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The Muse: Resources for Faculty and TA Newsletters, No. 2, Fall 1989

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The Muse

Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education

No. 2 Fall 1989

Putting the edge on your newsletter

Easy-to-make design adjustments enhance readability and attractiveness to readers

Linc. Fisch

By and large we newsletter editors are an edgy lot. We constantly wonder if our newsletters are grabbing readers as well as they might. We worry that our publications are becoming too much like the solid but stodgy Good Gray Times. We try to fix things that ain't even broke yet. We fidget, we fiddle, we tinker.

Or, viewing it from a different angle, we editors are always looking for new slants, new ways to present our material more effectively. We search for new ideas to appeal to our readers, for ways to make our newsletters more attractive. We like to be in the forefront of trends. We practice preventive editorship to keep things from sagging. We want an edge on our newsletters that insures they are timely, relevant, vital.

Whether we are exercising a healthy bent for continual improvement or suffering from a serious compulsion toward perfection might well be a matter of perspective. The diagnosis is sometimes hard to make. Whatever, the treatment for this common journalistic condition is usually not difficult or painful. And, best of all, it doesn't have to be costly.

Let's suppose that your publication hasn't succumbed to a case of the total blahs. (If it has, take two aspirins and consult a makeover doctor as soon as possible.) But maybe you have this nagging feeling that the newsletter you have grown to love can be more than it is, that it's falling a bit short of the mark you've set for it. Perhaps you've supported this with a survey of your readers or by consultation with fellow editor-wizards or

colleagues in your publications office.

What can you do? Are there adjustments short of massive format re-design that can improve readability and attractiveness to your constituency? And in that process can you avoid the risk of getting carried away with triviality or change-for-change's-sake?

Let me draw my responses from some of the patterns revealed by leading newsletters that cross my desk—newsletters that practically reach out and beg to be read. I'll concentrate on design adjustments that are easy to make and cost little or nothing.

One thing that makes a newsletter inviting is openness and informality. These qualities can be improved by running right column margins ragged instead of justified and by reducing hyphenation. When space occurs at the end of an article, let it remain; don't automatically reach for your filler file for something to jam in. If the white space seems a bit excessive, consider distributing it across the columns of the article—and not necessarily in an even distribution. Inserting an extra point of leading between lines or adding an extra half-pica or so of space in the gutters between columns can do wonders in opening up copy.

Another technique that seems to add appeal is to dress pages with rules at the top or at both top and bottom. Often the top rule is heavier than the bottom. Hairline rules in the gutters are another possibility to help frame copy.

See *Edge*, page 2

Enclosed: Supplement: Some observations on *The Beacon*
Evaluation Form: Survey of readers

□ Edge (from page 1)

Perhaps the move toward openness that's simplest to accomplish is to present material in shorter paragraphs.

Headlines do a lot to create the image of your publication. The trend is to make them more readable by setting them "downstyle"—capitalizing the first letter of only the first word—so that they read more like a sentence. Consider using a second font for headlines; that's the one acceptable exception to consistency of type throughout a newsletter. But if you choose to do this, make sure the two fonts are compatible.

Headlines draw readers to articles. Editors struggle to include enough information in short heads to convey the essence of the article. One solution to this problem is to use a subhead to expand upon the head. A "kicker" above the head sometimes can serve the same purpose. Of course, don't overdo it by using both, and try to be consistent in what you use throughout the publication.

A blurb or pull-out quotation also helps to attract readers. It can be placed at the beginning of an article as a substitute for a subhead or located strategically within the article to break up solid copy.

If you're willing to invest a little more time in modifications, greater use of graphic elements or the addition of a photograph might be considerations. Be sure, however that these additions are relevant to the material and not just decorations. The trend is toward large and bold graphics, rather than small fillers.

If bold graphics are too major a move for you, you might consider enlarged initial letters at the beginning of articles and at one or two logical places within the copy. One authority reports 13% increased reading as a result of this practice. Discrete use of screens can call attention to small items and announcements. Screens provide graphic relief as well.

