Journal of Child and Youth Care Work

WRITING FOR PUBLICATION: TIPS FOR BEGINNING WRITERS

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During the past five years, editors and review board members from three child and youth care journals have been conducting beginning writers' workshops at conferences throughout the U.S. and Canada. This article is the first in a series in which we will try to describe what we have taught and learned in these workshops. Our goal is to encourage more child and youth care workers to write for publication.

Perhaps the best place to begin is to say that if you feel a little apprehensive about sharing your thoughts on paper, you are not alone. This is a common feeling about publishing, which is after all a concrete way of expressing your beliefs and ideas, and of submitting yourself to the possibility of rejection. In the workshops we find that empathy from other new writers and words of encouragement from published authors is a wonderful motivator. So the first tip is to talk to someone about writing. If you can't attend a workshop or a writing class, try to form your own informal support or work group. Ask your friends and people at work. You'll be surprised how many writers are hiding out there.

It helps to know as much as you can about the publishing process. Often new writers have misinformation about how articles are reviewed. They have heard stories about how competitive publishing can be and about ivory tower editors who are waiting to tear their work apart. Although stories like this may be true for some publications, the editors and review board members in child and youth care are trying to be teachers first and critics second. We want to develop a knowledge base that is rooted in contributions from practitioners, not the words of a few polished authors, and we realize that this means new authors have to be encouraged and supported. Following this article are two articles describing the review process and philosophy of this journal that may change some of your impressions.

There is, of course, no way around the rejection part of writing for publication. All writers have manuscripts turned down, even the best. It's part of the process and takes some getting used to, but it can be a strengthening experience. Successful writers are persistent. They stick with it and learn from rejection. When they receive a letter of rejection

from an editor, they examine it for suggestions that might improve their work and then try again.

The next tip is to read as much as you can. Good writing comes from good reading. Read about areas in which you are most interested. Get copies of books, articles, and journals in child and youth care (You might be surprised at how rich the child and youth care literature has become). Also read good fiction writers and essayists.

Books about writing are essential. We recommend Elements of Style by Strunk and White, and Elements of Grammar by Shertzer. Another good book is Elbow's, Writing Without Teachers. If these don't work for you, look in a book store, usually under "Writers or Writing," and there should be something to suit your taste.

Computers are a big help. They can make you much more proficient. Overcoming fear seems to be a key here too. Many writers have put off learning how to use a computer and then kicked themselves later for not doing it sooner. As one of those writers, I can only say: try it, you'll never regret that you did. Writing with a computer is like working with clay. You can move words and phrases around in a much more textural way than with a pen.

Whether you use a computer, typewriter, or pen, however, writing requires hard work. Most published works have been through several revisions before and after submission. It's part of the fun of writing—changing and making the words sound better. Some writers enjoy the revising more than the initial burst of thoughts. Poor writing often comes from a compulsion to make the first draft perfect. One way to free yourself of this feeling is to write about your topic as fast as you can without worrying about grammar, sentence structure or spelling. Put down all your thoughts no matter how silly they seem. Then pick it up the next day and see how you can make it better. (Peter Elbow's book teaches this method in detail.)

If you like to write, it makes a difference. People who enjoy their work always seem to do a little better. If you are like most people, though, writing is probably not one of your first loves. So do whatever you can to make it more enjoyable—put on some good music, get a bowl of popcorn, find a private space, talk about it with people—and, most of all, choose a topic that you are enthusiastic about. Integrity and enthusiasm are what readers appreciate. Without it, an article or book is flat and so is the task. Editors can eventually help with grammar and style, but if you aren't excited about the topic the readers probably won't be either.

As you are searching for an idea, brainstorm with colleagues and page through the journals. See if you can build upon a popular topic, fill a gap that hasn't been addressed in youth work, or introduce an entirely

new idea. If you already have a subject, it is important to do a literature review to be sure you are not duplicating something that has been written.

Getting your idea or subject into workable boundaries can be the most difficult part of your task. A frequent tendency is to choose something too big because of the fear that you won't have enough to say. In workshops we spend a lot of time helping people whittle down ideas. Most journal articles are small pieces that, when read with other articles, become part of the reader's own integrated whole. They are meant to be read in one sitting and impart with interest a few new concepts or ideas that readers can adapt to their own needs.

After reviewing the journals and talking to colleagues, if you still are not sure about the relevancy or scope of your idea, send a query letter or an outline to an editor and ask for help. Most of us are more than happy to answer inquiries from new writers.

There are several formats from which to choose. If you are doing a research article, then obviously you have to follow a research format and the style manual recommended by the journal to which you will be submitting your article is essential for referencing and presenting data. A case history, a story, an essay, a poem, an editorial, a program description, and a position paper are some of the other options. Look at the journals and see what kinds of articles they publish. The range is getting wider and wider. For first time writers, it is usually best to start with a format that feels most natural. You can experiment with other formats later, after you have a few publications.

Once you are ready to write, develop an outline. Then write your narrative, following the outline but writing as freely as you can without worrying about grammar, spelling, etc. Get it all out. If nothing much comes at first, don't worry. You can come back after you think some more. Don't sit there and force yourself. Go about your daily work and when you get the urge, come back and try again. It's natural for the subject or thrust to change slightly. Often the correct direction emerges during the writing.

