Reaching People: Writing for a General Audience

Introduction

This handout was adapted from a workshop given at BirdsCaribbean's 21st international conference. Feel free to use it on your own, or to lead your own workshop. Suggested activities are italicized. Examples are mostly related to Caribbean bird education and conservation, but feel free to make up your own. Good luck!

Why are we here?

Hopefully people are here to improve their writing. It's a fundamental skill that we all need, whether you are a scientist, conservationist or educator. We write reports, blog posts, media releases, fundraising appeals, emails, articles, tweets and more. If people don't read and understand what we are writing, then it's wasted. What are some of the things that you want to write better?

Make a list of things you write.

As we can see, we are all doing a lot of different kinds of writing. During the workshop, we will use examples of stuff like writing a media release or newspaper article. If you need to write some other kind of thing, chances are the ideas here will still be relevant, but please feel free to raise your hand and ask how you might be able to modify these tools to what you need to write.

Who are we writing for?

In this workshop, we want to make our writing more accessible to a general audience. Who is a general audience in the Caribbean? What attributes do they have?

Imagine a general audience in your town. Are they ornithologists? Scientists? Do they care about birds? Are they university graduates? Is English (or Spanish or French) their first language? Are they busy? Distracted?

Our "general audience" is made up of lots of people and they're all different. A couple things are true, though. If you're easier to understand, your message will reach further. Everyone likes a good story.

Why is it hard?

We write all the time, but writing well is challenging. There are things we know are hard for us, and I want to work on those things. What challenges are we having?

Make a list of things that make writing challenging for you. Trouble getting started? Hard to convey complex science in understandable terms? Feel your writing is boring?

As we continue the workshop, please tell us about challenges you have. I think some of us might be surprised to find that even our best writing may have problems we're not aware of.

Storytelling and Accessibility.

We're going to start by learning how to tell stories to make our writing more engaging. You can think about it as how we create the overall structure. The second half of the workshop will focus on accessibility. That half will be about fine-tuning your writing to make sure people can easily understand it. The third half…will be about how to work with media to get your message out.

Storytelling

What is storytelling?

It's not exactly the same as someone telling a story around a fire, but it does share some things with that experience. What is storytelling to you?

Write down notes on what storytelling means to you. Does storytelling grab your interest? Does it sustain your interest? Does it arrange facts into a logical narrative? Does it make you feel emotion/care about the story?

Storytelling can mean different things in different situations. I don't have one answer to this question. In a basic sense, it means using a narrative to present information. It often means using specific techniques or structures to engage with an audience. Storytelling styles often vary by culture.

Why is storytelling important?

In most cases, people don't have to read what we are writing. In fact, they probably have many other things competing for their attention. If we want to get our message to people, we have to make it interesting and meaningful to our audience. At the beginning of a piece, we need to give them a reason to start reading. At every moment along the way, we need to give them a reason to keep reading.

Why does storytelling work?

Organizing information into a story makes it easier for us to understand it and remember it. How many people here remember reading greek myths, or fables like the ant and the grasshopper? We grew up with stories that helped us make sense of the world around us. That still works. A good story also creates an emotional connection. A list of facts doesn't.

Finding your story.

Most of the time, our first step is to find our story. If we were telling the story of a young man on his journey to become a powerful Jedi master and help his father redeem himself, our job would be easy. Unfortunately, we usually start without a full-fledged story. Most of the time, the thing we need to write about isn't a story at all. What are some things you need to write about? Are they stories?

Write a list of topics you need to write about this year. Review the topics and consider if they are already structured as a story. Usually, they're not. An education event is coming up. Is it a story? No. New research shows birds nest in area. Is it a story? No. Wetland will be destroyed to make hotel. Is it a story? No.

Who, what, when, where, why and how. (WWWWW+H)

We're not writing the next Star Wars movie, but a lot of the time we are doing something close to journalism. Journalists use these questions to identify the key information they need to write a story, and we can, too. One thing you will notice is that the story we end up with can change dramatically depending on how we answer these questions.