Want to follow the trends just a bit farther? Adjust your format to an additional column. If you're in two columns go to three; if you're in three columns, go to four. Yes, four, even on

an 8 1/2 x 11 sheet—I've seen several newsletters that employ it successfully. These techniques work because short lines are easier to read than long lines. But if you're in one column for a good reason and want to stay that way, you can simply reduce the length of your column lines. For the truly brave and creative, there's the possibility of going to columns of different widths or employing sidebars for presentation of author information, pull-out quotations and the like.

You might want to reconsider the type style you've been using; there may be another font that's more contemporary and more readable. And for only slight additional cost you can shift to a paper of different color and texture—or simply change the color of your ink.

Many newsletters have nameplates that do the job of naming but little else. Probably the one thing that can change image most is to re-design the nameplate. But do it carefully. It probably will involve a fee for a graphic artist and many hours of frustrating deliberation. Don't rush into a new nameplate hastily; you'll have to live with it a long time.

The possibilities for modifications in newsletter design that I've listed may help increase appeal to readers. Of course, they're no substitute for good content (that's another story, entirely). Realize that for the most part my suggestions are cosmetic changes, albeit for deliberate purposes. Just as you would not go to a cosmetics counter and apply all the potions available, you should not adopt newsletter changes without careful consideration. And you don't want to follow trends blindly.

But with thoughtful discretion you might be able to make some simple adjustments in your newsletter that are just right for giving it the edge over the many other things that compete for your busy readers' attention.

Linc. Fisch has edited newsletters at several colleges and universities where he has taught. He lives in Lexington, Kentucky, and is engaged in educational consulting, film-designing, and writing.

Editors' musings

What? A second issue of *The Muse*?

Those of you who read the "one-time-only" *Muse* that appeared in *POD's Handbook for New Practitioners* may wonder why another issue appears a year later.

First off, we received some nice comments about the original issue, and you know what positive reinforcement does for egotistical people. But more important, a number of editors told us that they're scrambling for ideas to keep their publications timely and relevant. They're anxious to receive things they can use and willing to share whatever they can in return.

Given that encouragement, we conceived the idea of a continuation of *The Muse* that might facilitate the process of providing resources for editors—things like materials and ideas that could be used directly, names of people to whom to write for articles, a sample newsletter along with a commentary by its editor, with even a little inspiration thrown in now and then in case it were needed.

The *POD* Core Committee approved and provided a modest grant to publish two trial issues. In the process, we'll study costs and assess market demand.

That's one of the places where *you* come in. We need to hear from you in order to find out if we're on the right track. You'll find an evaluation form in each issue. Please complete and return it promptly to the indicated address so that we may be appropriately guided in our efforts.

You can help us also by contributing articles and materials along the lines of what you find in this issue. Our aim is to turn this into a true reader-supported publication.

—L.B., L.F., K.Z.

The Muse is published by the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education as a resource for editors of faculty and TA development newsletters. Comments and contributions are welcomed by the editors.

Editors: Laura Border; University of Colorado, Boulder

Linc. Fisch; Lexington, KY

Ken Zahorski; St. Norbert College

Designer: Bill Border, Nederland, Colorado

For further information about *The Muse* or the *POD* Network, please contact: Emily C. Wadsworth, *POD* Network, Professional Development, Northeastern Illinois University, 5500 North St. Louis, Chicago, IL 60646; (312) 583-4050 ext. 3309.

Filings . . .

Reprints from other newsletters

Some faculty development newsletter editors occasionally reprint articles that have appeared in other newsletters. Alternately, they may announce the availability of the articles and make copies for any who request them. Below are listed several that have been popular recently. We've contacted the authors and each is willing to have the article reprinted. If you wish to consider a particular article, write to the address given in order to get an accurate copy and attribution information.

"Teaching Thinking" by Wilbert J. McKeachie. *NCRIPTAL Update*, Vol. 2, No. 1, September 1988. About 900 words.

Contact Mary Joscelyn, NCRIPTAL, 2400 SEB, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259; (313) 936-2741.

"What Should Faculty Know about Today's Students?" by James Eison. *Research Serving Teaching*, Vol 2. No. 1, Fall 1988. About 1000 words.

Contact James Eison, Center for Teaching and Learning, Southeast Missouri State University, Cape Girardeau, MO 63701; (314) 658-2298.

"101 Things You Can Do the First Three Weeks of Class" by Joyce Povolac Lunde. *Teaching at UNL*, Vol. 8, No. 1, August 1986. About 1900 words.

