

Book review

JOHNSTONE, M.-J. (2004) EFFECTIVE WRITING FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS: A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO GETTING PUBLISHED

Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 223 pages, references and index. Paperback, \$29.95.

Reviewed by Rick Hayes, School of Public Health, La Trobe University

When my students are preparing to give presentations, I remind them of three salient points. They are trying to *inform* people about things of importance. They will also want to *convince* the audience of their credibility. They will do this so that they can *persuade* people to think, feel or act differently. Or, they will want their audience to think, feel and act the same way yet again. That, in effect, is my criterion for a successful presentation. It is also the standard by which I judge a book. Based on that measure, this book is well worth your time to buy and read.

As a working health professional and an academic, I do my daily round of writing and the yearly quota of publications expected of a lecturer. It is not easy. Writing is a strange activity. I love to think about it and I even enjoy reading books about writing—just have a look at my bookshelves. However, I do not always like *doing* the writing. Yet, when I have done it, I am often quite pleased with what I have done. In fact, I sometimes wonder what all my fussing and fuming was for in the first place. Then, I remember. Writing well can be just plain hard work. Yet, Johnstone's book rekindled my resolve to roll up my sleeves and get stuck into this work with greater gusto.

The hard work begins before you write your article or book chapter. It even begins before you dash off your email or jot down your memo. Writing well starts with the desire to say something worth the bother of reading. It results from having engaged something of significance. Because others share our lives and concerns, they will often benefit from the insights that we have gained. But, to really have something worth saying, we have to be serious about conversing cogently. A superficial encounter and desultory communication is unlikely to be worth our own effort, much less the time of others.

It seems to me that one obstacle to good writing is a lack of confidence in our capabilities. A second closely related obstacle is the fear of looking the fool. With regard to the first issue, a friend of mine remarks that people are pretty happy to admit that they are sometimes let down by their memory. However, few people are willing to admit that their judgment is lacking. Writing for publication puts our judgment on the line publicly. With regard to the second, that same friend keeps saying, "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing poorly." For a time I just could not agree with this. Now, I am persuaded. So, I will say it again for emphasis: All good learning is, at first, failing. So, I would suggest doing this safely within smaller newsletters and internal pieces where we can keep the damage to our egos to a minimum. But, do keep building up your ability, judgment and comfort with learning. Then, move to the larger and more public pieces.

Johnstone tackles these concerns throughout her highly readable book. While the editor has not done this, I would divide her nine chapters in to three sections: Passion, Production and Promotion. The first three chapters form a primer. I use this word in two senses. In the first instance, these chapters prime the motivation pump. Secondly, the chapters review the basics of getting going and gaining momentum. The first chapter outlines both the benefits of writing and the barriers. There is no avoiding the fact that most of us are cheating others and ourselves by not getting our practice and research wisdom into print. Yet, the focus of the chapter is not on guilt. What Johnstone promotes is a realistic and revitalising evaluation of our own aspirations.

In effect, the second chapter wisely encourages the reader to line up three essential hurdles: our readers, our publishers and our selves. We need to answer a few questions: What are our goals and will they be achieved by our writing, who might benefit from our learning and how, and who handles that type of material and in what manner? Failure to think these through will lead to dissipation of effort and a growing disinterest in writing and publishing. The third chapter reviews the importance of style and demonstrates the key elements that we writers can easily forget or regretfully ignore. The chapter closes with an important section on the importance of revision. Unfortunately, this section is too brief and should be supplemented by material found in the several reference works mentioned in chapter four.

Once the pump is primed, there is a need to move into a strategic, systematic and sustainable production mode. It is not enough to want to write well. You also need the right resources, routines and reinforcement. Chapter four expands on just these concerns. Writing takes time and having the time to write takes planning. What you should plan for is regular opportunities to put into practice the routines of reading, note taking, and researching. I would like to comment briefly about the first routine. Reading great material makes for the possibility of writing good material as we begin or renew our commitment. We see what works in the way of words and we hear the nuances of a variety of voices. This helps us gain a sense for what awakens wonder and invigorates interest.