Consider this example. International Migratory Bird Day (IMBD) is celebrated in countries from Canada to Argentina, including many events hosted in the Caribbean. How do you present this information?

WHO: Dozens of organizations
WHAT: Organizing events to celebrate migratory birds
WHEN: Throughout October
WHERE: On 12 islands in the Caribbean
WHY: The Caribbean is an important seasonal home to birds
HOW: With coordination from BirdsCaribbean
WHO IS THE TARGET? This story is a good way to promote the event to groups that might want to host an event.
WHAT IS THE FOCUS? The focus is on the international collaboration.

WHO: Dozens of organizations
WHAT: Are highlighting habitat restoration
WHEN: This fall
WHERE: At their IMBD events
WHY: Because bird habitats in the Caribbean are threatened
HOW: With this year's theme *Restore Habitats, Restore Birds*
WHO IS THE TARGET? This is also a good way to target groups that might host events.
WHAT IS THE FOCUS? The focus is on this year's theme.

WHO: Tens of thousands of people of all ages
WHAT: Will attend walks, lectures, art activities and more
WHEN: Throughout October
WHERE: On 12 islands in the Caribbean
WHY: To learn about the importance of migratory birds
HOW: Events made by local organizers and BirdsCaribbean
WHO IS THE TARGET? This would be a useful way to present the event to regional media or in a newsletter to members the regional organizing group.
WHAT IS THE FOCUS? The regional impact of the event.

WHO: You
WHAT: Can have fun and learn about migratory birds
WHEN: This month
WHERE: On your island
WHY: It feels good to know about local natural heritage
HOW: Visit birdscaribbean.org to find an event near you
WHO IS THE TARGET? Local people who might want to attend an the event.
WHAT IS THE FOCUS? The fun activities at a specific event.

Take a topic that you need to write about and go through the process of developing the who, what, when, where, why and how for it. Try a couple versions that focus on different aspects of the story. Which one works better for your actual target audience.

Pick a story.

As you can see, a topic can be turned into many different stories. None of them are wrong, but one might stand out as the best way to present your information. Most importantly, choosing one story can help you structure your writing in a way that flows naturally. It gives you a perspective and a structure that you can fill out with additional details.

Know your goal.

When you pick your story, think about your audience and your goal. If you are trying to reach members of the public and convince them to attend your event, a story about how it will be fun and free could be best. If you want to reach potential volunteers, maybe it is more exciting to tell a story about how one event is part of something bigger.

Take a moment to list some of the goals for your group or for a specific project. Or review these goals if they've already been written down. Keep them in mind whenever you are writing something.

The inverted pyramid.

Journalists often use what is known as an inverted pyramid structure for news stories. The most important information is presented first. Then, other details are presented in order of importance, with the least important stuff at the end. In some ways, this is the opposite of many stories, where the climax comes near the end. The key benefit is that readers get the most important information even if they stop reading before the end.

Go back to the topic you were exploring (WWWWW+H), and identify some details that are less important and can be featured late in your piece. In IBMD example, could be specific activity details, where to park or sponsors.

Writing your lead.

The lead (lede) is the first paragraph of your article. Often it is just a couple sentences that give the who, what, when, where, why and how of your story. This type of straightforward lead is known as a summary lead.

Write a lead for an article based on the topic you have been developing.

Creative leads.

Depending on what you are writing, you might want to try a different style of lead to hook your audience. In each case, there is a short set-up before the topic is presented. A question lead starts with a question, a narrative lead starts with a short story to set the stage. Just remember to keep it short and have it connect with your topic sentence. Also, you don't have to write this first. It can be easier to write the rest of your piece and then come back to see if there is a creative hook you can add to the beginning.

