The Muse: Ideas for Campus Newsletters, [No. 1,] October 1988
Writing Newsletters with Style

Maryellen Weimer

The key to successful writing of newsletters for faculty lies in the name — newsletter. The most fundamental and certainly most important purpose of the newsletter is that it brings to its readers news — information that they may not have heard or, in the case of teaching and learning, information they may have forgotten or only know vaguely. This need not be news in the late-breaking-development sense. If you're writing about teaching and learning, you'll soon run out of that kind of information. Educational results do not appear nearly as often as findings about AIDS. But the newsletter does need to provide information of interest and value to readers.

And that information, especially if it contains research results or other educational material, must be presented in readable form. The second word in the name is letter and that says a lot about the tone and style newsletter writers should assume. The letter summarizes activities and events. It doesn't contain every jot and title of how it all transpired. The writer doesn't have time to write that much and the reader certainly doesn't have time to read it. That's the joy of the newsletter format. It presents information succinctly so that it can be read and digested quickly and easily. We don't labor through letters, working hard to decipher obscure and complicated prose. They read easily. Sometimes they even make us laugh or cry.

But these are newsletters so there must be substance. If part of their purpose is to encourage readers that there still might be more to be learned about an issue, then they must include references and follow-up information. This is especially true when the readers are faculty members who take pride in scholarship and their ability to judge it. To the extent we want them to take teaching and learning seriously, we must reflect in the publication the complexity of the phenomena about which we write and let them know these issues have been the objects of sustained and concerted attention. Put simply, although letters don't include footnotes and references, newsletters written for faculty audiences should.

And finally, the newsletter is a curious blend of objectivity and personal involvement. It must report in a good, clear, and objective way the news. On the other hand, the format makes acceptable the personal involvement of the author. If in your judgment something qualifies as a good idea, you can say so. The key is balance—a delicate mix of facts and feelings about them. Finding that balance comes with experience and listening closely to the feedback of your readers.

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Newsletters Serve Many Purposes

While the general purpose of a faculty development newsletter is to provide faculty and TAs with support and information to help improve teaching, it can also help you address several audiences and achieve goals important to each one.

For instructors a newsletter:
• presents information about effective teaching.
• stimulates discussion and promotes the sharing of good ideas on teaching.
• encourages further exploration of the topics presented.
• discusses styles of teaching and learning.
• provides instructional support by presenting helpful hints.
• showcases award-winning faculty and TAs.
• serves as a forum for the presentation of local faculty members' and TAs' innovative ideas on teaching and learning.

For the administration a newsletter:
• outlines faculty activities and the importance of teaching.
• serves as a public relations vehicle when recruiting students, soliciting funds, and hiring new faculty.

For the public a newsletter:
• signals that good teaching is honored and rewarded.
• emphasizes that the quality of undergraduate education is a high priority.

In addition, a newsletter serves as a vehicle for a faculty development center to advertise, market, and feature its services, resources, and staff, as well as those of other service units on campus.

—L.B.

So You Want to Be an Editor?

A famous editor, once asked for advice on developing a new publication, replied succinctly and eloquently: "Don't."

We know why. It takes much more time and effort than one anticipates. It's loaded with frustrations: scratching for material, tightening up loose copy, racing for deadlines, combing for typos (the last of which appear just after ink hits paper). And you know that you'll never quite get a perfect issue, no matter how hard you try. (You don't have to be compulsive to be an editor, but it sure helps an awful lot.)

Then why do people submit — sometimes even willingly — to becoming editors? We know the why of that, too. It can bring the pride of accomplishment. It can bring the satisfaction of sharing good things with colleagues. It can bring the joy of a challenge well-met. And, hey, someone's gotta do it — you can probably do it as well or better than the next person. Whether the benefits outweigh the tribulations is sometimes hard to determine, but the call is close enough for most of us to forge forward.

