

Cut, Measure, and Sew

Tailoring your written message to fit

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&
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Presentation at Delaware Riverkeeper's Watershed Congress Along the Schuylkill

Presenter Ruth Heil, a freelance writer, introduced her editor and good friend, Paula Goff. Both live in the Perkiomen Watershed, have volunteered in various roles for the Perkiomen Watershed Conservancy, and have personal interests in environmental conservation.

Session expectations/What this is about

- . A summary of methods writers use to present what they want to say in a way that will get read.
- . The craft of developing any piece of writing, in a step-by-step format, applicable to numerous types of writing assignments.
- . Inside information from the creative writing and freelance writing business, and the newspaper business (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *Morning Call* and others).

Words on Paper



Ruth began:

“I have been attending this conference for more than a decade, and for many of those years I have served on the conference planning committee. Chari Towne does all the hard work, there is no doubt. What the committee does is offer a range of personal opinions and perspectives.

“Every year, after the call goes out, we must wade through a lot of session proposals. This is a photo of the ones from 2012. The committee's primary role is to vote on which ones make it into the program's 21 time slots and which ones don't. It's hard. You'd like to include them all.

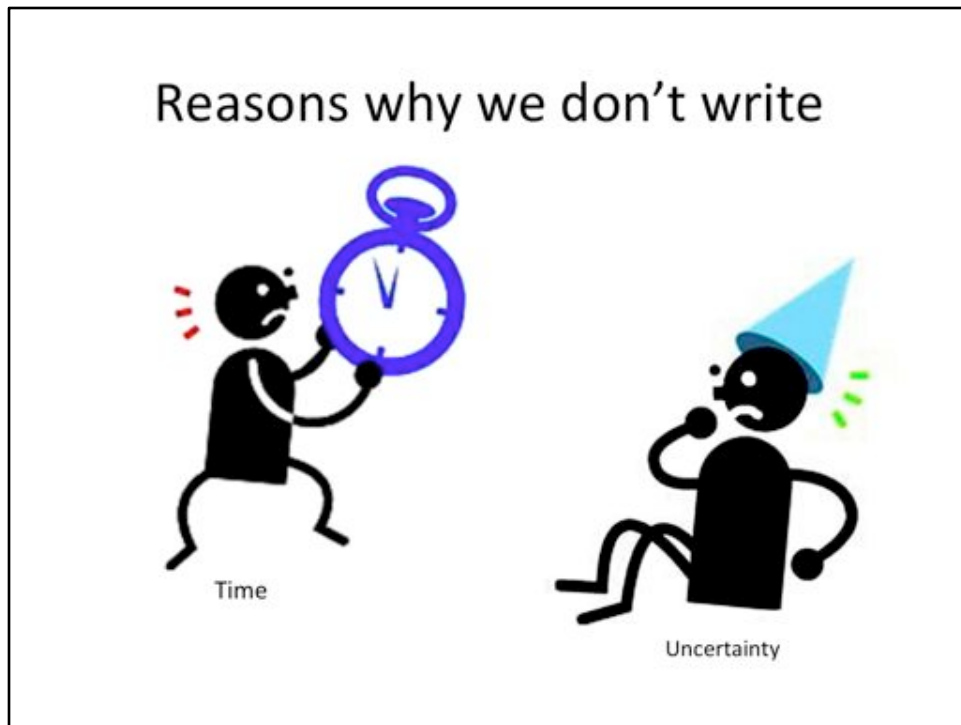
“The presenter could have the most current information to share, could have the most experience in his or her field, or could have a degree from the best college, but aside from the instances in which a committee member actually knows the person, all we have to go on is a paper full of words.”



Communication comes in many forms.

- Public Outreach
- Printed materials/brochures
- Blog posts
- Annual giving letters
- Grant Applications

The following steps can be applied, in some form, to all of it.



But first, a look at the reasons why we don't write.

Many projects ask you to condense a life's worth of work into a limited number of words.

Too often, we give up or we never even try.

Two most common reasons: 1.) lack of time, 2.) lack of confidence

“Like trying to stop pollution, any attempt is better than no attempt at all.”

Reasons why we must



Ruth continued:

“Imagine all the hard work you put into a recent project or event. Now imagine how much easier life would be if the general public knew about the outcome from all that work. People would be mailing you letters, ‘how can I get involved?’ instead of you writing them to say, ‘we need help.’ That is the power of communication. Yes, the environment will be better for your work whether you tell people or not, but what would be the multiplier if your work inspired others to do more?”

