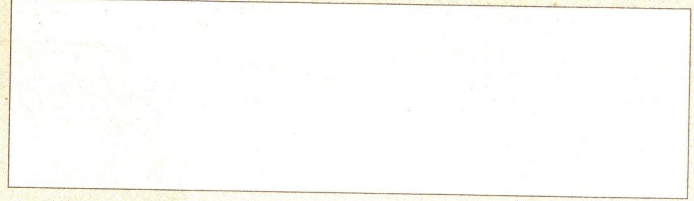


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VOL. 16 NO. 2 \$10/FEBRUARY 2009

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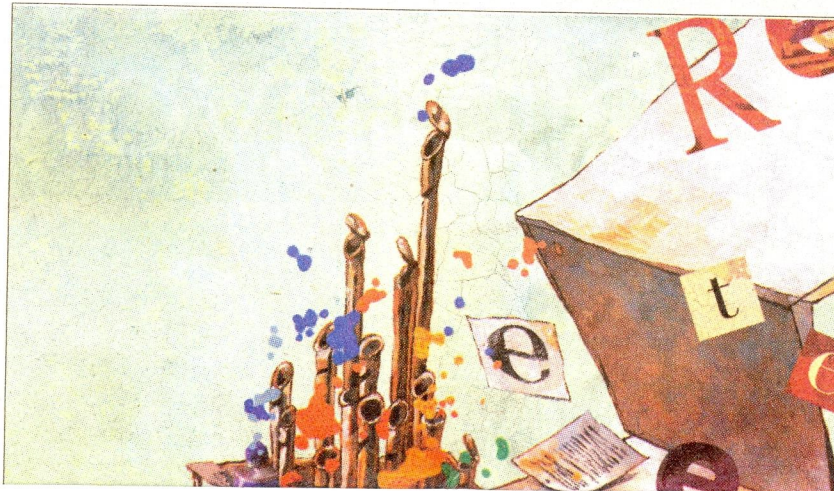
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spotlight on: writing

The write way



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What's your story?

Teaching your technical experts to write for the media

By JoAnne Castagna, Ed.D.

Eugene Urbanik, a New Jersey-area engineer for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New York District, spends his days working on hazardous-waste removal projects, like the Federal Creosote Superfund site, to keep communities informed.

To augment his field work, he frequently publishes articles describing the Corps' projects and informing communities about the efforts in their areas.

"News articles help educate the public about how the Corps is making their communities safe and putting their taxpayer money to good use," Urbanik says. "I've also been approached by colleagues and people I work with from partnering agencies who tell me they've read my published articles and enjoyed learning about my projects."

A survey of technical personnel showed that the reason others were not publishing like Urbanik was because they had not received news writing training in college and didn't think they had the skill or time. To address these concerns, the Corps' New York District had me create a news writing course, "Engineering Effective News Articles — A Course for Non-writers," for our district's technical and non-technical staff, which includes engineers, biologists, geographers and archaeologists.

The course combines information mapping news-writing techniques for easy comprehension, use and recall. We

story idea is and who your readers are. Your story should be timely and interesting to your readers, who may be colleagues or individuals outside your organization. Either way, write in language they understand.

Step 1: Write your lead. The first paragraph of a news article is called the lead because it captures a reader's attention and leads them into your story. To create the first paragraph, answer who, what, when, where, why and how with short, one-sentence answers. See example below.

Answer News Questions

Who: Corps of Engineers New York District

What: Completed Federal Creosote Superfund Site Project

Where: Manville, N.J.

Why: To clean up and remove hazardous material

When: January 2008

How: Demolition of buildings and off-site removal of hazardous material

Combine the answers to these questions to create one short paragraph. It's OK if you don't get all of the answers in the first paragraph, but try to get most of them. The other answers can be in the next paragraph. See example below:

Paragraph 1

Step 2: Brainstorm questions.

What questions would someone unfamiliar with your project ask? List possible questions by thinking about who, what, when, where, why and how. It doesn't matter how many questions you come up with or if some are redundant.

Brainstorm Questions

Who:

Who were the parties involved?

Who is the customer?

What:

What was the Corps' role?

What type of work was performed?

Where:

Where is the site location?