Contact Delivee Wright, Teaching and Learning Center, 114 Benton Hall, University of Nebraska—Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68588; (402) 472-3079.

Essays from *Teaching Excellence*

This year POD is inaugurating a new service, *Teaching Excellence*, which annually provides eight essays on enhancing teaching effectiveness. Arrangements can be made to reprint these in newsletters or to distribute them individually to faculty members. All POD members should have received a mailing on this in June. If you did not, or if you wish further information, please contact:

Loren Ekroth
Center for Teaching Excellence
108 Kuykendall Hall
1733 Donaghho Road
University of Hawaii at Manoa
Honolulu, HI 96822
(808) 948-6978

Copies of *The Muse*, October 1988

The initial issue of *The Muse* was printed in 1988 as chapter 9 in *Professional and Organizational Development: A Handbook for New Practitioners*. Among the articles are "Writing Newsletters with Style," "Successful Newsletter Editors Give Their Best Advice," "Publish from Your Own Desk!" and "Try a Few Tricks of the Layout Trade."

A copy of the *Handbook* can be obtained for \$15.00 (\$8.00 to POD

members) by writing to:

Emily C. Wadsworth
POD Network
Professional Development
Northeastern Illinois University
5500 North St. Louis
Chicago, IL 60646

If you want only a copy of *The Muse*, send \$1.00 to cover duplicating and postage to:

Linc. Fisch
3309 Bellefonte Drive
Lexington, KY 40502 ■



Excerpts

Composing Headlines

For a newspaper or magazine, a specialist writes headlines *after* reading articles. For your newsletter, you should compose headlines *before* writing articles.

Crafting headlines first makes body copy better and production more efficient. It helps you focus on what the article will say. The headline "Fund drive reaches goal" implies a different story from "Pledges assure new library."

Writing the headline first also suggests how important its article is with regard to other articles in the same issue. The priority of the article tells you the type size and character count of its headline. It helps you visualize the printed newsletter.

Headlines summarize and advertise stories. To make every word in them count, follow these simple guidelines.

Relate to the story. It may seem obvious that a headline should relate to its story, but it's not apparent to every editor. Standing heads such as "President's report" invite yawns, not attention.

No *Legislative update*
Yes *Senate slates highway hearings*
No *Superintendent's corner*
Yes *Hometown schools first in SATs*

One way to ensure that headlines relate to stories is to insist they have a verb. The verb can even be implied, as in the second example above. A headline without a verb is probably just a dull label.

Present tense. News is most interesting when fresh. When writing headlines, forget that you know past or future tenses.

No *National officer will attend convention*

Yes *National rep schedules visit*

No *Million dollars sold by Jane Stewart*

Yes *Jane Stewart sells million*

Writing in the present tense tends to keep grammar lively and headlines short.

Specific. Tell as much of your story as possible in its headline. Specific heads help readers find exactly the information they seek.

No *Arts and crafts displayed*

Yes *Craft fair heralds holidays*

No *Production good in eastern mills*

Yes *Eastern mills near production record*

Writing for specifics tends to be active, not passive. It gets the subject up front and focuses on its actions.



The Muse

Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education

No. 2 Fall 1989

Some observations on *The Beacon*

Kenneth J. Zahorski

The Beacon, a newsletter published by the Office of Faculty Development, serves the entire St. Norbert College academic community. While its primary purpose is to publicize and promote faculty development activities and programs, it also acts as a medium for exchanging ideas and views about teaching, learning, and scholarship. Further, through book reviews and topical articles, it keeps readers apprised of current issues in higher education. In sum, *The Beacon* helps sustain a fertile, nurturing, and supportive academic climate in which good teaching, deep-seated learning, and productive scholarship can thrive. One of my jobs as Director of Faculty Development is to edit this publication.

I distribute *The Beacon* not only to all current College faculty (both full- and part-time) and key administrative officers, but also to retired S.N.C. faculty, members of the S.N.C. Board of Trustees, and foundation directors nationwide. In addition, I mail copies to over 200 directors of faculty development. I also send copies to members of the Wisconsin Association of Independent Colleges and Universities Faculty Development Network, a nineteen-school consortial enterprise aimed at fostering professional growth programs through interinstitutional sharing and cooperation.

