31. Work Guides

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WRITING FOR EFFECT: CORRESPONDENCE, RECORDS, AND DOCUMENTS

INTRODUCTION

The community practitioner in policy, planning, organizing, administration, and evaluation needs some specific skills in written communication. Social work, like some of the other helping professions, tends to have an "oral history," and social workers generally are not trained well in the practice of written communication. Additionally, our profession shares with many other groups in society a general hesitancy to "put it in writing." Nevertheless, many important types of communication are written. Memos, minutes, and letters are some of the most common forms of written communication the social worker will use; others are reports, studies, summaries, and press releases. What is important to the practitioner is not "style," in the most highly developed sense of that concept, but rather simple, declarative sentences, informed by correct grammar and punctuation. Although the proper use of language and application of the rules governing it are important, it is also necessary that the worker-writer keep in mind two crucial elements: readership and format.

In all writing, it is important to remember who, and what groups, will be reading the piece produced. It is of the utmost importance to have some anticipation of who the readership will be and the constraints upon and desires of the readership group, so the text can be adjusted to accommodate the group. Most community organization practitioners who come from college undergraduate and graduate programs, for example, learn to write for academic purposes, where the sole readership is the professor who made the assignment. In actual practice, audiences are different. They tend to be less theory oriented and to seek the direct, pointed conclusions of a piece first, with the supportive evidence coming later. We will be discussing some of the readership issues and their implications.

Issues of format are also very important. People who think that there is only one way to write a letter or a memo, or that the format of a report does not make much difference, could not be more mistaken. There are many ways to put a written document together, from using different type faces and spatial arrangement on a page, to the more complex interleafing of parts and pages, recommendations and appendixes of a major report. Format is important in all written communication, but it becomes especially crucial in documents of some length. Then it is absolutely necessary to have summaries and references so arranged that the reader can find the material of interest quickly and can proceed into the more complex material in stages.

We should note that none of these points is very startling, nor will anything said in subsequent sections be very new.

Source: Unpublished, John E. Tropman and Ann Rosegrant Alvarez, "Professional Writing."

Rather, we are reviewing some of the most common areas of writing from the perspective of the practicing community organizer.

WRITING FOR COMMUNICATION

Written communication should be clear and direct. The language used should be varied and fresh. Repeating the same word over and over should be avoided; the use of a thesaurus—a reference which supplies synonyms and words of related meanings for a key word—may be invaluable in this regard. (Inexpensive paperback editions are available.) You should never use "you" as a generalized subject, in the sense we used it to begin this sentence; the word "one" can be substituted. The word "this" is not a noun, and so can never serve as the subject of a sentence. It is quite common to see sentences beginning, "This is a key point. . . . " Since "this" is an adjective, however, whatever it modifies should be present as the subject of the sentence. Something else to keep in mind is that a preposition is a bad word to end a sentence with. Rather, one should say that a preposition is a bad word with which to end a sentence.

These points are among the most common errors we have seen in professional writing—not including, of course, errors in grammar. Beyond specific hints and suggestions, there is a flow to a paragraph which the writer should keep in mind. Each paragraph needs an introductory sentence or two which orients the reader to what is coming in the remainder. The middle sentences of the paragraph convey the main content. The last sentence or two can serve as a summary and transition to the next paragraph. This basic model—introduction, content, and recapitulation—is a highly general one which serves, in extended form, for paragraphs in an essay, chapters in a book, and so on. While there is no general rule for the length of paragraphs and their content, we recommend the inclusion of only one or two ideas per paragraph. The writer should not overload a paragraph but should instead use briefer, more numerous paragraphs. In general, the standard page with standard type contains about 250–300 words (based on 25–30 lines of 10 words each). This estimate means that one should think in terms of about three paragraphs of 100 words each per page, a limit which we have found sensible.

There is one point which relates to the factual content of the written piece which is always important, regardless of the audience: accuracy. Accuracy involves checking, and perhaps double checking, the facts one presents. Phrases such as "research shows," "people think," or "it seems" abound in writing, and many writers seem to think that such statements in themselves constitute verification. If "research shows" it, cite the research; if "people think" it, name the people; if "it seems" means "I think that," say the latter. We are not saying that all the verification must be in the text or in that very spot. For example, a footnote may suffice. But it is extremely important (1) to have the verification and (2) to list it somewhere in the text. The listing serves a triple purpose. First, it serves as additional proof for the reader. Second, it serves as an additional and final check for the writer; having to cite the actual source often reveals errors in the rendering that would otherwise have been missed. Finally, listing the source serves to place on record the location of information which might otherwise be lost. Practitioners will recognize the seeming inevitability that the crucial references to significant minutes, the most important letters, and so

on are those one is never able to find unless their location is clearly noted.

