



Guidelines for new professionals who'd like to publish

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Are you interested in writing for library publications? Are you interested in writing for the general public? How many of you are interested in writing publicity or public relations? Whatever your publishing goal, I would like to remind you that the real satisfaction in writing is not in being published, it is in being read. And the meaning of “publishing” has changed a great deal in recent years.

Let me begin by telling you that lately, I have come to understand that librarians have a great deal more clout than we sometimes know in popular perception. Let me give you an example. Sarah Michele Geller and other cast members from the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* were on the cover of *American Libraries* a few years ago. One of the main characters on the show, Giles, was a librarian, so we thought it would be fun for our readers if we featured him on the cover. In order to obtain a photograph for our magazine cover, one of our editors called the

permissions department of this television show. We were informed that it would cost *American Libraries* several thousand dollars.

“Wait just a moment, here,” I said to myself, “We are a nonprofit organization promoting literacy and reading.” I called the *publicity* department of this television show and instead of asking for permission to publish a photograph, I offered this television show an opportunity to be on the cover of a magazine read by over 65,000 information professionals with enormous influence in their communities. The next day we had our choice of an entire sheet of Giles photographs. Once I recognized that this was a case not of asking permission, but of making an offer of publicity and recognition for the show that was priceless, and far more valuable to them than to us, we got what we wanted.

As a journalist, I have learned to tell a story in the words of others; that is basically what a reporter does—the words of others and what he or she sees. People want their stories to be told—even Bill Gates, who gave *American Libraries* an exclusive cover story in 2003. It would never have happened if I had not asked. I am here to encourage you to be bold—bolder sooner than I have been.

In the last five years or so, there really has been a great shift in how people get published. Nevertheless, books are still coming, magazines line the racks. There is no shortage of print. And even environmentalists understand that trees are a renewable resource that can be farmed, just like tomatoes and oranges. “Publishing” is booming, online and in print.

There have been many changes at *American Libraries* since I became one of its editors. I have seen the production of the magazine go from hot wax and an Exact-O knife to InDesign software and online publication. Still, I maintain that on any given workday the most difficult thing I do is construct a lucid original sentence.

At *American Libraries*, we are all experiencing changes in the way we do our work. The most important change is our response to the way people read. The competition for reading time has

never been more desperate. What guides our decisions at *American Libraries*, and publishing everywhere, is the question: Will anyone read it?

In January 2006, *American Libraries* launched *American Libraries Direct*, a weekly electronic newsletter exclusively for members of the American Library Association. This electronic newsletter has been very well received, and has enabled *American Libraries* to deliver news in ways we certainly could never do in print. *American Libraries Direct* offers an entirely new option for your materials, in addition to print. Make no mistake: The internet has changed everything. *American Libraries* also launched a blog. This blog is called “Hectic Pace” after our technology columnist, Andrew Pace, and to reflect the fact that a publishing environment does indeed operate at a hectic pace. And while we were at it, in 2006 we also launched “JobLIST,” a new online job site that we bill as “your number one choice for careers in library and information science and technology.” In addition *American Libraries* “Datebook” online is a free listing of educational opportunities for library and information science and technology professionals around the world. It is updated almost daily.

American Libraries receives many queries about articles and many press releases. How do we choose what news to publish? News is and always has been presented through the answers to the questions that I referred to as the “Five-Ws”. The “Five Ws” are:

1. “What happened?”
2. “When did it happen?”
3. “Where did it happen?”
4. “Who did it?”
5. “Why do librarians across the nation and the world need to know about it?”

Our goal is to answer these questions every day, every week and every month in a fashion that will be read. We do not want people to *see* articles in *American Libraries*. We want them to *read* them. Today, the competition for reading time is enormous.

