

# Unit 2 : Preparing to write

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## Introduction

This unit discusses the editor's role in:

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

The activities described in this unit may take place over the same period as course planning, covered in Unit 3.

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

- \* set up records;
- \* set a writing schedule;
- \* brief a writer on the schedule;
- \* organise training for a writer;
- \* appreciate the importance of establishing a good relationship with a writer;
- \* describe how to persuade a writer to start writing.

As with Unit 1, some editors will be closely involved in these preparatory stages. Everyone should find it useful to read the unit right through, although some readers may not need to complete the exercises.

You may need about 2 hours to work through the unit, and a further hour or two to complete Assignment A.

## 1. Keeping records

Once a contract is signed, a course will begin to take shape. This is an appropriate time to discuss filing. Everything to do with each course must be filed accessibly. As the course develops, others besides the editor may need to use the files or want questions answered - the finance department, tutorial advisors, or student advisers. Usually, institutions give each course a reference number, and this is used for filing all material on the course. The file, however, will need many subdivisions, such as correspondence with writers, course outlines, schedules, information on supplementary materials such as textbooks and copyright letters. Some of the material, such as drafts of the units - and there will be two or three of these, will be very bulky and unsuitable for filing in standard office cabinets. Set up a comprehensive system from the beginning so that you do not have to spend time sorting out a muddle later on. Open a subfile for each topic or kind of correspondence, and designate a suitable large area of shelving for the draft course materials. It will help considerably later on if all material is in good order and easy to find.

## 2. Writing a schedule

One of the first subfiles you open will be on production schedules. A schedule tells you when each unit should be ready for each stage of the production process. There is an example on the next page.

You have to work out a tentative outline schedule before you brief the writer on his or her schedule. The schedule in the example shows the material is due from the writer in 3 batches, February 1, March 15 and May 1. You ought to have some idea of the schedule before agreeing on a deadline with a writer, but this is not always possible as the date may have to be accommodated to the writer's circumstances.

You work out a rough schedule by working backwards, if you already have a target date for sending the course to students. In the sample schedule, the course is due to go to students on December 1. You need an approximation of the total number of pages and the number of course volumes, and then you estimate, or get estimates from the relevant departments, the time needed for each process:

- printing, binding
- design, typing, proof reading, correcting
- copy editing
- illustrating
- editing
- rewriting
- assessment
- writing
- preparing course outline
- briefing/training writers

If the course is being produced in several volumes, you can make a table and fill in dates for each batch.

It is better to fill in the times backwards, because operations like printing and typing are more predictable in their timing. You can calculate, for example, that typing a certain number of pages will take a minimum number of days. You will then have to fit the less predictable jobs like rewriting into the remaining time available.

PEOPLES EDUCATION CENTRE  
COURSE SCHEDULE

Course title: Childcare..... Code: C.H.S...

Number of units: 12.....

Writers: Mrs. Rosamunda Mtaba and  
Doctor Freda Bunn.....

Arrangements for briefing: Meeting with editor 21 October (1/2 day)

Course outline due: November 30.....

|                   | <u>Dates due</u>    |                    |                     |
|-------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
|                   | <u>Batch 1</u>      | <u>Batch 2</u>     | <u>Batch 3</u>      |
|                   | <u>Units 1-4</u>    | <u>Units 5-8</u>   | <u>Units 9-12</u>   |
| Written           | <u>February 1</u>   | <u>March 15</u>    | <u>May 1</u>        |
| Assessed          | <u>March 1</u>      | <u>April 15</u>    | <u>June 1</u>       |
| Edited            | <u>March 15</u>     | <u>May 1</u>       | <u>June 15</u>      |
| Rewritten         | <u>May 1</u>        | <u>May 15</u>      | <u>August 1</u>     |
| Illustrated       | <u>July 1</u>       | <u>July 15</u>     | <u>September 1</u>  |
| Copy edited       | <u>July 1</u>       | <u>July 15</u>     | <u>September 1</u>  |
| Typeset           | <u>July 15</u>      | <u>August 1</u>    | <u>September 15</u> |
| Proof-read        | <u>August 1</u>     | <u>August 15</u>   | <u>October 1</u>    |
| Corrected         | <u>August 15</u>    | <u>September 1</u> | <u>October 15</u>   |
| Made-up           | <u>September 15</u> | <u>November 1</u>  | <u>December 15</u>  |
| Printed and bound | <u>November 15</u>  | <u>January 1</u>   | <u>February 15</u>  |

As you make your estimates, always allow more time than the minimum. If the printer tells you the jobs will take 3 weeks, write down 4 weeks. If you usually take a day to edit a unit, write down a day and a half. Generous estimates will make room for delays and miscalculations that are inevitable.