Why:

Why is this project needed?

When:

When did this project begin?

When will the project end?

How:

How was the work performed?

How close do residents live to the site?

Step 3: Outline your article.

Reorganize your list of questions into an article outline. Place the questions in the areas (paragraphs) in the order you feel they would best be answered.

Think of the beginning, middle and

Paragraph 2:

Questions:

Who were the parties involved in the project?

Who is the customer?

Paragraph:

This project was performed for the Environmental Protection Agency — Region 2 (EPA) and was carried out by the Corps' New York District with the support of other Corps districts including the Kansas City District, Baltimore District and the New England District.

find a place for it later.

Remember: Your quick draft really should be quick. Don't edit or check facts, just write.

Step 5: Edit. Reading your article out loud really will help you catch spelling and grammar errors and see where information needs to be moved, added or deleted.

Unnecessary information must be removed because most editors require that article submissions be no more than two or three pages, double spaced, with 12-point font. To write concisely, remember that paragraphs should be no longer than one to two sentences; sentences should be short and express a single thought; and words should be simple for readers to understand.

Make sure your article flows.

Paragraphs should transition logically.

Be conversational. However you would verbally explain something is how

Corps' New York District had me create a news writing course, "Engineering Effective News Articles — A Course for Non-writers," for our district's technical and non-technical staff, which includes engineers, biologists, geographers and archaeologists.

The course combines information mapping news-writing techniques for easy comprehension, use and recall. We follow a five-step process for quickly getting an article on paper, and discuss the importance of having a story idea, a target audience and visuals.

The following is advice from the course that may help you get your organization's experts to write publishable articles. Portions of a news article written by a Corps engineer who used this method are shown as examples.

Five-step process

Before you write, know what your

Steps to revealing your accomplishments

1. What is your story and audience?
2. Write the first paragraph by answering the 6 news questions.
3. Brainstorm questions that your readers would ask you.
4. Create an article outline by moving your questions into the areas (paragraphs) of your outline where you feel they would best be answered.
5. Write a quick draft by answering the questions you placed for each paragraph in our outline. Don't stop to edit or get information!
6. Edit your draft.
7. Include visuals that help tell your story. **T** — J.C.

Combine the answers to these questions to create one short paragraph. It's OK if you don't get all of the answers in the first paragraph, but try to get most of them. The other answers can be in the next paragraph. See example below:

Paragraph 1

This winter, the Corps' New York District completed the Federal Creosote Superfund Site project in Manville, N.J. The project involved the clean-up and off-site removal of hazardous material.

All of this information needs to be in the first paragraph because many readers skim the beginning of news articles and only read more if they are intrigued.

How close do residents live to the site?

Step 3: Outline your article.

Reorganize your list of questions into an article outline. Place the questions in the areas (paragraphs) in the order you feel they would best be answered.

Think of the beginning, middle and end of your outline as the beginning, middle and end of your project to help you decide where questions fit in the outline. For example, the beginning of your outline should answer questions about the project's history and why it was started; the middle should explain what occurred during the project; and the end should answer questions about the completion and future developments.

To help you do this, place the numbers one, two or three next to your questions to indicate whether they relate to the beginning, middle or end of your project.

Step 4: Write a quick draft.

With your outline and lead prepared, you are ready to write the rest of the article. Create the remaining paragraphs the same way you created the first, by answering the questions you've listed. It's OK to take more than one paragraph to answer the questions, and if an answer doesn't seem to fit, set it aside. You can

three pages, double spaced, with 12-point font. To write concisely, remember that paragraphs should be no longer than one to two sentences; sentences should be short and express a single thought; and words should be simple for readers to understand.

Make sure your article flows.

Paragraphs should transition logically.

Be conversational. However you would verbally explain something is how you should write about it.

Have someone else read your article, preferably someone unfamiliar with your subject because they will notice unclear writing.

Visuals

You must have visuals to communicate your story. Images that show what you explain in the text will help readers grasp your message.

Editors want high-quality digital images showing people in action, not posed. Always include captions to describe what is shown, including the full names of individuals in the photo. Give credit to the photographer or creator of a graphic. You may need written consent to use images from other organizations. **T**



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