

Unit 1 : Appointing writers

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Introduction

An editor may be responsible for any of the following activities, all of which take place before the writer produces any text:

- selecting and appointing writers
- managing a writing schedule
- briefing writers
- training writers
- helping writers to start work.

These tasks involve three kinds of activities: editing, administration and personal contact with the writer. Unit 1 deals with the first of these topics.

When you have worked through this unit, you should be able to:

- * list and evaluate different ways of identifying course writers;
- * prepare a job description for a new writer;
- * define criteria for selecting writers and choose between them;
- * negotiate a contract with a writer.

Some editors will be closely involved in selecting and appointing writers. Others will only have an important role at a later stage. Whatever your role, read the unit right through, but decide how much work to put into it in the light of the requirements of your job.

You may need between 2 and 3 hours to complete the unit. Assignment A at the end of Unit 2 contains work based on both Units 1 and 2.

1. Identifying writers

Some distance-teaching institutions appoint full-time course writers. These may be permanent, on secondment or on a short-term contract for as long as it takes to complete a course, perhaps for one or two years. Full-time writers may have other duties besides writing. They may, for example, be required to mark correspondence assignments, prepare radio scripts, commission outside writers, and edit their materials.

Some institutions appoint part-time writers. Sometimes a university will require its lecturers to write courses for external students in addition to their regular teaching. Such people work part time as course writers, but do so on a permanent basis. In this case, the unit has little or no choice whom to appoint as writers, although it may be possible to use only the more promising and enthusiastic lecturers. Sometimes an institution is free to appoint any suitable applicant as a part-time writer, whether one of its own staff or an outsider. Such writers are commissioned to write only those courses or sections of courses which match their expertise.

Many institutions have a flexible policy towards the appointment of writers, and have a mix of both full-time and part-time writers. Whatever the policy, it is never easy to identify good writers. People who are good class teachers are not necessarily good at writing, and few candidates for a writing job can present you with texts they have already written, to help you choose. So how do you set about finding people who can do the job?

One way of identifying writers is through advertising. An advertisement could be placed in newspapers or magazines that normally carry details of teaching jobs or in a teachers' journal.

Advertising can give you a wide choice of applicants. However, it is seldom, on its own, the best way of finding writers. For one thing, if you need a large number of new part-time writers each year, advertising and the administrative work involved in processing applications will be expensive. For another, people know so little about the job of writing for distance education that suitable candidates often do not realise the job is one they could do. Finally, in many countries the educational establishment is so small that it is not difficult, and often more efficient, to identify writers informally by asking people. You can ask colleagues, other educational contacts, or even friends for suggestions for writers. Ministry of Education subject advisers or inspectors, for example, may be able to suggest the names of exceptionally good teachers, or a senior academic may put you in touch with a promising young lecturer.

So far, I have described this process as though one person, the editor, has to find writers. There are two useful ways of broadening the search. One is to appoint an advisory committee for each subject area or each course. The members of the committee would be drawn mainly from relevant bodies outside your institution. The committee would advise on policy and activity in the subject area. One of its jobs could be to help with the identification of writers. At a later stage of course development it would also provide academic assessment of the materials. The other idea is to appoint a chairperson as the first member of a course team. You can invite someone who is eminent in the field, and would oversee the academic development of the course. He or she would not necessarily write any units, but would have personal contacts and so could help identify writers.

EXERCISE 1

How does your institution set about identifying new writers? Are you satisfied with these methods? Do you have any new ideas? Make a note below of ideas to try out or to discuss with your colleagues.

(10 minutes)

Comment

It is usual to feel anxious in case you appoint the wrong person. Of course, it is impossible to choose good writers all the time, but if you are careful to define the qualities and experience you are looking for, you may make a good choice most of the time. The next sections, therefore, are about narrowing down the field and choosing between writers.

2. Preparing a job description for a writer

When you are seeking a course writer, you will have to describe the sort of person you want, and the work you want the person to do. A written description of the job is useful in three ways:

1. It defines the duties of the writer, and the conditions under which he or she will have to fulfil those duties.
2. It will help applicants to decide whether or not they can do the job, by describing the kinds of experience and qualifications that you are looking for.
3. Once a person is appointed to the job, it will form a basis of agreement over what is to be done.

