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ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF A WRITING COURSE PROPOSAL

By Dr. Erika Dreifus

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At some point in their careers, many writers may teach writing courses, either before a "live" classroom audience or, these days, online. But how does a new teacher develop that first course proposal? What elements should go into it?

Sometimes a prospective employer may offer guidelines or forms, and when those are online they help everyone. Check your local adult education center's website to see if it offers online proposal guidelines. Read whatever information you can find for online writing classes at your favorite writing sites, too.

In most cases a proposal will need to include at least five basic elements:

1. Your contact and personal information (such as citizenship status, for payment purposes) as well as your professional biography.
2. Your sense of the target audience for your class.
3. Your sense of what students will gain/learn from your class.
4. Your sense of course expenditures (including costs for guest lecturers or other needs, especially for "live" classes).
5. Contact information for individuals who will serve as referees for you.

Still, if you can't find the specific program proposal guidelines and requirements that you need online, you must contact program directors at local colleges/continuing education programs by phone or e-mail, yourself. Explain that you are a writer who is interested in learning about the procedures for proposing courses. Be forewarned that institutions and programs operate on different schedules; some may plan ahead just weeks at a time, while others may have an entire academic year already set the previous winter.

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Fine. What if, after all that, you're simply instructed to send a cover letter and a general course proposal? What then?

I trust all professional writers to handle cover letters. You should also take this opportunity to update your resume or c.v. and review your list of references in case you are, indeed, asked for that information as the screening process continues, too. It's also a good idea to review your clip file and consider which of your writing samples you might submit if requested to do so.

As for the proposal itself, here are some additional elements that will render it immediately more professional and complete:

6. Your name, title ("Instructor" is fine if applicable!), and, again for "live" courses especially, a note about your office hours, if you plan to hold them ("by appointment" or "to be determined"). Place this information in the top left-hand corner.

7. The course title. Be sure it accurately reflects the course content. One of my early course was titled "The Historical Novel: A Writing Workshop." I like poets and essayists and playwrights just fine, but this course wasn't for them!

8. The course description. Catalog copy generally runs tight. Try to describe your course in no more than 75–100 words; be prepared to cut this description even further. View samples from previous catalogs or listings to get a sense of the institution or program's editorial style. Be direct about the purpose/goal of the course.

For example, here's a description for the historical novel workshop mentioned above:

"This workshop is for writers of historical novels. Through tailored writing exercises and discussion of selected texts, the course will address issues of particular challenge to historical novelists: use of 'real' characters, setting, and tensions between 'fact' and 'fiction.' Primary focus, however, will be on critiques of students' work."

9. Prerequisites (if applicable). A line such as: "Students must submit a one-page synopsis and five pages of their work-in-progress" signals from the start that only writers particularly committed to their work should enroll.

10. Schedule of meetings and reading/writing assignments. This doesn't necessarily have to be set in stone, but you'll acquire—and convey—a better sense of your own course if you think ahead to the class meetings and to how you will be making use of each. One writing program director once advised me that prospective students tended to respond favorably to having some mention of the authors they'd be reading for a course within the description, so it can make sense to provide the same information, in even greater detail, for the "authorities," too.

Once you are preparing the actual syllabus for a course, you'll want to delineate additional policies. Depending on the class/institution, you may need to think about grading policies. And a writing workshop benefits from a set of critique guidelines everyone understands from the start.

But don't worry too much about that. Yet. Start with the proposal, and add that to your writing practice.

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Put Muscle on Your News Proposal

By Rusty Cawley

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Let's say your company is opening a new widget plant. Immediately, you have change, which is one of the four basic elements of news.

But change is also the most common of these four elements, and thus the weakest. You should search for other elements within the story.

PR Rainmakers recognize these four basic elements of news: change, conflict, aberration and problem.

Any one of these, if significant in its scope, can spark media interest in your story. The more of these elements that are present, the most likely you are to get a reporter's attention.

But the converse is also true. You must have at least one of these elements in your story proposal, or you simply do not have a news story.

We've looked at change. Let's look at the other three elements that can put muscle on a weak news proposal.

You find out that some industry experts think it's insane for a company to invest in a widget plant in the current economy. There's conflict.

You learn that your company's widget factory is the nation's first new widget factory since World War II. There's aberration.

You discover that your company must convince customers to embrace a revolutionary new design over cheap imports of an outdated, but functional design. There's your problem.

With any of these three elements, you've got a much stronger story to offer than with change alone. And if you can work all four into your proposal, you've got a monster story with which to work.

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But be forewarned. Most companies will readily accept a story proposal that focuses on change and aberration. But most will resist proposals that point to conflicts and problems.

Stand your ground. If your job is to get your company into the news media, then it is your responsibility to insist that your company maximize its potential for news coverage. The trick is to do it in a way that does not harm or embarrass your company.

In this, you must be guided by common sense and good judgment. Look for conflicts and problems that portray your company as a hero or as an underdog. Do this, and resistance within your company will melt away.

Just as attorneys must keep their clients within the law, and accountants must keep their clients within generally accepted accounting principles, so must you - as your company's media relations counsel - prod your client or your boss to make the most of any opportunity to create news.

The PR Rainmaker knows: Change is news. But to really get attention, you must find a way to include conflict, aberration and problem in any story proposal.

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