

Ten common qualities of uncommonly effective writers

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If rarity impacts value, then good writers are worth their weight in gold. Their works are happily received by editors and enthusiastically read by audiences. Technical writers have a knee up on more mainstream writers; they come to the table with heads full of knowledge. Their task is not to conjure plots but to vend information in a concise, precise, and readable manner. And yet the fraternity of truly good technical writers is thin because too many scientists are unschooled in what it takes to be in the inner circle. Good technical writers realize that both editors and readers have rights and expectations. They live up to both. Although they write with individual styles and about different subjects, they share common qualities that make them uncommonly successful.

- 1) Successful technical writers are, first and foremost, successful scientists or engineers. Unlike journalists, who may write about subjects of which they have only secondhand knowledge gleaned through interviews, technical writers are the experts. They write about what they do and know. Strong technical writers wrap their pens around strong information that is well researched and well documented—in other words, scientifically sound.
- 2) Good technical writers are proficient in laying out both an argument and a manuscript in a manner that makes sense to the consumer. The development is clear and logical. Each piece of information is linked to that which precedes and that which follows. There are no gaps in information, argument, or presentation, and the material is well supported. Weak writers create arguments only they can follow. Strong writers create arguments even those less familiar with the discipline can follow.
- 3) Linguistics being the brick and mortar of all communication, successful technical writers understand and use the basics of grammar and the rules governing sentence structure. They possess strong vocabularies and are comfortable using them. Good writers understand that well-chosen and well-placed verbs are a bet-

ter option than strings of modifiers and prepositional phrases. They also know when to elaborate and when fewer words say more.

- 4) Personal honesty is another characteristic found in outstanding technical writers. They understand that not all technical work is suitable for publication. That which is invariably states and solves a real problem or question of interest to the audience. They would not submit unqualified work in the hope of padding their publication lists. If more writers were personally honest, journals would be smaller and more valuable.
- 5) Successful writers are humble—they try to keep ego out of their writing. Their published papers are testimonials to the science rather than to the scientist. Work submitted by these professionals lacks the whistle-tooting of writers with less hubris. Their manuscripts detour around inconsequentialities that bulk up the look of a manuscript but add little to the content. They give the facts that are pertinent and necessary and leave out the fluff.
- 6) The authors of papers shoulder a huge responsibility in producing quality material, but they are merely among the people needed to bring that project to the public. Professional colleagues, reviewers, and editors are important links of the publishing chain. Uncommon writers recognize this chain and realize that each link offers expertise that improves the presentation and readability of the finished product. Strong technical writers respect the importance of critical feedback. They approach suggested revisions without defensiveness and give respectful consideration to constructive comments.
- 7) Successful writers are sensitive to the needs of their readers. They write to be read. Talented technical writers know that if a reader cannot understand the material, then the writer has not done a sufficient job. They also seek to make reading painless.
- 8) Patience is a virtue that applies to writing. Those who cultivate this quality are more likely to produce

successful articles which are well researched, well supported, and well presented. Without a compulsion to rush the paper to press, the writer can allow a new manuscript to rest before editing it. While the article is set aside, the author can change mantles from writer to reader. Subsequent revisions are made with less emotional attachment and more perspective.

- 9) Uncommonly competent writers are permanent students. Their ongoing quest for growth crosses over the boundaries of their discipline. These professionals are interested in the world around them. Despite the academic letters that follow their names and the accolades they have received, they have not yet arrived. On the contrary, they are in the middle of a journey for knowledge that has no end.
- 10) Finally, well-received writers understand the art of persuasion. Unlike unsuccessful writers, who write believing the science will automatically sell itself simply because it is science, uncommon writers recognize that the value of their work is in its acceptance. These writers know that ideas may be met with skepticism and that readers must be persuaded. They create documents designed specifically to work through the reticence of readers. They anticipate and meet objections with explanations and turn a skeptical audience into believers.

Most writers have known the puzzlement or pain of having a manuscript rejected. They have suffered the blow-to-the-belly feeling when holding their wounded work and scouring it for answers to the questions: Why was it returned, and why should I try again? Uncommonly good writers know the answer: It was rejected because it wasn't strong enough. And they try again, because they are. ■

If you have any topics that you would like me to address in future columns, contact me and I will see what I can do.

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