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Put It In Writing

Eric C. Shoaf

Do you have what it takes? Can you translate your thoughts and ideas into words for others to see? Of course you can! Unless you have been on another planet for the last six months, you are probably aware that *Library Administration & Management* (*LA&M*) seeks manuscripts for publication. Contributions can take many forms: scholarly research on issues related to administration and management of libraries, reports of successful project implementation, interviews with important movers and shakers in the profession, presentations from conferences and symposia, or invited articles. There is no shortage of topics and the pace of change in libraries makes for rich and fertile from which ideas can spring. Articles can be submitted individually or written by committees, colleagues, or coworkers. Of particular interest to readers are presentations from LAMA conference programs. These are encouraged and should be part of program planning by sponsoring committees. Those submitting manuscripts need not be LAMA members.

Submission to *LA&M* is not meant to be difficult, but there are procedures to follow in order to meet publication standards. See "Instructions to Authors" online at www.ala.org/ala/lama/lamapublications/laandm/libraryadministrationmanagementmagazine.cfm. They were also printed in the summer 2007 issue. The instructions provide guidance on acceptable writing style and on using graphic content.

Many people want to write but have a difficult time getting started. It is important to know that there is no single correct approach. Certainly an idea is required. If you look around the library where you work, ask yourself what to make of the transformative changes that you see happening. How are they affecting the workers, the budget, or services to users? If you look around, you may find a dozen topics rather than just one. Once you have identified your topic its time to develop the idea. What do you want people to know about the idea? How can you organize your thoughts to communicate best the framework of the idea? Let's look at two examples of highly divergent approaches.

I have had the opportunity to work with several authors over the years, in my role as bibliographer, and I always ask them about their approach to writing. Tom Wolfe is known for applying fiction techniques to journalistic reporting, and he wrote several best-selling nonfiction books. In the mid-1980s, he began working in the fiction genre and he promptly brought journalistic reporting techniques to his fiction. Wolfe's initial fiction blockbuster, *The Bonfire of the Vanities,* cemented his name among the great writers of the twentieth century. Wolfe takes a very disciplined approach to writing and he incorporates lengthy and detailed research and reporting into his work. Wolfe told me that for his book *The Right Stuff,* a work of nonfiction written about the space program and astronauts, he wrote a three-hundred-page outline of the book which covered all the issues he wanted to cover. He even sketched out how the outline looked with capital A, Roman numeral I, small a, etc. He said that as he worked through the manuscript he stayed close to his outline. He had a similar outline for *Bonfire,* but not as detailed. He wrote much of that book in serialized form for *Rolling Stone,* and later reworked it for the final publication.

Interestingly, when it came time to produce more fiction in the 1990s, Wolfe found himself stuck on several occasions, unable to move the action forward. It was not until he changed the central location of the book *A Man in Full* to Atlanta that he was able to move ahead again. Though the result is not considered one of his best works of fiction, it has a complex and detailed plot which could only have been produced by a meticulous writer. It shows that even gifted writers can encounter a block, but eventually find a way around it.

Contrast this disciplined approach to that of another writer with whom I had the opportunity to work, Hunter S. Thompson. As the creator and chief practitioner of "gonzo" journalism, Thompson put himself at the center of his subject, whatever it might be, then wrote about how the events affected him and how his reaction affected the subject. His goal was to be able to report the events as close to the vortex of action as possible. Thompson produced writing that reads like a stream of consciousness, and he was convinced that the best nonfiction reporting came from using just such an approach. Of course, Thompson had a youthful crowd of followers who reveled in his free use of alcohol and drugs. And Thompson sometimes seemed to write for them, in a sort of "give them what they want" fashion. But there is much more to Thompson's writing than a substance-fueled sound bite from the middle of conflict.

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Thompson liked to make it seem as if he was throwing everything together at the last minute, but there was much more craft involved. Certainly in his coverage of the 1972 presidential election, with regular deadlines for *Rolling Stone,* some of Thompson's best writing came with the first draft approach. And though he cultivated a reputation as someone who could sit at the typewriter and bang out great reading, the truth is very different. Thompson told me he spent a lot of time making sure his work read like Hunter S. Thompson. He said his best known work, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas,* went through a number of drafts, though it certainly does not read that way. Rather, the book reads as if it was written while the action was happening, which is very much the genius of the thing. Thompson's approach seemed to mean producing an initial rough draft to get everything down on paper, then several subsequent drafts in which the basic work was edited and massaged until he was satisfied. Thompson said that he spent months doing the research and reporting that was woven into his first book, *Hell's Angels.* And he said that even for his columns at ESPN.com that he wrote in recent years, he would study up on the teams he was writing about.

So here are two successful authors with very different approaches to writing. Wolfe is highly disciplined. He knows where he wants to go and he goes there. He uses the classic outline and does heavy research before he begins writing proper. His ideas a clearly expressed and have earned him esteem as a writer. Thompson is more freeform. He has some ideas he wants to share and he does some research, then types those ideas out, coming back later to rework the writing several times until he is satisfied. His ideas are (generally) clearly expressed and he earned esteem as a writer.

The fact is, there is no right or wrong way to write. Successful writers find an approach that works for them. For some it is the disciplined approach with a careful outline and concisely crafted manuscript. For others it is a more freeform approach to get the material down on paper in any form, often without any editing. Then later, that rough draft is honed into a proper manuscript. There may also be a combination of the two approaches, or a completely different approach. The important thing is to not let the approach impede the writing. If everyone has a story to tell, then everyone has a way to tell it. Tap into that story and experiment to find out which way works best for you.

The editors of *LA&M* are here to help. One approach to getting started is to develop your idea, then query the editors about your idea and how you propose to move it toward a publishable manuscript, including a timetable for completion. It is particularly helpful to query in advance if your article is of a certain type; for example, a case study, an interview, or anything time-sensitive. Or perhaps you or your cowriters have already produced a work you want to submit. Once you are sure it meets the criteria outlined in the "Instructions to Authors" you can submit the article electronically to Editor Gregg Sapp at gsapp@uamail.albany.edu or Associate Editor Eric Shoaf at ecs@brown.edu.

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