EXERCISE 2

Imagine you are seeking someone to write a correspondence course on teaching methods for in-service training of unqualified primary school teachers. What experience and qualifications would your ideal candidate have? List your ideas below.

(10 minutes)

Comment

I would look for someone with experience of teaching in a primary school; of training primary teachers, particularly mature trainees; of writing instructional materials; of tutoring by correspondence; and with interest in innovative educational methods. The ideal person would also be familiar with current approaches to the curriculum. I would be more interested in the applicants' experience than in their formal qualifications, although qualifications provide guidance on competence.

Few, if any, applicants would have all these characteristics! I would therefore give priority to a teacher trainer who had, in the past, taught in a primary school. I would also look for a strong interest in teaching mature adults, and a lively attitude towards innovation. That is, I would pay more attention to their teaching experience and potential than to their writing experience, although some writing experience would be desirable. Most important would be a sense of commitment.

2.1 An advertisement

A job description goes into some detail about a job, while an advertisement attempts in a few words to describe the job and the sort of person you are seeking. We will consider each in turn.

EXERCISE 3

The advertisement below is for a course writer on a two-year contract. Read it carefully and analyse the information it contains.

- a. Imagine you are considering applying for the job. Does it tell you all you need to know?
- b. Imagine you are the employer. Will the advertisement attract the right kind of people?

There is no need to write your answer.

WRITER

People's Extension Centre seeks correspondence course writer(s) for new course on National History. Applicants should have:

- a. at least three years experience of teaching the subject, preferably to adults as well as children;
- b. experience in writing educational materials;
- c. fluent English style.

Further details available from Administrator, PEC. Payment on fee basis. Applications (no forms) showing how the applicant meets the three criteria to PEC within 28 days of the appearance of this advertisement.

(10 minutes)

Comment

The advertisement does not say how much work will be involved, how long the job is for or how much the fee is. However, the Centre has been explicit about the sort of person they are seeking. I can see that the way I write my application will give me an opportunity to show whether I can satisfy the second two requirements.

As an employer, I would be able to use the applications to make a short list, assessing people's writing efficiency and ability from their self-descriptions. I would also feel that anyone who sent in an application late, unless they had a good reason such as illness, would not be reliable in meeting deadlines. But my insistence on 3 years experience of teaching the subject may exclude some good candidates.

An advertisement can only contain bare essentials. The one above, however, could be improved with a few minor amendments.

2.2 A job description

A job description should be fuller than an advertisement, and should contain the following:

1. Essential qualifications/desirable experience: the description would be on the lines developed in Exercise 2, according to the needs of the course concerned.
2. A description of the distance-teaching programme: its syllabus and aims, its components (other media as well as print) and a profile of the students for whom it is intended.

3. A description of the writer's duties: the number and length of units to be written; the writer's role in course planning; any responsibilities for course revision; any duties other than writing units, such as scriptwriting for radio, preparing model answers, or writing a handbook for tutors.
4. Specification of the time allowed: you may be offering a limited-term contract, or may have a deadline by which writing must be complete.
5. Facilities and personnel available: say whether the writer will have the services of a secretary or typist. The description should make clear the facilities available. Also, he or she needs to know whether there is a course team, or whether the writer is working individually. Details will need to be discussed at the interview.
6. Pay: the pay must, of course, be stated, and it must be made clear on what basis payment will be made (a salary, or fees per unit completed).

Both part-time and full-time writers need job descriptions. You don't need to compose a complete job description for each new employee. Probably you will have available a short description of your organisation and its work which is given to anyone who applies for a job, and you will have a general job description for writers which has gaps to be filled for specific posts or courses. The contract of employment given to new writers will clarify the nature of the work, and this will be dealt with in a later section.

3. Selecting a writer

How do you decide whom to appoint? Conducting an interview is difficult. This section suggests some points to discuss.