If you cannot fit all the steps into the time available, you may still be able to complete the course in time. First, see if the publication deadline can be changed. If not, consider rescheduling production into smaller batches; for example, it may be possible to get each unit approved separately as it is written, so it can go straight into production. There are also other measures to take in an emergency, such as employing extra typists so that several can work on a course at once and get it done very fast. Such emergency measures are costly. If the schedule looks unworkable, warn colleagues and try to find a way of avoiding crisis.

## EXERCISE 1

This exercise requires a little research work. If you are new to editing, it will probably come as a shock to discover the length of the course production process. Choose a course that your institution has recently produced and, copying the list of processes in the sample course schedule, fill in as many dates as you can between the date the writers started work and the date the last unit was printed. If your institution has not yet produced any materials try to get the information from another local establishment, such as a local publisher.

(about 1 hour)

### Comment

Everyone will have schedules with a different time-distribution. Timing depends a great deal on whether you have internal facilities for various processes or must use outsiders and fit in with their schedules. It also depends to some extent on the type of production facilities you use. Generally, anyone who can produce any distance-learning material within a year is working very fast, while two years is a reasonable average development and production time for one year's part-time study materials for adults. Suppose, for example, you are developing a lengthy course for two years of correspondence study, you would probably have the first half ready at the end of two years, and the rest after another year. The overall planning, development of outline, and developing the first, sample material could take a year. The development and production of each half of the course could then take a further year. The sample schedule we looked at earlier in the unit, showed about 13 months from the briefing meeting with the writer to the printing of the first batch, and a further 3 months till the course (a short one) is complete.

### 3. Briefing the writer on the schedule

New writers often have little idea of what is involved in production, and a short explanation will help them accept the deadline, and open up discussions on how they can submit a steady flow of material. Explain the constraints imposed by a schedule, and emphasise that the dates given are not arbitrary, but the last possible dates for getting material ready for the students.

You will also have to explain the process your institution uses for approving materials, including academic vetting and trial runs. Explain what you as an editor will be doing, introduce the writer to the idea of rewriting drafts, and discuss how you will best be able to work in partnership.

At an initial briefing, you must bring up three other matters. First, ask the writer what resources she needs. You may be able to help by providing some textbooks which she will need as resource material, or some samples of distance-learning materials in a related subject. Second, ask whether she is planning to base the material on a textbook which all students must have, or provide a kit, or any other supplementary material, or include any copyright material in the course. You have to check immediately whether such accompanying materials are available for use, before she has got too far ahead with the units. Finally, you must ask her if there are any problems. A common one is typing facilities; a writer may be uncertain

how to manage the typing, and you may be able to help with arrangements.

## EXERCISE 2

You meet a newly appointed writer who assures you that she will complete the writing in four weeks and does not appear to be listening seriously to what you say. What would you do? Think about this for a few moments before you read on.

(3 minutes)

### Comment

This writer does not understand the complexity of the job. You have a difficult situation to deal with, but you must not accept the proposal that everything will be completed so rapidly. Persuade the writer to send you a draft of the first section of the text, and write no more until she has received comments on this draft. You could also send the writer a written record of all the points raised in the discussion, in case she really was not listening.

### 4. Training writers

All those new to writing for distance education need some sort of training. The nature and extent of that training depends largely on two factors: first, the writer's background and, second, the facilities (personnel, finance, and so on) that your institution has access to. Your decisions on training will also be affected by the amount of work a person is to do for you; you cannot offer an extensive training programme to someone who is commissioned to write only a short unit.

There is no room here to describe in detail the content of a training programme for writers. You can follow this up by studying for yourself the companion volume to this manual, Writing for Distance Education. My article\* reproduced below defines the essential minimum for training, and discusses some methods.

#### Tell me how to write

*The variety of attitudes and experience course writers bring to their task requires a flexible training program*

Course writers today demand training. Gone are the days when the novice writer could confidently set about the task of writing with only minimal guidance. Gone are the days of experiment, when the enthusiastic writer would, unaided, become aware of the problems of teaching by correspondence and creatively adapt his or her classroom techniques to teaching at a distance. Gone are the days when the

\* From Learning at a Distance: a world perspective, the proceedings of the International Council for Correspondence Education 1982 conference, edited by J S Daniel, M A Stroud and J R Thompson (Edmonton: Athabasca University/ICCE 1982, pp.227-229)

intervention of an editor or educational technologist was considered a wrongful intrusion into the preserve of the teacher.