Although I write the regular features and a few of the topical articles, submissions from my colleagues constitute the lifeblood of *The Beacon*. Since the first issue in September 1986, nearly fifty faculty from twenty disciplines have submitted articles and reviews, giving *The*

Beacon its vitality, variety, and distinctive flavor. Occasionally, I solicit articles from outside the immediate S.N.C. community. For instance, I have invited S.N.C. alumni to write particular kinds of articles and they have always generously responded, making distinguished contributions to series such as "Learning for Life: The Liberal Arts Tradition." In addition, I sometimes reprint articles from other faculty development newsletters.

Everything in *The Beacon* must deal in one form or another with faculty development, but within that spacious realm there is plenty of room for variety. *Beacon* readers may find a treatise on scholarship on one page, and on the next a travelogue documenting a faculty member's experience in some exotic land. Still another page might contain a list of suggestions for generating classroom discussion, and on the following a commentary on some current issue in higher education. In short, I encourage diversity, accepting submissions which span the broad faculty-development spectrum.

But while readers welcome variety, they also appreciate the familiar. Like travelers, they embrace the prospect of meeting new people and seeing new sights, but they also welcome the sight of an expected landmark. With this in mind, I include a number of regular features such as "Opportunity Calendar," "Notes from the Director," "The Reviewing Stand," and "Teaching Tips." Some of these serve special functions, like "Bookends" which publicizes resources available through the

See *Beacon*, Supplement, page 2

The Beacon, a guide to faculty development at St. Norbert College, is such an exemplary newsletter that we arranged to share the September 1989 issue with readers of *The Muse*. We've invited Ken Zahorski, its editor, to comment on its purpose, design and production. Ken is Professor of English and Director of Faculty Development at St. Norbert College, De Pere, Wisconsin 54115-2099; (414) 337-3218.

□ *Beacon* (from page 1)

Resource Center. Others, such as "Publications and Presentations," acknowledge faculty achievements. I should also mention that each year I select a subject for special emphasis and use the continuing theme approach to explore it. Last year, for instance, I focused on the sabbatical, featuring a new *Beacon* series entitled "Replenishing the Well: Reflections on the Sabbatical Experience."

A few words about *The Beacon's* format and design. Issued six times a year (three issues per semester), *The Beacon* is typeset in-house and printed off-campus by a local printer at a cost of \$250.00 per 500 copies (8 pp.). Printed in black ink on Ivory Nekoosa Text Weave, *The Beacon* uses English Times Roman Medium for its body text and Megaron Bold for its heads. Although a few issues have been longer, eight pages is the usual length. One of the reasons I chose a three-column justified format is that it lends itself to graphics — I try to work in several of these each issue. In addition to a variety of departmental logos (e.g. the "International Forum" and "Food

for Thought" logos found in the issue before you), I use break-out quotes, screens, tables, and charts to enhance visual appeal. Photographs might also help, but I have decided not to use them because of the cost as well as the inevitable delays resulting from photographers not meeting deadlines. My editorial tasks are complicated enough without inviting additional problems.

And what about *The Beacon's* future look? While I intend to stick with the formula which has generated favorable reader response over the past three years, I will continue to seek ways of improving the product. From time to time I will try new things. For example, I am planning a special winter issue on "Generating Classroom Discussion." Although single theme issues are not uncommon in other faculty development newsletters, this approach will be new for *The Beacon*. I may also experiment with format, using fewer breakout quotes and more subheads (especially in longer articles), substituting "downstyle" for bold heads, and running right columns ragged instead of justified. But these

are all minor mutations. Major changes in direction and content are not in the cards.

I must confess that editing *The Beacon* consumes my time and energy as relentlessly as Chronus devoured his children. Happily, however, I have received the generous help of an industrious and dependable student assistant, a top-notch secretarial pool, a cooperative and professional publications staff, a gifted graphic artist, and an extraordinarily congenial and talented group of contributing colleagues. Because of this superb supporting cast — and an administration which provides encouragement, support, and a generous publications budget — *The Beacon's* beam has shone forth regularly over the past three years. With the ongoing support of the S.N.C. academic community I am confident its light will continue to shine brightly into the future. ■