1. Writer's background and experience:

a. academic: does she* have a reliable grasp of the subject? Her qualifications may help you decide this. You can also take up her references, and assess her publications, if any, on the subject.

b. teaching: if she has taught only for a short while, you will need to check with referees. If she has been teaching a long time, check that she has made suitable moves during her career to positions of greater responsibility. If not, try to find out why. Is it for a good reason, or because she is not very good and cannot get promotion? Find out how far she is likely to adapt her teaching to her students. If she has only taught children, what ideas does she have about teaching adults?

c. writing: if she has already produced teaching materials, assess and discuss them with her. If not, try to assess potential. Assess her skill in presenting her application. If possible, ask her to prepare a small sample of text. Some organisations ask writers to prepare a sample unit, for a small fee, before making a firm appointment. Another idea is to run a short training workshop for potential writers, and then appoint the best ones (see Unit 2).

* In this manual, writers will usually be referred to as 'she' and others as 'he'.

d. distance education: you need to find out how far the writer is likely to understand the needs and difficulties of distance learners. Some people will have taught at a distance before and these are clearly strong candidates for the job. Some people will have studied by correspondence themselves, others will have tried some kind of independent study from books or the radio.

2. Reliability: it is essential to appoint someone who is likely to keep to schedules. Does she seem businesslike and efficient?

3. Expectations:

a. Is she applying because she thinks it is any easy job? Tell her that the job is demanding, and observe how she reacts.

b. Is she prepared to undergo training and accept criticism? Explain that drafts will be assessed and rewriting will be necessary and observe how she reacts.

4. Time available (for part-time writers): give a rough estimate of the writing time, and ask her to describe how it will fit in with other commitments. Discuss together whether the writing remains a realistic proposition.

5. Accessibility (for part-time writers): if there are to be course-team meetings, will she be able to attend? Or will travel be too difficult, or costly?

These guidelines will help you to prepare a list of questions to ask at an interview. Before an interview, all those interviewing should have a briefing meeting and agree on a list of questions to ask all applicants. At least two people, such as the head of department and senior editor, should conduct the interviews. An interviewing panel could also include one or two other people, such as subject specialists from the advisory committee, but should not be so big that it inhibits the candidates. Three is an ideal size and five the maximum.

EXERCISE 4

Imagine you want to appoint a part-time writer of a correspondence course in mathematics for adults. The students will take the exam usually taken by schoolchildren at the end of secondary school. Below you will find brief descriptions of four applicants. Whom would you appoint?

Mrs A: a foreign businessman's wife, who expects to remain in the country for three years more. She has been here a year already and during that year worked as a part-time volunteer teaching English language to adults in evening classes. She prepared some work cards for these classes, and has sent them in with her application. You think they show she has promise as a writer. Before she came abroad she taught maths in a secondary school for 10 years, and marked public examination papers on three occasions. At present she has no paid employment, and lives in the capital near your headquarters.

Dr B: a practising secondary teacher for 30 years. For twenty years he has been deputy head of a large school. Most of his work is administrative, but he teaches some examination classes. He also spent three years some time ago lecturing in a teacher-training college; this was his only experience teaching adults. He wrote a textbook on maths for secondary pupils ten years ago and it is now in its 7th printing. He is due to retire in a year, and wants to write this course so he can keep in touch. He lives in a suburb half-an-hour's drive from your office.

Mr C: a young man, who has been teaching maths for four years in a secondary school in a remote rural town. His headmaster describes him as a dynamic teacher, full of ideas, and is very pleased with pupils' exam results. He has no writing experience, and his application was clearly completed in rather a hurry. His interest in writing the course comes from his voluntary work in a local youth group, and his growing awareness of the employment difficulties faced by unqualified young people.

Miss D: has taught maths in a rural secondary school for seven years. A year ago she had to leave her job to look after an ailing parent in the capital. At present she has no paid job, and is supported by relatives. She has an excellent reference from her former head. She has no writing experience, and no experience teaching adults, but in order to upgrade her teaching qualification to a degree, she is currently studying a correspondence course, and has made some perceptive comments on it. She misses teaching, and wants to write the course in order to keep in touch.

Write your choice below, giving reasons:

(15 minutes)

Comment

I will discuss each applicant in turn. First, Mrs A. She has plenty of teaching experience, some writing experience, and some experience of adult education. She also has plenty of time, and appears to have no need of a full-time job for the money. There are two major drawbacks: first, she is a foreigner, has spent only a little time in the country and has no first-hand experience of the educational system; second, it is just possible that she might be recalled to her country suddenly, perhaps if a close relative is ill or her husband's business collapses.