“You need not adhere to steps strictly, but if you come at it with a similar plan of attack, you will have a better chance of achieving your writing goal.”

Measure



Step One: Research

Collect the data and the details. Get your facts.

Answer any questions you do not know ... for your topic as well as for the publication. Understand what exactly the person you are writing for wants to or should know?

William Penn Foundation General Inquiry

Topic	Word Count
The Challenge or Opportunity	<300
Project Description	<500
Anticipated Results	<300
Alignment with Priorities	<175

Source: www.williampenfoundation.org/WatershedProtection.aspx

Example: William Penn Foundation's general inquiry asks:

Briefly describe the challenge and/or opportunity that your proposed project will address.

Briefly describe the proposed project.

Briefly describe the anticipated results of the proposed project.

Articulate how the project is aligned with the Foundation's strategic priorities.

Gather the information needed to answer the questions. Accumulate more than you need, cut to the key points later. Notice: word counts are very small.

"You can't isolate the most important facts until you know all the facts."

Step Two: Free Write

Ruth: “You’ve got all this stuff you want to say, and your brain won’t be satisfied until you let it out. So let it out. Write down a description of your project without regard to word count, grammar, spelling, the hope of funding, or the influence of the William Penn Foundation. You’ve heard the advice, ‘dance like no one is watching.’ This is where you write like no one is reading.”

Be in a comfortable place; use simple tools; save a record so you can use the good content.

Free writing is commonly used as a method to avoid writer’s block, but it also be a general practice.

**Step Three:
Loosely organize your content.**

Arrange all that you have so far so that you can access it later. Make contact notes related to sources and contributors.

Cut



Step Four: Define Your Reader



Ask yourself, “who am I writing to?”

Visualize ONE person.

Who?



When you write for everyone, the result is a blur. What would you say to this crowd?

When you write for someone, the result is clarity. What would you say to him?

When you are writing communications, you are working for no one else but that reader.

Step Five: Come Up with 10 Angles

Take a piece of paper and number the first ten lines.

Look at the whole of what you want to say from 10 different angles.

What are the top ten points you want to make. What are 10 possible headlines for your topic?

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For example, what are the angles you can use to answer the first question?

Angles

- 1.) We've ignored our waterway for so long, the situation is now dire.
- 2.) A recent study found there are more tires than fish in the water.
- 3.) We know of an innovative way to clean the channel and engage local citizens at the same time.
- 4.) At a recent news conference, the mayor just acknowledged, "this river is the backbone of our community."

Possible angles

Step Six: Pick One Angle

Then, pick the best/most relevant one.

Paula: “Don’t think you’re getting your most bang for your buck by including various messages. Focus on one relevant angle per piece. The simpler message, the greater the chance of having your reader remember the key facts. The takeaway should be something unique or unusual that sets this project, study, or event apart. It’s your main selling point.”

Angles

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- 2.) A recent study found there are more tires than fish in the water.
- 3.) We know of an innovative way to clean the channel and engage local citizens at the same time.
- 4.) At a recent news conference, the mayor just acknowledged, "this river is the backbone of our community."

Remember the goal.

Persuade or inform. This first one leans toward persuasion; grantor needs information.

Step Seven: Outline

Having an outline can reduce the amount of time required to produce a project and is useful as a checklist when piece is complete.

Outline the Five Ws and an H: Who, what, when, where, why, and how. Then, define the path you want to take in presenting the information.

Include only the relevant information: what they need to hear; not what you want to say.

Sew



Step Eight: Draft

Repurpose the free writing or start from scratch. Create a piece that conveys your message (a.k.a., the ugly first draft; don't go for perfection yet).

As in sewing, start by making a knot in the thread: your opening. Use the the chosen angle. Tell the reader what your entire piece is about.

Weave the thread through all the necessary facts; drive needle through all the anticipated questions so as not to leave the reader hanging.

Close with another knot: this too is the core point, reframed slightly. End with the take-home message.

Just like every piece has an opening, body, and closing, every paragraph does, too. One shall lead to the next.

Suggestion: Use the Keyword Tool in Google Analytics to find some popular phrases for opening. Showcase the facts (the what) and follow up with an explanation of the value of the information to the reader (the why). Tailor the opening so that the person will want to learn more.

Minimize qualifiers (it's the best ever); conditional tenses (it could be; it is) and jargon.

Environmental Jargon

Data Driven Approaches to Decision Making = use information to decide

BMPs – Best Management Practices = smart maintenance

AMD – Acid Mine Drainage = water pollution

proposed amendments = suggested changes

sequester = withdraw

comply = obey

aggregation = collection, heap

Jargon and complicated language.