If you want, try out a couple creative leads for the topic you are developing. Some examples for the IMBD topic:
- *Did you know thousands of birds come to island every fall?*
- *Bird Group headquarters is filled with the buzzes and hums of drilling and sanding. Volunteers have been busy all day transforming dried calabash fruit into bird feeders. Next Sunday, people of all ages are invited to paint their own bird feeders and take them home at the Bird Festival.*

Create a flow.

As you fill out the rest of your story, present your details in order of importance (inverted pyramid). Use a separate paragraph for each idea (e.g., one paragraph about the activities at the upcoming event). Create a logical flow if you can (e.g., a paragraph about the local organizers might lead into a paragraph about the regional organizers). If you find you have very long paragraphs, see if you have multiple ideas that could be separated into shorter ones. If you return to the same topic in multiple places, then you probably need to reorganize.

Paint a picture with details.

Adding details will make your story come alive. You don't want to bloat your story with facts or lists, but adding one two interesting things that can be seen on a walk, or describing one of the games that will be played at an event, or one of the most interesting presentations can make it come alive.

Consider your topic and come up with a couple details that would enrich your story.

Use people to make a human connection.

Using quotes and telling human stories is a great way to get interest. A new discovery about a bird could include information about who made the discovery and how. A story about a proposed development could include the story of neighbors that are impacted by it. Including quotes can be a great way to make writing more personal.

Who could you quote when writing about your topic?

Know what to skip.

In almost every story, there are too many details to include them all. Should you include every species impacted by a new development or a synopsis of every presentation given at a conference? Follow your story to know what to skip. The tighter your story, the more likely it is to be published and read.

A press release should be about 300-500 words or one page. An editor might give you a target length for an article. Blog and social media posts are often best when they are relatively short.

Read a piece of writing you've already done. Pick something you could leave out to make it stronger.

Sleep on it.

Writing can be hard, and setting a piece aside for a day can give you the perspective you need to finish or improve it.

Get a second opinion.

It is almost impossible to proofread your own work because you already know what you are trying to say. Having someone else read it is incredibly valuable. If they're not familiar with the topic, it is even better. Often we accidentally assume knowledge that our audience doesn't have.

Activity: Storytelling

- *Draft an article or media release or other piece of writing. Use the topic you are working on, or another.*
- *Take a mid-workshop break. Think about something else, do something else, talk with someone about something else.*
- *Review your own piece. Make edits if you want.*
- *Pick a partner, swap articles and review each other's article.*

Accessibility

What is accessibility?

Accessibility is the ability to be understood. In writing, it is determined by a combination of things, like the words you use and the way you build sentences.

Is accessible writing dumbed-down?

Easy to read means clear, not dumb. You can still convey complex ideas, but you have to break them down into simpler parts that people can understand. The process can be challenging, and it requires mastery of your subject.

Richard Feynman, the late Nobel Laureate in physics, was once asked by a Caltech faculty member to explain why spin one-half particles obey Fermi Dirac statistics. Rising to the challenge, he said, "I'll prepare a freshman lecture on it." But a few days later he told the faculty member, "You know, I couldn't do it. I couldn't reduce it to the freshman level. That means we really don't understand it."

What level should you write for?

Accessibility is often measured by grade level. Great writing is easy to read. Ernest Hemingway wrote at a 4th grade level, Stephen King at 6th grade and Leo Tolstoy at 8th grade.

Take a piece of writing you've done and paste it, or at least a few paragraphs, into the readability scoring tool here: http://www.readabilityformulas.com/free-readability-formula-tests.php. What's your grade level?

Where should you be?

The average adult reading level in the USA is usually estimated between 7th and 9th grade, or between about 13 and 15 years old. In parts of the Caribbean, the average may be much lower. Often your writing might also not be in a reader's first language.

What do our scores tell us?

Even if we can get our work printed, we can be certain that most people can't read it or won't understand it. I think this is important to remember, because when we write something and send it to our media list and see it printed we feel like we are getting our message out. If people can't read it, we're not. That part is invisible to us, so we need to make it visible.

Get your score.