Dr B has experience in his favour. It is possible, however, that he will have difficulty in adapting his thinking and writing to the needs of adult students. It is also unlikely that he will be able to pay much attention to his writing until his retirement starts, in a year's time.

Mr C is relatively inexperienced, but sounds a lively and interesting person. His hasty application unfortunately gives no clue as to his writing potential, but it will be worth seeking some further evidence on

this. It is a disadvantage that he works in such a remote place.

Miss D has good teaching experience, but no writing experience and no experience teaching adults. Her attitude towards the job is, however, promising, and she appears to be reliable and enthusiastic. She has practical experience of using distance materials, and has some ideas about writing as a result. She has sufficient time at the moment, but if she had the opportunity to return to full-time teaching she would probably do so.

It is difficult to decide which applicant is best. All are clearly possible. I think my order of priority would be as follows:

1. Miss D. She has the right kind of commitment and a willingness to take on a challenge. Even if she did return to full-time work, I think she would complete her writing. I think she would produce a competent course, although perhaps not exceptionally good.
2. Mr C. He presents himself as imaginative and enthusiastic. I would like him to produce some sample material before making a final decision. His units may need a lot of editing, but the work may be worth it, if he writes with the sparkle he clearly brings to his classes.
3. Mrs A. I'm unhappy about her lack of local experience. If she had a local co-writer, she would be ideal.
4. Dr B. The writing must start before Dr B's retirement. In any case, can he adapt to distance education? Although he is a successful textbook writer, he has been in school for 30 years. It is difficult to change after so long. If someone who knows him well can convince me he is adaptable, I will appoint him. Otherwise, it is a risk.

I certainly could not make up my mind before interviewing all the candidates.

4. Negotiating a contract

Once the offer of a job has been made and accepted, the employer and writer have to reach a precise agreement on what is expected of each. Such an agreement is normally formalised in a contract of employment.

Your institution probably has a standard contract for writers. If not, the example below may help you to develop one. Contracts are usually modelled on those used by book publishers, but adapted to suit an educational institution. You need to examine the contract used in your institution, so that you are sure of the rights and duties of both parties.

EXERCISE 5

Here, as an example, is a contract used in England for a part-time writer. As you read it, try to work out what rights are given to the writer and what to the institution. Try not to be put off by the formal legal language. There is no need to write anything; just read the contract and my comments carefully.

(15 minutes)

AN AGREEMENT date 19

made between the (the college) of (address)
and (the Author) of (address)

The contract starts with the date, and the names of those agreeing. A separate contract needs to be signed by each writer, if there are several.

WHEREBY IT IS AGREED as follows:-

1. The Author shall write a course (defined in the Schedule) and shall deliver the typescript to the College on or before the day of 19

Clause 1 A full description of the writing job is given in the Schedule at the end. The writer is specifically asked to deliver typed material, and the deadline for delivery is given.

2. The Author hereby warrants that he/she has not granted any licences or rights in respect of the course unit to any person company or firm and that he/she is the owner of the copyright of any illustrations or material in any medium provided in accordance with this agreement.

Clause 2 This asks the writer to affirm that he or she has not given permission for anyone else to use the material, and has not used anyone else's material. This means that if the institution comes across the material published elsewhere, they can accuse the publisher of infringing copyright. If, on the other hand, the writer is dishonest and 'borrows' large amounts of material from another publication, then the institution can say that the writer is responsible and the institution published the material in good faith.

3. In consideration of the sum of £ to be paid by the College to the Author after approval of the completed typescript by the College the Author assigns to the College the copyright in the course units for all purposes.

Clause 3 specifies the fee and says it will only be paid after the typescript has been approved (not just received). Once it is approved, the copyright belongs to the institution.

4. The Author shall not publish or license the publication in any form of the course units or any of them or any part of them after they have been approved by the College in accordance with Clause 3.

5. The College or such other person as may be authorized by the College may make such alterations to the course units by way of editing punctuation spelling abbreviation grammar or otherwise as the College or such person in his discretion shall think fit.

6. The Author shall at no expense to the College on receipt from the College of the proofs of the course units check the proofs for errors or omissions and shall return them to the College within days signed.

7. The Author will at the request of the College and at his own expense make such changes or corrections in the course unit as the College may require PROVIDED that such request is made within a period of 12 months from the acceptance of the course unit by the College.