Some practical advice: In addition to the “Five-Ws,” a writer should consider the following:

1. Good proposals. Present an article or news item in a way that demonstrates your capability of handling the proposed topic.
2. Examine the publication first. Know what they publish. You are asking to become part of an endeavor. Understand what that endeavor is so you can articulate how what you are doing fits into the picture.
3. Be sensitive to the editor's agenda. *American Libraries* publish an editorial calendar with projected themes for every month of the year.
4. Save the time of the editor. Don't bury your subject in hyperbole. Help the editors visualize immediately how it would fit.
5. Sell the article, not the idea. What is it going to look like, feel like? Who will you talk to? For example, you do not have to convince me that *American Libraries* needs to publish an article on, say, library education. That is a given. But what will your article say that has not already been said?

Let me talk a little about being on the other side of the equation, about being the writer instead of the editor or publisher.

I recently published a book, my first: *A Polish Son in the Motherland: An American's Journey Home*, a travel memoir about returning to Poland to find my family, with whom we had lost touch after the Second World War. When I finished writing the book, I felt that I had something that was aimed at the public. But in order to get it published, I had to find an interested publisher. Even though I've been in publishing for many years, I had no special ability to make it happen. Since I was certain I had written for popular consumption, I initially presented my book to big publishers, and I got some lovely rejection letters. One of these big publishers said: [add quote here] I finally sent a full-fledged proposal for *A Polish Son in the Motherland* to the Slavic Studies Series at Texas A&M University Press, the publisher of my book. The key was matching what I was writing with a publisher that published that kind of material. Once again, match your work with the right publisher—and never give up.

In order to gain the view of a publisher, I asked Patrick Hogan, editorial director for ALA Editions, the book-publishing arm of the American Library Association, to give me his vantage point on how to get published. This is what he said:

“In pitching a project to ALA Editions, or to any publisher, answer the question, ‘What is distinctive and compelling?’ ALA Editions publishes books it can sell.” In other words, readers vote with their dollars.

Make no mistake, ALA Publishing is run like a business. Even I have no special power to get a book published there. I recently proposed a title that was rejected. Should I tell you what it was? *American Libraries* will be 100 years old next year. I wanted ALA Editions to publish a commemorative volume of articles and photographs from past issues, to celebrate this milestone. But commemorative editions are expensive to produce, more popular in theory than they are with buyers, and they have a very short lifespan, namely the anniversary year.

I would like to share with you the views of another editor and writer on this topic of getting published. I asked Arthur Plotnik, a former editor of *American Libraries* and the author of several books on how to write well, including the recent *Spunk and Bite*, published last year by Random House, a very important American publisher, what he has observed to be the biggest mistake librarians make when writing for publication. He answered in one word: “Length.” And he went on to say, “Librarians ... produce clinically excessive word counts signaling deeper problems: the notion, for example, that academic peers will snicker if one writes ‘we decided’ instead of ‘it was decided that’; or the need to uncork every last thing researched on a topic—that freedom-of-information mind-set perverted into manic disclosure. Then, too, like all aspiring writers, librarians must remember that the most stimulating connections are made in the reader’s mind, not hammered home in words.”

A very important thing for you to know is how to contact an editor who might publish your article in a magazine. First, look in the masthead of the magazine or on the web pages. Editors can be reached by e-mail, phone, fax, or mail. Eventually most editors and publishers would like

to see a written proposal for any article you want published, along with a brief description of what you are proposing, including the people you will be talking to.

For the print magazine at *American Libraries*, there is roughly a six-week lead-time before publication. It is 18-20 workdays in preparation and then another two weeks in printing and mailing. Publication in *American Libraries Direct* is much shorter, but much less permanent, since it links to material that resides on the web.

Both *American Libraries Online*, which publishes original weekly news stories and *American Libraries Direct* have transformed *American Libraries* from monthly deadlines to weekly deadlines. The Internet and e-mail have transformed the way we gather news. Still, no one wants to give up the paper magazine, and it is still the single thing that every member of the American Library Association receives without making a special trip to a website. When dealing with editors, remember that every day is a deadline in the publishing world.

Right now our subscribers number about 65,000, with pass-along readership estimated at two for every subscriber, yielding a readership level of almost 200,000. If you want to reach the largest readership of any magazine in this profession, *American Libraries* and other association publications—electronic and print—are waiting for you.