You can get a readability score for free online. The best sites run multiple tests to give an average score. No formula tells us exactly how hard it is to read something. They may not be perfect, but they are very helpful.

Do you disagree?

You might think your writing isn't that hard to read. But you don't know the size of the average person's vocabulary. Maybe you don't know that people who don't read well read one word at a time and can get lost by the end of a long sentence.

How do we do it?

Modify your vocabulary and structure.

Use simple words.

Don't use longer, less familiar words if you don't have to.

Avoid jargon.

Jargon is industry slang, and it usually won't be understood by the average person. An exception would be using (and explaining) jargon as a way to draw someone into the story (e.g., a cute word like peeps might add a bit of color, and explaining it might make scientists more relatable because even they have some challenges with similar species).

Explain technical terms.

Explain technical terms, either explicitly or through context. Remember that these terms might include more things than you expect. Never assume others will have knowledge of your topic. Don't assume they have read what you have written previously.

Skip what you don't need.

It might be tempting to drop in terms like "Atlantic flyway" in passing, but you should either define them or skip them. If a concept needs explaining, it better be important to your story. If adding an explanation derails your story, the concept is something you can probably cut out.

Don't assume the reader will skip over it and keep reading. By the same token, a clear explanation of a concept that is key to your story will always make it better.

Simplify your structures.

From phrase to sentence to paragraph to article, simplifying structures improves readability.

Sentences.

For many of us, it is natural to write long and complex sentences. If that's your style, I suggest writing that way in your first draft to get your thoughts on the page. Simplify your sentences as you revise. Often, we connect multiple ideas in one sentence when we don't need to.

Make paragraphs short and focused.

Short paragraphs make writing more approachable. A lot of times, two or three sentences is perfect. People are more likely to feel they can read a text when it is broken into small bits. Long paragraphs are also a sign that you are trying to put too many ideas together. Look for places where two ideas can be separated.

Check your flow.

When your sentences and paragraphs are clear and focused, it should be easy to see if your whole piece flows together. Unnecessary parts and spots that don't flow from one idea to the next should stand out. Now you can cut, rearrange or make the proper connections between ideas so your piece flows.

Follow your readability scores.

Scoring your text should be part of your workflow. These scores aren't perfect, but they do send you in the right direction. Often, the long sentences that are giving you a bad score are actually hard to follow. Use the score to know where you're at, more or less, and do the revisions by reviewing what is actually hard to read. Remember, there is nothing more important than making your writing readable.

Time and revision.

Take a break and revise your work later. It will be easier to see spots that need improvement.

Get a second opinion.

Get someone to read your work that wasn't working on our project with you, that doesn't know much about birds, etc. If you get feedback from a layperson, you may be surprised and frustrated by the amount of things they have trouble understanding. Remember that most of your audience will probably have the same issues.

Activity: Accessibility

- *Word review. Highlight technical words from the piece you wrote. Count the total and how many are explained in the text.*

- *Sentence review. Count the number of words in each sentence. How many are longer than 15 words?*
- *Paragraph review. Count the sentences in each paragraph. Break up paragraphs that express multiple ideas.*
- *Partner review. Have a partner read your revised piece and give feedback.*
- *If you are online or working at home, get the readability score for a piece of writing you are working on and then revise the piece until you achieve a target grade level. You could aim for about 8th grade, but be warned, it's tough.*

Resources

Storytelling for conservation action course:
http://www.frogleaps.org/blog/topic/what-will-i-learn-2/

Readability scoring online:
http://www.readabilityformulas.com/free-readability-formula-tests.php

Readability scoring online (SPANISH):
https://legible.es

Jargon humor:
http://www.newyorker.com/humor/daily-shouts/a-deep-dive-to-remember-a-love-story-between-business-managers-written-by-a-business-manager

General nonfiction writing resource:
https://www.amazon.com/Writing-Well-Classic-Guide-Nonfiction/dp/0060891548

Comments? Questions?

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