So, if the opportunity is presented to produce a newsletter, should you, too, take such a precarious plunge? Ask yourself these questions: Are there clear and worthy purposes for the publication? Is there faculty and administrative support for the effort? Are there funds enough to do a good job? Can I squeeze out the time? Do I have the courage?

If your answers are affirmative — particularly with regard to the courage — then our advice to you counters that of the famous editor. We say: "By all means, DO!"

—L.B., L.F.
A Survey of 15 Editors
Successful Newsletter Editors Give Their Best Advice

Lin. Fisch

What are the five best bits of advice you could give to fledgling newsletter editors in colleges and universities?

That was the question posed to 15 successful newsletter editors to whom we had easy access. They are among the best in the faculty development newsletter business. Their institutions range from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from Alberta to Texas, from community college to complex university.

Virtually all editors advise: keep it short, simple, and sweet. Faculty members have many things competing for their attention. Don't clutter your issue with an excess of short items, says Lee Humphreys (Tennessee/Knoxville). Keep articles short, perhaps no more than 300 words, suggests Christopher Knapper (Waterloo).

Jim Eison (Southeast Missouri State) says with a twinkle of humor, "Edit until all unnecessary and redundant words have been removed (and then do it again)." In a similar vein, Susan Kahn (Wisconsin System) adds, "Eschew the more ponderous brands of academic prose." Construct short paragraphs, urges Delivee Wright (Nebraska), and aim for an ideal length of three sentences. (That's hard to do!)

There's also a lot of agreement on the need for carefully defining newsletter objectives and then designing a format for achieving them. While newsletters can serve a multitude of purposes (see separate article), they cannot be all things to all people. Once you have a clear sense of purpose, style, and presentation, announce it and stick to it, Kahn advises. Move slowly when making changes, adds Bob Flagler (Minnesota/Duluth).

Many editors stress that it's essential for the content to be of high quality. Flagler says, "Do the best you can for the bucks, but never, never allow mediocre copy to go to print." Knapper advises that you may have to do a lot of the writing yourself in order to control style and quality.

Ken Zahorski (St. Norbert) urges, "Don't be afraid to edit submissions constructively," then cautions, "but remember that you are an editor first, an author second."

Judith Chandler (Georgia) likes to think of articles by and/or about faculty members as collaborative efforts; she suggests sending working drafts to faculty to edit, correct, and supplement (and to be sure to give a deadline for return). While many good editors may exercise a heavy editorial hand at times, rarely is it obvious, and rarely do they seek credit for their background efforts. As part of quality control, Eison warns, "Proof carefully!!"

Where do you get quality material? Much of it can come from your faculty, particularly if you view your newsletter as a medium of communication among teaching colleagues. Zahorski advises actively soliciting material to help match the content to faculty needs and tastes. Ann Lucas (Fairleigh Dickinson) cites the value of ownership of the newsletter by faculty as a result of inviting and featuring their contributions. She also suggests coverage of legislation and other topics of national interest in higher education; the newsletter may be the only place where faculty may read about such issues. Develop a cadre of writers to do reviews and regular features, recommends Loren Ekoroth (Hawaii).

Sometimes interviewing a faculty member about activities and then writing it up yourself is an efficient way to produce a concise, effective article. This can also be done with program presentations, both on and off campus. Priscilla Visek (Illinois) publishes interviews with recipients.

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See ☐ Best Advice, p. 4
Best Advice (from p. 3)

Articles serve a diversified readership. Edwina Hertzberg (Augsburg) recommends including brief, straightforward articles aimed at readers' interests, such as information on research support. Flagler uses quality content as a means to help market campus faculty development opportunities. Hertzberg suggests using insert sheets and tear-offs that facilitate replying to announcements of faculty development events.

Wright stresses that pertinent current information will motivate faculty much more than reports of past happenings. She further recommends that the most important articles be placed on page one and the back page, keeping the newsletter to four pages, if possible. Flagler reminds us that anything more than eight pages becomes something to be read later (if read at all). Knapper recommends using "teaser" material — quotations from articles and books that will motivate readers to delve further into the sources.