Clause 4 complements clause 2 and covers copy-right after approval of the writing.

Clause 5 allows the editor or anyone else appointed by the College to change the text, without necessarily having the writer's approval.

Clause 6 asks the author to check proofs for no extra fee, and implies that if the proofs are not returned by a given date, the writer will have no right to complain about errors.

Clause 7 says that the writer must revise the units as necessary, and for no extra fee, provided the request is made within a year after the acceptance of the units.

8. The College will at its own cost reproduce circulate and distribute the course.

Clause 8 says the institution will pay for printing and distribution, but the clause does not oblige the institution to go ahead with printing. It only says it will pay if it does print.

9. The College will bear the reasonable travelling and subsistence expenses in respect of any journeys undertaken by the Author at the request of the College.

Clause 9 says that expenses are only paid if the institution has approved the journey in advance.

10. No fee shall be payable whether by way of quantum meruit or otherwise in respect of any course units delivered after the date stated in paragraph 1.

Clause 10 says if you are late with your units, you do not get paid.

THE SCHEDULE

The schedule is filled in to include all the material the writer must provide. This contract wrongly omits a heading for work on course planning and outline.

Subject matter:

Number and description of units:

Illustrations:

Students' work assignments:

Other teaching aids:

Signed
for(College)
Date
Signed (writer)
Date

Comment

From the institution's point of view this contract is useful. It protects the institution against some of the things that can go wrong. For example, if a writer does not produce the course by the given date, you are free to appoint someone else. In practice, it is usually more satisfactory to arrange the schedule so that units are due in batches, and payment made on acceptance of each batch. Sometimes a writer completes units, but they are too bad to be accepted. In this case the institution has no obligation to pay, although in practice a college and writer may agree on a nominal payment for unsuitable work. Clause 5 allows the institution to amend a text if the writer is unwilling to do it.

On questions of legal responsibility for the content of the text, the contract is rather obscure. If the writer misled the institution about copyright material, the institution, as publisher, would still be held responsible in a law court. In addition, nothing is said about libel and other forms of misrepresentation.

From the writer's point of view this is not a very satisfactory contract. A contract is meant to provide a framework for an agreement, and both sides can negotiate modifications. But this contract gives the impression the employer does not trust the writer at all. Notice, first, that the writer only gets one fee, however often the course is reprinted, however many copies are sold. A royalty provision, that is a percentage payment on each copy over a certain number, would improve matters. Then clause 10 is very severe, especially if you read it together with clause 3, on approval. There is no indication of the procedure used for approval, nor of how long it takes. Suppose I sign a contract on January 1st 1985, and I deliver my units on the agreed date, January 1st 1986. I then discover that the units have to be assessed by certain committees for approval, and that will take 6 months. I am eventually paid on July 1st 1986, and I now realise that the institution has a right to ask me to change the units up to July 1st 1987. Meanwhile, under clause 6, the institution can make any changes it likes to what I have written.

This is a poor deal for the writer and the conditions need relaxing a little. There also needs to be a clause which describes what happens in the case of disputes. As things stand, the writer is at the mercy of the employer.

Clause 8 is also unnecessarily favourable to the institution. There needs to be some aid for the writer if the college decides not to publish. For example, the contract could allow the writer to buy back the copyright, if the institution does not publish within a certain time.

Finally, clause 9 only covers travelling expenses. It should also at least cover postage and telephone, and might also include stationery and typing expenses. The clause could simply be broadened with the phrase "and such other expenses as shall be agreed".

We can see now the importance of the form a contract takes, and the difficulty of writing a satisfactory contract. An institution must guard against having to pay for unsatisfactory work, and the writer needs protection too.

EXERCISE 6

What issues are important for your writers or your institution? Jot down a list. Payment, copyright and time limits are bound to be on your list. Then go through your institution's standard contract for writers, or reread the one in this unit, and consider how far it deals with the points on your list.

(20 minutes)

Summary

This unit has considered the selection and appointment of writers. I have suggested that you should, where necessary:

- . evaluate the methods used for identifying writers
- . define the qualities and skilled needed in each case
- . consider criteria for choosing between writers
- . evaluate a contract as a means of controlling and protecting both employer and writer

The next unit is concerned mainly with training writers.