Use a thesaurus to help you translate.

Ruth: “Either you put the labor into writing the piece or the reader puts the labor into reading it.”

Step Nine: Refine



Refine your draft until it meets your desired word count and looks what you had in mind.

Check against your outline

Check grammar and spelling.

Step Ten: Refine Again

- Walk away.
- Return, save another copy, tighten the format, read out loud, spell-check again.
- Get another look.
- Reuse and recycle

Step Ten: Refine Again

Walk away. Leave it for awhile. Time will give you a fresh impression.

When you return, save draft as a new file. Then, without fear of losing the refined draft, rework the new file to ensure it meets the formatting guidelines; read it out loud to help find any stumbling sentences, spell check again, refine a little more.

Get another look. A peer. A trusted friend. Hire an editor to proofread or to give it a thorough review.

Don't forget to reuse and recycle. Save the stuff from the cutting room floor for access later. Rework the piece for additional uses.

Tips and Tricks

- Use strong verbs. Verbs are like stoneflies; their health is an indicator. Avoid passive phrases.

Adequate: I was suspicious of dumping activity.

Strong: I suspected a polluter had dumped his waste.

Adequate: Paula was introduced by Ruth

Strong: Ruth introduced Paula

- Go for concrete facts.

Adequate: I sat in the shade of a tree to read a book.

Strong: I sat in the shade of an apple tree to read *Silent Spring*.

Tips and Tricks

- Aim for the fence

While advocating change, you'll find three kinds of readers.



- 1.) People who agree with everything you write

2.) People who will resist everything you write



3.) People who just aren't sure



Aim for those who are teetering on the fence; pull them over to your side and your writing will have made a difference.

Tips and Tricks

- Tell a short story whenever you can; unless your audience wants bulleted facts.
- Think visually.

You don't have to be a child to want someone to tell you a story.

The story should resonate with the audience, not simply serve to get your point across.

Paula: "Think visually. Besides painting a picture with your words, consider enhancing your text with relevant images, if appropriate. Include a headshot of a key person or a scene-setting shot of an important location or people doing the work you are writing about. If you simply want to illustrate your piece, one source is Getty Images, which recently opened its archives of 35 million images, most of which are available for free using the "embed tool" at <http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/>."

The Press Release and Beyond

- Reporters want your ideas
- Put down the phone
- Get attention

Tips for getting attention for your event or information from news media, generally newspapers, radio and television stations and magazines through press releases. But be open to putting the information out through other outlets, including blogs, social media, your local *Patch* web site, special interest publications, alumni newsletters, etc. Be strategic.

- Reporters want your ideas

You never know what might inspire a writer or assigning editor. Increase your odds of getting a reporter's or editor's attention by pitching a story idea that is well-crafted.

- Put down the phone

Do not make unsolicited phone calls to reporters. They are busy.

- Getting attention

Emails can be sent quickly, but give them time and don't expect an immediate response; Send time-sensitive material one to two weeks ahead. Include photos that might be helpful to the publication if appropriate.

Avoid sending mass emails. Target your information for the outlet and/or the reporter so that you don't waste your or their time.

The Press Release and Beyond

Housekeeping

- Date sent
- Headline
- Time, Date, and Place (if event)
- Information Release date (if any)
- All your contact information

A release must include these elements:

Online Resources

Tips for crafting and sending releases:

<http://www.prnewsonline.com/about>

<http://www.mediabistro.com/>

Sites with paid subscriptions for
public relations help:

<https://ireachprnewswire.com/Home.aspx>

<http://www.pressfriendly.com/>

Images:

<http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/>

Plain English Writing Advice

<http://www.waterwordsthatwork.com/our-methods/message-method>

The best method to find media contacts is to Google “media in Philadelphia” or whatever your region. You can also use that phrase on Wikipedia and about.com. Also try www.Philadelphia.com/media/

Tips for crafting and sending releases:

<http://www.prnewsonline.com/about>

<http://www.mediabistro.com/>

Sites with paid subscriptions for public relations help:

<https://ireachprnewswire.com/Home.aspx>

<http://www.pressfriendly.com/>

Images:

<http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/>

Plain English Writing Advice

<http://www.waterwordsthatwork.com/our-methods/message-method>

Ideas communicated



Ruth: “When I look at this pile of proposals, I think about all the ones that were never written ... all the innovations, ideas, and partnerships not shared. Write as well as you can, write authentically, and write often. Then, your writing will become far more than words on paper.”



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