Ten or more years ago, at least in my experience then at the National Extension College, writers did not expect to be trained. With better writers this was not a problem. They would produce good lesson drafts to start with, and tended to welcome discussion of their work. With weaker writers, the only acceptable form of training was tactful suggestion and quite often, such advice was not followed.

This experience was, I suspect, typical in any country where people were only just beginning to take distance teaching seriously. That time is now past. Today, distance teaching is an acceptable form of education. Those without experience do not attempt to struggle alone. They look to institutions or people with experience to provide advice and training.

#### How does a new writer feel?

First, there are the confident writers: "Just tell me all about the techniques I need and I'll have no trouble in applying them." They assume there are a few simple rules to be learned. They are shocked and surprised when they are presented with a challenge to their assumptions about teaching. They are forced to rethink how they should present their subject. This process contains an implicit questioning of the effectiveness of all their teaching. What they want is a quick guide to the theory and practice of distance teaching. What they need is to learn to think very carefully about what they teach and how they do it.

Any good teacher is, of course, prepared to do this. The shock to the course writer comes because a mystique has built up around the idea of distance teaching. Writers expect, and look for, a new kind of challenge. They discover instead that the major requirement is a familiar one, the hard slog of teaching to a high standard; and, worse, their teaching no longer takes place in the privacy of the classroom or lecture hall, but is open to the scrutiny of their peers and a variety of course development personnel. Their initial confidence is often severely shaken. Their training must, indeed, bring about this disruption, but it must also go on to restore confidence.

Second, there are writers who lack confidence: "I've never done any writing and I'm worried about it." The ones who admit to this worry are easy to help, with encouragement and constructive criticism. The difficult ones - and there are plenty of them - are those who don't like to acknowledge that they are worried. If a college provides only informal training, the problem may come to light when the deadline for submitting lessons arrives, and nothing has been written.

Third, there are those who resist training. There are still a few who believe it is quite unnecessary. If you've ever attended a writer's workshop, you may have met the sulky-faced person who sleeps ostentatiously in the back row. Others pay lip-service: "Give me the right books, I'll read them and get on with it." They are nevertheless determined to do things their own way. Sometimes, with patience and luck, they become more receptive; in other cases, the production of a course becomes a stormy and unpleasant experience for all involved.

There are, of course, other attitudes, but these three are typical and each presents training difficulties. The problem for the trainer is to build on the writer's initial receptivity; and to do so without destroying enthusiasm. In those cases where the writer has a negative attitude, the trainer has to attempt to break through the barrier.

## What kind of training?

I have dwelt on the question of attitudes because I believe it crucially affects the content and conduct of training. Institutions can only provide limited training, and a training programme should therefore be designed to train writers in essentials. Opportunities for training may be limited for many practical reasons; a course may be needed in a hurry, money may be short, or trainers may be unavailable. But perhaps the most serious constraint is the one imposed by the writers themselves: they are seldom prepared to devote much time to training.

However, we must accept that, particularly for part-time writers, time is important. People want to get on with the job. This implies that a training programme should be efficient and selective. Our objective should be pragmatic rather than perfectionist: that is, to train writers to be competent. And the training needs to be built round the writers' experience and to take into account their attitudes.

### A minimum curriculum for training

A typical new course writer has considerable experience of teaching in class but will know little about distance education, and have little or no experience of writing. For such people, a minimum curriculum should cover the following 6 topics:

1. What it is like to learn at a distance. In particular, the writer must consider the study environment, motivation and the needs of the group of students he is to teach.
2. Planning and writing by objectives. Most teachers have only a vague notion of objectives and their use. They need to clarify their ideas and, in particular, learn to write precise objectives.
3. Relating activities to objectives. The next step after writing objectives is to provide activities to test that they have been achieved. This is not obvious to those who are unfamiliar with teaching by objectives.
4. Providing constant feedback. Teachers need to learn to translate into print the normal classroom interaction. They need to be shown why frequent self-assessment questions are necessary, and need guidance on devising a variety of such questions.
5. Writing clearly. First attempts at writing are often unnecessarily heavy and complex. Writers need to learn to write simply and clearly. They also need to learn to write thorough but clear instructions.
6. How the course will work. Writers, particularly external ones, cannot be expected to understand the administration of a course. They need to know exactly what kind of support services are available to students, and how they operate. In particular, they need to understand how best to use a tutor's assessment skills, if a tutor is provided.