Although quality content is essential, quality appearance also is important in the presentation of your newsletter; it must be attractive to both the eye and the mind. Make it handsome but not slick, advises Ekroth. Knapper suggests that the line is fine between producing an attractive, professional publication and wasting the institution's money on yet another glossy piece of trash can fodder.

The first issue of a new publication is critical because it sets the tone and pattern for the entire endeavor. If at all possible, use a graphic artist for at least this issue and then copy the format yourself in subsequent issues, says Clem Gruen (Appalachian State). Allow ample time to get it right — "Everything takes longer than it takes," says Eison. Zahorski suggests that fledgling editors read one or two texts on publishing, study other newsletters, and then do the entire first newsletter from start to finish, including layout. Those who have regular access to a designer for layout and graphics have a valuable luxury. But even a small college probably has one person on campus who is versed in these areas and who can function as a consultant.

Visual variety attracts readers, suggests Wright; effective devices

Ask yourself: "If this came to me in the mail, would I really read it?"

for this are boxes, screened sections, cartoons, graphic elements, photos, clip art, and even just plain white space. And, she adds, be sure your fillers are tasteful, relevant, and not too cute. Most editors find that a two- or three-column format is more easily read than a single column stretching across a page.

Select a good type font and stick with it, providing variety and emphasis through different type sizes, italics, and bold-face, advises Gruen. Don't be tempted by your computer to mix several different fonts. Ten-point type is a commonly used size for text; headlines can be set in 12- or 15-point bold. Kamps cautions that the "greying of faculty" calls for easily read print.

Gruen's rule of thumb for visual variety is one illustration or photo for each two pages. Wright points out that photos will turn out best when there is high contrast between ink color and page color. Be sure to consider pull-out quotes, both to provide variety and to draw readers into the articles, Kahn advises. Johnson suggests punching holes in the left margin to facilitate filing newsletters in a notebook.

Humphreys recommends that you "sell" your newsletter to faculty and administration and link it to a clear pattern of support and development services and activities. Kamps suggests over distributing the newsletter to administration, staff, boards, and anyone whose support would be strengthened by knowing more about your institution's endeavors.

Much more could be said about publishing effective newsletters — given the remaining suggestions from editors that I still have in hand. But I'm conscious that I've already far exceeded the guidelines of brevity recommended earlier. Perhaps I'll let Eison have the last word of advice: as you are preparing material, ask yourself, "If this came to me in the mail, would I really read it?" If not, modify, adjust, and delete accordingly.

So here you have a lot of practical advice that you can put to use in producing your own successful newsletter. Most faculty newsletter editors come by their expertise through experience. You'll find that you'll learn quickly too; it will be fun, and it will provide you with much satisfaction.

All of us wish you well in your endeavors!
Notes for the Beginner
Publish From Your Own Desk!

Laura Border

Many faculty developers find themselves in need of a way to communicate directly with faculty or TAs on a regular, though relatively formal basis. A faculty development or a TA newsletter can be a useful vehicle for accomplishing this task, and fortunately, the recent advances in computer technology allow you to produce a professional-looking newsletter in-house.

This article, set up as a question and answer dialogue, addresses questions about the process, equipment, materials, and skills needed to initiate your own desktop publishing venture.

What does the term "desktop publishing" mean? In the expanding computer-assisted world of today, desktop publishing (DTP) refers to the production of any printed material using computer equipment and software to design pages electronically. Desktop publishing software allows you to set up columns, specify typefaces and type sizes, and incorporate graphics into the text.

How does desktop publishing differ from traditional publishing in the campus setting? Historically, when a unit decided to publish a formal newsletter several steps were followed: a typed manuscript was delivered to the publications staff, who edited it, typeset it, and sent the galleys back to the home department for approval. Then a layout was done and approved, necessary corrections made, printing ordered, and the camera-ready copy sent out to a printer.

Thanks to the sophisticated desktop publishing software available today, an individual with training in word processing skills and the proper computer equipment can produce an electronic layout easily.

