they want an author photo? Is this formal or informal? Do you have anything relevant available or are you going to attempt taking a one-handed self-portrait next to a filing cabinet with the sun behind you? Another top tip: if you don't have some formal-looking pictures of you, smiling or non-smiling, in formal attire, and if you plan to be writing on a regular basis, get some taken by someone with some photographic skills so that you always have an appropriate picture to hand.

Does the journal want images to go with your article? If you have described a new building development or a stylish marketing campaign, images will probably be a must. What resolution is required? Can you e-mail images or is a disk in the post a safer bet? Do the pictures need captions?

Will the article online include web 2.0 elements, such as a comments section? How do you feel about this? Will you be expected to enter into online debate?

Yet again, all this requires communication with your editor. This communication is also likely to be two-way, as your editor may need to check the details and meaning in your text and – if there are major revisions – should run these past you too.

WHAT NEXT?

Publication! Your masterpiece is in print and online.

Once you have been published you will find some of your initial objectives fulfilled. Perhaps you have developed your communication skills in a new forum. Or perhaps you have unveiled a new service that will start the profession off down a brave new avenue. Or perhaps you will just have some evidence for your chartership portfolio.

But there will be more: there will, hopefully, be a sense of pride in your work and the great feeling of being published. You should be sent an author copy of your article to cherish. Some journals send more than one copy – ideal presents for proud relatives! Some publications will give you more joy than others but there is nothing quite like the buzz you get from your first time in print.

But this isn't the end. Once you have become published you can expect correspondence. This may be e-mails or it may come via forum applications on your journal's site. You can also expect requests: for more information, for visits, for conference papers ... and more articles.

Who knows, you may even be asked to join an editorial board and one day even become an editor. Well, how do you think I got this job?

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- 11 <http://www.cilip.org.uk/publications/update-magazine/Pages/default.aspx>
- 12 <http://www.cilip.org.uk/publications/gazette/Pages/default.aspx>
- 13 Clapton, 'Library and information science practitioners writing for publication', p 13
- 14 <http://www.sconul.ac.uk/publications/newsletter/>
- 15 It is likely that the idea is derived from Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, who wrote 'Whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing, obey it – wholeheartedly – and delete it before sending your manuscripts to press. Murder your darlings.' Or it may even originate with Samuel Johnson: 'Read over your compositions, and wherever you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out.'