In addition to these six essentials, training should include some writing, either part of the writer's actual course or a lesson written as an exercise. The temptation to cover more topics must be resisted, if as a result writing is postponed. Any delay in starting to write increases the fears of writers with little confidence. Others immediately see the relevance of their subsequent training, as they can apply what they learn directly to their own drafts. They learn, too, that a writer must be prepared to redraft his work several times. The International Extension College has produced a training manual, Writing for Distance Education (1979), which starts by asking people to use some given information to write a few pages. Only then does it begin to look at techniques. We have used the manual in several workshops and find it is effective in helping all writers, even reluctant ones, develop their competence.

There is also the problem of time. Writers need to feel they are achieving something, and doing so quickly. It is tempting to introduce more topics into a training programme, but if time is limited, training should be kept to the basics and to helping writers get started.

#### How can we train writers?

A number of training methods can be used to suit different circumstances.

#### Teaching by correspondence

Some years ago the International Extension College produced a correspondence course for correspondence course writers. It consisted of nine units, some of which were related to teaching particular subjects at a distance. It proved less than satisfactory. The problem was time. Although people began to write their courses as they worked through the units, they wanted to proceed faster than the course allowed. The delay while assignments were marked and returned was, for most, a severe handicap. This method of training has its uses, and other institutions may have found it more satisfactory; but I prefer other methods.

#### Self-tuition

There are now a number of training manuals available. It is difficult to assess their effectiveness, as feedback from users is lacking. My impression is that they are much better than nothing, but are more effective if used with some tutorial support, such as occasional seminars or a trainer who will answer queries. One institution, which asked its writers to use the International Extension College manual on their own, found that the trainees needed an opportunity to discuss their work.

#### Workshops

In my experience, intensive training and writing workshops are the best form of training. In a workshop of 2 or 3 weeks, trainee writers both learn the job and produce some finished lessons. Training manuals come into their own, forming the basis for seminars. Writers get feedback from trainers and other writers, which builds their confidence. Even a workshop of 1 week can be satisfactory, especially if it is followed by support from an editor.

### In-service training

This is the best term to describe training which involves an editor and a writer working closely together. Such training can be individualised, and can take place face-to-face and by correspondence. Training manuals can be used, on the advice of the editor. This method has many advantages: in particular, the problems of teaching specific subjects at a distance can be closely examined. However, there is a risk that it will not be systematic enough, and writers will lack the benefits gained from group work in a workshop.

Given the choice, I would prefer to train writers in workshops. But, clearly, different methods are appropriate in different cases. Whatever the method, it is important to give writers the satisfaction of achieving results soon. And this means that a writer needs to get at least one lesson written quite quickly. Once a writer has written a lesson or section and revised it, or knows how to do so, he should be able to continue with confidence. Formal training can stop here, to be supplemented with informal advice.

### Conclusions

This paper has looked at the sort of training writers require, what that training should include, and different training methods. I've suggested that, since training must be selective, training programmes should be designed to take into account writers' attitudes. Dominant attitudes today are largely due to the mystique that has grown round the concept of distance teaching. Writers are misled into thinking either that the whole business is very difficult, or that there is a simple system which will provide them with infallible guidance. I've suggested that, to overcome these difficulties, actual writing of lessons should form part of a training programme.

### EXERCISE 3

Imagine that you are training a new writer, and you have asked her to prepare a sample unit. How could you use the unit to help with the training? Think about this for a few moments before you read on.

(3 minutes)

### Comment

First, you will use the sample to help the writer assess and develop her skills of writing for distance education. The sample will show you what the writer can already do well, and whether she needs to develop further expertise. Your knowledge of the writer's background will help you in making this assessment. You might, for example, note that an experienced secondary science teacher is very good at describing examples from everyday life, but has selected ones more suitable for adolescents than for adults. A writer might offer clear explanations but in a literary style, and you could draw attention to this and suggest that she try to shift to a more informal style, closer to speech. Some points you would pick out for immediate attention, to reinforce the writer in the approach she is taking, or to suggest another direction. At first, you would only

express major criticisms, and do so constructively. You would reserve comments on other less important points until later, so that the writer is not overwhelmed with suggestions.

Second, use the sample to build up the writer's confidence. A few comments that pick out qualities as well as faults help give confidence to continue. The sample writing can serve as an appetiser to set the writer going.

A third function of the sample is to help writer and editor get to know each other and begin to understand each other's way of working. This can be useful later, when large sections of material are ready for editing, and misunderstandings can easily arise.

#### EXERCISE 4

In what circumstances would you urge your institution to organise a writers' training workshop?

(10 minutes)

#### Comment

Workshops are quite expensive. I would give high priority to a workshop in any of the following circumstances: a number of new writers are appointed within a period of a few weeks; an evaluation of your institution suggests there are serious shortcomings in existing course units, and you want to make a fresh start; you feel that your workload is impossible and you keep saying the same thing to writer after writer; an unexpected opportunity presents itself, such as a national adult education conference, which a number of your writers will be attending who can be invited to a brief training seminar at little extra cost; or you have a problem finding writers for a new scheme and want to identify them through an induction workshop.