What equipment is needed to get started in desktop publishing? To begin your DTP venture, you need a microcomputer, appropriate software packages, and a printer — for example, a Macintosh computer with a word processing program, such as Microsoft Word, and an Apple Laserwriter printer. Excellent MS-DOS based desktop publishing systems are also marketed by IBM, Xerox, Hewlett-Packard, Canon, and others. An image scanner that transfers graphics onto a computer file on a disk is a useful, though not essential piece of equipment.

How do I decide what equipment to buy? Carefully examine your office's general printing needs and explore potential areas for improvement and expansion. Then visit several local computer stores, tell them exactly what you plan to do with the equipment, and ask for advice. Try out different computers and various software programs; ask the salesperson, "How user-friendly is this equipment/this program?"

Investigate thoroughly: the variety of equipment can seem overwhelming, but it pays to be patient and to choose equipment that does what you need it to do and that you can learn to operate.

What page make-up software programs are available? For ease of production, a WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) software program is very helpful. Another important feature is having the flexibility to move easily from one application to another, for example, from a word processing program to a graphics program.

PageMaker, Ventura Publisher, XPress and ReadySetGo are examples of good, flexible page layout programs.

What do I do for graphics? You can buy ready-made clip art programs. If you want to draw graphics yourself, purchase a graphics program, such as Superpaint, MacDraw, Crickett Draw, or GEM Draw Plus.

How do I produce my final product? The final output or camera-ready copy may be photocopied or sent to a conventional printer.

What level of funding is necessary to set up a desktop publishing system? Depending on your choice of microcomputer, applications, and printer, a basic system can cost from around $3,000 to $10,000 or more. You also need to budget for training workshops for staff. If your office has a low budget, computer equipment may be available in another office on campus or at a local print or photocopying shop.

What do I do once I have purchased the equipment? Training in the use of the equipment is essential and can save you frustration and time; most computer stores provide some level of training, as do most campus media/computer centers. Computerized tutorial programs may be purchased for some DTP software.

What are the advantages of desktop publishing? If you are already familiar with the publishing process, you will enjoy having more control over editing, design, layout, paste-up, turnaround times, and deadlines. If your office produces a newsletter, DTP will save money formerly spent on outside typesetting and
design services. And last but not least, all the printed material you produce will look more professional.

What are the unforeseen problems that may occur? We caution you to explore the market thoroughly before purchasing equipment and software. Be sure that everything you buy is compatible and that the store provides user support. If you are going to connect several microcomputers to one laser printer, ask about the process. Be sure to buy a system that has enough memory to support all the components you will be using.

Will I enjoy desktop publishing? Absolutely. Given the wide variety of programs available and the constant growth in sophistication of computer hardware and software, you may become a computer addict!

It's Basic, but Is It English?

If you were to walk into a room of MACusers or PCers, you might feel that your command of basic English had suffered a sudden decline. The expansion in computer technology has led to a parallel explosion in the terminology used to communicate new ideas, concepts, behaviors, and products.

A new generation of word processors has spurred the creation of a plethora of terms such as DTP — desktop publishing. We present here some of the funniest, though useful terms you will encounter as you venture into the computer world.

dpi dots per inch
Fax facsimile transmission
footer bottom margin
header top margin
NLQ near letter quality
OCR optical character recognition
And last but not least:
WYSIWYG what you see is what you get or whizzing as it’s pronounced, refers to page layout programs that show the full page on the monitor.

Chapter 9: A Newsletter on Newsletters

Editing Your Newsletter, by Mark Beach

Your three main questions probably are: Would the book be useful to me? Is the author’s advice sound? Is this manual of modest length worth the cost? My answer to each is an unequivocal "Yes."

New editors will learn how to establish a firm foundation for a publication, communicate effectively with design personnel and printers, and avoid the pitfalls of inexperience. There are hundreds of practical pointers on scheduling, format, layout, and writing. The book is loaded with examples contrasting good and poor design.