Generally, people have more than enough to say once they start to write. If you don't, read, take notes, and talk to colleagues for more information. After you've got a first draft finished, set it aside for a few days, then come back and give it a fresh look. The second draft is usually the time to let go or get rid of the parts you don't need. If something doesn't add anything to your basic message or "advance the story" as they say in fiction writing, throw it out. The third, fourth and sometimes fifth drafts are times to oust clumsy words and phrases, fill in gaps, and smooth transitions from one thought to another. Spelling and grammar should also be corrected.

Editors and readers like writing that is clear and straightforward. For a good example I'd suggest reading an E.B. White essay or a short story by Raymond Carver or Chekhov. In White's work every word has a purpose and he uses a larger or less familiar word only when a simpler one is not adequate, never to impress. Carver gets complex feelings and ideas across in simple, straightforward language. Chekhov, the master short story writer, writes in a clear, concise, nonjudgmental fashion. That's what good journal writing is about. A good test of how well your article reads is to read it out loud to someone you trust. If it doesn't flow from your tongue or you find yourself or the listener cringing with certain phrases or words, strike them out.

Always let someone else proof your work, preferably, of course, a good proofreader. Authors are too familiar with their work to be their own proofreaders. Then once you have a clean copy, make sure you have followed the submission procedures, which are usually described inside the front cover of most journals. Having your article sent back for more copies or changes in formatting will only delay the process.

After you have sent the manuscript, try to forget about it for a while. Reviews sometimes take two or three months and it usually takes a year or more before an article appears in print. Work on other articles while you are waiting. Sometimes it helps to have two or three things in the works. Then, if one gets rejected, you still have something else going. In child care many first articles get published. If yours doesn't, stick with it. Perseverance pays off in publishing.

Although writing for publication takes extra time and lots of work, it is worth it. The positive comments you will receive from your colleagues will add meaning to your work and the professional credits that go along with a published article will be helpful in your career. But, perhaps more importantly you will be making a contribution to an emerging body of literature that needs your special way of seeing things.

Writing, it seems, is a little like piano playing; a few can do it by ear, but most of us have to practice and practice until we can get the notes to string together into a song that has rhythm and tempo. The more we practice, the better we get. If we believe in our work, all of our songs will have wonderful things to say. Then, as we get better, they will also be accompanied by good music.

Criteria for Evaluating Manuscripts

The following criteria for manuscript evaluation are based on criteria outlined in Arthur Plotnik's Elements of Editing. Reviewers for our journal rate and comment on refereed manuscripts (manuscripts reviewed as traditional journal articles) according to these guidelines. They are presented here as a general guide and goals for new and experienced writers.

Content

1. *Information.* Delivers a body of facts. Resources are authoritative. Original research methods are competent. Opinions are supported by information.
2. *Analysis and interpretation.* The facts are organized and examined, not merely enumerated. Concepts or hypotheses are presented that embody the facts and bear the imprint of the author. Difficult concepts are made manageable. Thoughtful interpretation leads one to a pointed overview of the subject. Knowledge (a synthesis of information) as well as raw information is imparted. The article is substantially more than the sum of its sources.
3. *Balance.* Opinions are clearly distinguished from fact. More than one side of an argument is presented or at least acknowledged. The reader has a fair chance to judge the reliability of the information.
4. *Originality.* Fresh, innovative, insightful. Shows an awareness of earlier thoughts on the subject, as well as an ability to go beyond them.

Readability

5. *Appeal.* From the start, the article is inviting. It intrigues or motivates the reader; it encourages one to go beyond the first page. It sustains interest throughout. Its organization creates a forward momentum. It contains a succession of interesting facts and concepts clearly presented. An authoritative command of the subject promises substantial educational value.
6. *Concreteness and clarity.* It favors the concrete over the abstract. It is free of jargon and turgid rhetoric. It gets to the point. It specifies. It asserts its point of view. It invites dialogue. It offers concrete points of reader identification. It rings with clarity.
7. *Color and tone.* The voice is conversational but intelligent. It favors

active over passive construction, sentences that build on strong verbs. It uses, when appropriate, examples, anecdotes, contrast, irony, and wit. Expression is sincere rather than slick. In general, the writing is free of elements that intrude upon the smooth flow of information and ideas to the reader.

8. *Enlightenment.* Edifies without preaching. Opens up new channels of action or understanding. Leaves one with a sense of solid benefit. Emotionally as well as intellectually stimulating. Turns on the inner light.
9. *Force.* Authoritative and persuasive without heavy-handedness. Intensity of conviction, strength of logic. Shows an awareness of trends, but does not derive its impact from ephemeral fashions and follies. Durable.
10. *Relevance.* The article relates directly to current or enduring interests of the specific readership. It rewards, extends, or challenges these interests.

Other Editors and Journals in Child and Youth Care Work

The Child and Youth Care Quarterly
Jerome Beker, Editor
CYDR, 386 McNeal Hall
1985 Buford Avenue
University of Minnesota
St. Paul, MN 55108

Journal of Child Care
Gerry Fewster & Thom Garfat, Editors
117 Woodpark Boulevard S.W.
Calgary, Alberta, Canada T28 2Z8

The Child and Youth Care Administrator
Abbey Manburg and Norman Powell, Editors
Nova University
3301 College Drive
Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33314

Helpful Books:

The Elements of Style
by: William Strunk and E.B. White
McMillan Publishing Company
New York, NY, 1979

The Elements of Grammar
by: Margaret Shertzer
McMillan Publishing Company
New York, NY, 1986

The Elements of Editing
by: Arthur Plotkin
McMillan Publishing Company
New York, NY, 1982