#### 5. Establishing a good relationship

An editor has to work with a writer over a long period. You have to get the writer to trust you and take you seriously. Sometimes this is easy; editor and writer find they naturally get on very well. At other times there can be difficulties, particularly when an academic is bewildered at

the idea that someone is going to 'interfere' with his or her writing. How can you deal with such difficulties?

Start by observing the ways different writers react. Some are irritated by frequent reminders of deadlines, other depend on them. Some prefer a friendly editor who takes a personal interest in their work, others prefer an impersonal approach. You will find that it is impossible to act in exactly the same way with each writer. You have to try to get to know each individual.

You will get angry sometimes. You may put a lot of effort into suggesting amendments to one unit, and expect the writer to take these into account in writing the next one. Then the next unit arrives, just as bad as the last. You are disappointed and furious. You have to be prepared to keep your feelings private, cool off, and then approach the problem calmly.

To work well with a writer, you must have a friendly relationship in a business context, and you are not at liberty to lose your temper and clear the air with colleagues as you would in out-of-work personal relationships.

Sometimes it is tempting to do nothing. When you receive an unsatisfactory unit, or a phone call from a writer saying the next unit will be 6 months late, or any other disaster lands on your desk, you may want to hide the problem away for as long as possible. But it is better to be decisive. The best way to deal with this is to talk the problem over with colleagues immediately, get their advice on what to do, and do it.

#### 6. Getting the writer started

Once a writer is appointed and trained, you have to help him or her to get started. This may be very difficult.

Some writers need no persuasion. An extreme case is the writer who rushes ahead without waiting for assessment of the first units. Others, when the moment arrives to put pen to paper, cannot do it - a normal reaction to the task of writing, as all of us know from our schooldays. The prospect of writing for an unknown audience of students can be daunting. But usually writers are reluctant to acknowledge, even to themselves, that they are worried. An editor has to watch for the first signs of a writing block; a deadline slips a little, a writer keeps requesting more information of various kinds, or claims to be still busy with background reading. You have to, somehow, cajole the writer into making a start, even just a page or two. Longer delays will lead to greater panic.

Various strategies for helping a writer to start have already been suggested: discussing the schedule and breaking it up into segments, training programmes, preliminary sample units. Emphasise that the course is a joint enterprise, between writer, editor, and any other members of a course team. People feel less vulnerable if they feel they belong to a group.

Once a writer has a block, it can be extraordinarily difficult to get going. Weeks slip away. Never leave a writer with a block to get over it alone, but do all you can to help her to get started again quickly.

#### Summary

This unit has considered preparations for writing, including training

writers. I have suggested that you should, where necessary:

- . develop a suitable course filing system
- . devise a method for course scheduling
- . select suitable methods of briefing and training writers
- . consider how to develop a good working relationship with a writer
- . consider strategies for helping a writer to get started

#### ASSIGNMENT A

Units 1 and 2 had a number of objectives concerned with working with writers. Each of these objectives has now been discussed, and it is time to draw together ideas. The assignment below suggests an informal way of doing this. Before you start, look through the units again. As you do so, remember the triple role of the editor: professional, administrative and personal adviser. You may think that I have given the editor more of a managerial role than is practicable in your institution. If this is so, consider this description of distance teaching:

'The management of the learning process requires the creation of a complex and interdependent system which needs constant administrative attention and teamwork.'\*

I have tried to show how the editor must be a member of a team, rather than the servant of a system. You may wish to add your own suggestions on the role of the editor alongside your other comments below.

Below is a list of the 10 subheadings in the two units. For each heading:

1. Describe what happens now in your institution.
2. Make at least one suggestion for modification and improvement.
3. Discuss your suggestions with a colleague, if possible an experienced course writer.

The object of the exercise is to find out more about your own institution and the writers who work for it.

Here is the list:

1. Identifying writers
2. Preparing a job description
3. Selecting a writer
4. Negotiating a contract
5. Keeping records
6. Writing a schedule
7. Briefing the writer on the schedule
8. Training writers
9. Establishing a good relationship
10. Getting a writer started

\* B L Snowden and J S Daniel, 'The Economics and management of small post-secondary distance education systems', Distance Education 1,1 (1980) pp. 68-91

You have already collected some of the information you need for this assignment. You will probably need another hour to gather the rest and sort out your ideas. Allow about 30 minutes discussion with a colleague.