Seasoned editors will find many ways to upgrade their publications, from improving photography to writing better kickers and headlines — write them before writing stories, include verbs in the present tense. (What? You don’t know what a kicker is? See p. 3 and the extensive glossary.) I found myself jotting down nearly a dozen ideas that I want to consider in the next newsletter I develop (including using kickers). If you are considering making a transition from traditional production to computer, valuable suggestions are offered.

The book is very readable and understandable. It’s exemplary in that it illustrates all the advice it gives. Beach’s writing is succinct and direct, with just the right touch of humor.

The short sections on avoiding bias in writing and observing proper copyright procedures are particularly well done and will help keep any editor out of trouble. Samples of style sheets and type specifications are provided. Every so often there’s a checklist — for example, for inspecting proofs or evaluating photograms. And in the appendix there’s an editor’s job organizer that you can copy and use.

I searched the book thoroughly, and I found no poor advice or recommendations that required significant qualification. While the book is aimed at newsletter editors generically, almost everything in it is relevant to newsletters for faculty. The suggestion of doing the writing yourself is sound, but of course would not apply to newsletters particularly designed to present faculty ideas directly to colleagues.

Editing Your Newsletter is comprehensive but not encyclopedic, and that’s the way it should be. I compared it with two other works in the field, both of which are also in new editions this year and have much to recommend them: Howard Hudson's Publishing Newsletters (Scribner’s, $12.95, pbk) and Frederick Goss’s Success in Newsletter Publishing (Newsletter Association, $37.50, hb). Both are more global than Beach’s book in their treatment of the subject. They’re oriented toward commercial, for-profit newsletters and deal extensively with marketing and the like. Editing Your Newsletter has the clear edge on practicality for the typical faculty newsletter editor.

The book is like a newsletter workshop, but more thorough. Having it on your desk would be like having a consultant at your fingertips at any time. The book will help you improve your work. It will save you time. And it will save you money.

What better recommendation could I give you?

Linc. Fisch

What's In a Name?

One task that faces everyone who initiates a newsletter is to title the publication and to design its nameplate, a.k.a. banner. It's surprising how often publication and to design its nameplate, we considered a variety of possibilities, including A Newsletter on Newsletters (too long, already in use), Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Newsletters (too long and too cute), Publishing Newsletters (pretty prosaic), and a few that we don't even care to admit to. We searched for something catchy that reflected our goal and could also carry over into some interesting graphics. One of us said, "We need something inspirational." The other said, "Some day soon, the muse will strike..." and suddenly there was our name: The Muse!

It's short and sweet and also reminds us that sometimes in the face of impending printing deadlines, one has to wait patiently for inspiration (or whatever) to strike before everything falls into place.

Then we went through a lengthy process of choosing the layout, the type size, logo, and subtitle—not to mention things like whether or not to do a reversal or other such technical manipulations.

A glance at representative newsletters reveals a variety of names and subtitles on a continuum from the academic to the metaphoric: Teaching-Learning Issues; Research Serving Teaching; Faculty Newsletter; Teaching Forum; Illini Instructor Series; Penn State ID, An Instructional Development Newsletter; Directions, A Faculty Development Newsletter at Red Deer College; The Beacon, A Guide to Faculty Development at St. Norbert College; Linkages; and one inspired from literature—And Gladly Teach.

Frequently, the initials of the institution and the word "teaching" are included: Teaching at UNL, VCU Teaching. Sometimes, graphic elements enter into the name itself: an apple for the letter "O".

The nameplate conveys the purpose and character of the publication. Whatever you select, consider it carefully; the name truly sets the tone for your entire publication and is likely to remain fixed for a long time.

—L.B., L.F.

Excerpts

On Writing Well

[All writers] are vulnerable and all of them are tense. They are driven by a compulsion to put some part of themselves on paper, and yet they don't just write what comes naturally. They sit down to commit an act of literature, and the self who emerges on paper is a far stiffer person than the one who sat down. The problem is to find the real man or woman behind all the tension.