A key support to enacting your plans is a schedule that works with your other commitments. The schedule will be more helpful if you are concrete and specific about what you intend to do and when. Having this written down and displayed will also help us writers to be realistic about what can be accomplished within our present limits. Besides time, which is perhaps the most important resource, writers need references such as: a variety of dictionaries, a thesaurus, a book of quotes or two, and style guides and manuals. Local writers' market guides will aid promotion of your work. I am in the habit of collecting the various writing guidelines for the journals to which I am likely to submit my work for a similar reason. When faced with unavoidable and undue criticism, rejection and envy, we will often find that mentors, rewards and constructive feedback can reinforce our commitment.

Having laid the foundations for production in chapter four, Johnstone explores three main types of product in chapter five. The first is what might be called the professional practice piece. It is often offered in the form of a commentary, an editorial or opinion item. Yet, in some journals, it can be a longer report from the field, or a student report of activities. Secondly, there is the philosophical paper that, according to established scholarly canons, seeks to explain why things are the way they are. It is important to take note of and observe the various traditions of scholarship. Journals tend to favour one over others and may not accept a very good piece because it is not written within their editorial tradition. Finally, there are the more empirical research products. These may take on a quantitative or qualitative flavour, or both.

For each of these types, Johnstone provides some basic rules of thumb. Having done this, she then provides some sound general advice. However, while I think that this chapter is useful, especially as a rapid reference, it is the least coherent of the chapters for me. I would also have liked references to more extensive treatments of the various types. Finally, as a former editor, I think more should be made of the importance of having just one big idea per piece. Limiting yourself to one well-supported idea is more difficult than it seems. If you discover that you really have two or three key ideas, either find a larger idea the pulls them all together, or write more than one piece.

A final chapter in this middle section of the book revisits the barriers to production. More careful signposting and better grouping of the material would have provided for a stronger argument. We can break the concerns down into issues relating to writers, writings and writing. Writers can develop difficulties with generating ideas, overcoming writer's block, procrastination, and collaboration with others. Useful advice is offered for each of these difficulties. Three types of writings are also commented upon. They include commissioned, converted and conference writings. In my opinion, beginning and returning writers will not have to deal with the first initially. It is typically the well-established authors who are asked to provide "tailor made" materials.

However, the second and third types are very important ways for people to get into the publication game. Johnstone raises important considerations for authors contemplating the conversion of assignments or theses into material for wider publication. And, I think her advice about preparing a conference paper as an article first and, then, highlighting the main points at the conference is very sound. It is much harder to work it the other way around. The writing category brings us back to some of the things that writers typically wrestle with in terms of mechanics, style and strategies for writing well. While these are helpful reminders, they have been covered earlier to a degree.

I have discovered that getting on and staying on the publishing track can be difficult. The material that Johnstone has covered to this point in her very personable style gets us two thirds of the way. I suspect that for many of us it is this last section of the book that we are most likely to ignore. Some see “Big-noting” as undesirable. If done to excess, it probably is counter-productive. But, as a colleague once commented having seen how many of my own publications I had referenced in an article: If you don't promote yourself, who will? I have used conferences and seminars to get my material before a wider audience. I have also used professional development activities. And, I have used the media to make my work known. According to the first chapter of this last section, these are all important ways of getting noticed and, therefore, read. Getting read widely can create a demand for more writing.

But, getting read raises issues relating to rights and responsibilities. Those of use who are academics are often concerned about our freedom to communicate our insights and concerns. This is especially important when there is a need to challenge ways of thinking and acting that benefit some at the expense of others. However, all writers need to consider a wide variety of ethical issues. Since she draws upon the writings of such people as the late Brazilian adult educationalist, Paulo Freire, much of what Johnstone says about this resonates with me.

She suggests that writing can honour, liberate and integrate people and their ideas. However, our writing can also dishonour, imprison and corrupt. Therefore, I concur with Johnstone that health professionals should cultivate four virtues in this regard: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. In addition to ethics, writers need to take into account legal concerns. Three important areas for our reflection relate to contractual obligations, copyright considerations and potential defamation situations. This may all seem daunting to the new or returning writer. However, a number of opportunities for support are outlined at the end of this chapter.

The final chapter is a postscript. Johnstone is a very widely published and respected author in our field. She offers two reasons for why she writes. One is professional, and the other is personal. Her professional passion has been ethics. To make a difference in this area in our region has meant writing and publishing. Her personal passion is freedom. And, for all its dilemmas and demands, writing is a way to be creative and committed to making a difference. If you want to communicate your passion and create the possibility of greater freedom for others and yourself, this book might just get you into the game for the first time, or again. Read it. Use it. Pass it on.