For ultimately, the product that any writer has to sell is not his subject, but who he is. I often find myself reading with interest about a topic that I never thought would interest me—some unusual scientific quest, for instance. What holds me is the enthusiasm of the writer for his field. How was he drawn into it? What emotional baggage did he bring along? How did it change his life? It is not necessary to want to spend a year alone at Walden Pond to become deeply involved with a man who did.

This is the personal transaction that is at the heart of good nonfiction writing. Out of it come two of the most important qualities that this book will go in search of: humanity and warmth. Good writing has an aliveness that keeps the reader reading from one paragraph to the next, and it's not a question of gimmicks to "personalize" the author. It's a question of using the English language in a way that will achieve the greatest strength and the least clutter. (p.5)

But the secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components. Every word that serves no function, every long word that could be a short word, every adverb that carries the same meaning that is already in the verb, every passive construction that leaves the reader unsure of who is doing what—these are the thousand and one adulterants that weaken the strength of a sentence. And they usually occur, ironically, in proportion to education and rank. (p. 6)

Soon after you confront this matter of preserving your identity, another question will occur to you: "Who am I writing for?" It is a fundamental question and it has a fundamental answer: you are writing for yourself. Don't try to guess what sort of thing editors might want to publish or what you think the country is in a mood to read. Editors and readers don't know what they want to read until they read it. Besides, they're always looking for something new.

Don't worry about whether the reader will "get it" if you indulge a sudden impulse for humor or nonsense. If it amuses you in the act of writing, put it in. (It can always be taken out later, but only you can put it in.) You are writing primarily to entertain yourself, and if you go about it with confidence you will also entertain the readers who are worth writing for. If you lose the dullards back in the dust, that's where they belong. (p.22)

Try a Few Tricks of the Layout Trade

Lin. Fisch

The chances are good that most novice newsletter editors are like I was: filled with ideas and desire, but pretty green about techniques. Sure, I had done a few simple newsletters with limited circulation, but I was strictly a layman when it came to layout. When I was called upon to produce a class publication that would be sent to a couple of thousand readers, my apprehension mounted.

Fortunately, at that point I discovered Mason Smith, an experienced newspaper hand in the public information office at our university. Not only did Mason give me some sound editorial advice, but he conveyed a number of practical pointers on how to put my publication all together. They worked! My newsletters began to get rave reviews.

Perhaps you can find a Mason Smith on your campus to consult with. But if not, here are some of the more valuable tricks of the trade and a bit of the jargon that he passed on to me.

- Compose your newsletter from the outside to the inside. Lay out the front page first, then the back page (Mason called it the "second front page"). Then adjust continuations of articles (if any) and remaining items on the inside pages.
- Strive for a modular or block format. Avoid "doglegs" caused in an article by columns of unequal length.
- Limit continuation of articles from one page to another as much as you can. Each "jump" loses a significant number of readers.
- Compose headlines that attract readers. Avoid "label" heads except for standing columns (e.g., Book Review). Extend heads over two columns when possible; one-column heads are hard to set and often "bump" other one-column heads.
- Avoid the "all-cap trap" in heads; use lower case whenever possible.
- Use "teaser" and "reefer" lines on the front page to direct readers to interesting material on inside pages.
- Use "break-out" or "pull-out" quotations from articles to draw reader interest and to break up solid copy. "All-gray" pages bore readers.
- Use graphic elements to provide variety and interest (and as attractive fillers). But don't get carried away and use so many that your publication looks all chopped up.
- Don't disdain white space; it provides relief from solid copy. But don't trap white space in the interior of a page; arrange copy so that it can "flow out" easily.
- Orient photographs appropriately: The persons in them should be looking toward the interior of the page. If a photograph is within a column, place it on the right, starting copy on the left.

And a final suggestion of Mason's may be the most important of all: remember that pointers are guidelines, rather than rigid rules. Good judgment and quality of the content and its presentation should always prevail over sheer mechanics.

Examples of layout and graphic design

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