The listing of information, and the way in which the information is recorded, can be worked out as the writer moves through several drafts. The concept of writing and rewriting seems difficult to many people—especially those who find putting things on paper hard in the first place. Of course, judgment must be used with respect to the type of writing under consideration. Yet we have found that nothing—not even the simplest letter—can be done in a single draft. More complex pieces, those where space is at an absolute premium (such as a press release), items of any sort which might be of special importance, or items which one suspects might be reprinted for a wider public deserve special care. From our perspective, "special care" often means at least three drafts, and perhaps more than that.

The potential of any written document "going public" is something that a community practitioner might well keep in mind. One rule of thumb is to put nothing on paper which would not be acceptable on the front page of the public press. It would, of course, be rare for such a thing to happen. Nonetheless, "confidential" documents do occasionally become public, and many practitioners have wished that an unfortunate speculation, comment, or proposal had been omitted from a supposedly confidential draft.[1]

Doing several drafts requires at least a primitive set of records to make sure that drafts and pages do not become confused; such confusion often leads to chaos. A good technique is to date each page, and after the date put the draft number (D-1, for example). Planners, especially, are very likely to circulate first, second, third, and further drafts of papers and reports to community constituencies, and it is particularly important when external or quasi-external groups are involved to keep oneself and the group informed of exactly which draft is being circulated. When new language is being substituted for old, *the new phrases are underlined* (and the old ones placed in parentheses).

Early drafts should be done with triple or quadruple spacing between the lines and with ample margins on one side of the page. This procedure facilitates the reworking of the draft, since it leaves plenty of space for changes, corrections, and additions and for cutting and pasting. Being able to cut up a draft and rearrange it is a great help and can eliminate much needless retyping. Final drafts—or close-to-final drafts—can be reduced to double or single spacing in order to test for total length and format style.

Finally, one should, if possible, allow a period of time to elapse between an initial draft and a rewrite. The written word has a tendency to express concretely, and in single-message form, what orally may be qualified and expressed in double- or triple-message format. For example, an "agreement" made in a sarcastic tone can actually express disagreement in the oral mode; tone is less important in writing, and statements must be qualified or expressed tentatively solely through the use of words, rather than actions, glances, and so on Partly because of this, it is prudent to let some time elapse between the initial writing and the final production or release of a piece, since in looking at a statement 12 hours after writing it, one may well see things which were less than clear in the heat of the actual writing. Flights of fancy, which may have taken on the ap-

[1]Moynihan's piece on the black family is perhaps the most widely known example of this phenomenon, and it is certainly a striking one. For a detailed analysis of both the original document and the sequelae, see Lee Rainwater and W. Yancy, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1967).

pearance of concrete proposals and commitments in the written format, can be caught before they go out. In addition, allowing for a short time lapse permits practitioners to share preliminary drafts and to ask others to read and comment on them. We recommend the use of others as readers and reactors, especially in the case of major documents.

To ensure maximum accuracy, the major writer of a draft should keep one master copy and enter all corrections on it. Often people will phone in with comments, and unless there is some way to record them, other than by making notations on miscellaneous pieces of paper, the comments may never reach the major text. As draft copies come back, they can be divided into separate piles by individual pages. (It is for this reason that the initials of every reader should be on each page of his or her copy.) This procedure is important because one not only wishes to secure comments from others but to compare them as well.[2]

Fortunately, mechanical means have been developed which can aid the practitioner-writer in the process of preparing these several drafts and incorporating comments from a variety of sources. The memory typewriter, which places a letter or a page on a card or tape and then operates the typewriter electronically, is of primary assistance. Since the changes on drafts tend to become progressively less drastic, more and more of the previous draft is retained. This machine will simply retype the text to the point of change; the changed word, paragraph, or whatever can be entered; and then the machine automatically rearranges the remainder of the text.

[2]It is not the intent here to consider the broader implications for community organization, policy, and administrative practice of the "clearing" process. To some extent, this aspect is covered in Chapter IV by Connor and de la Isla (Reading 20). However, we do want to say that the securing of comments on proposed documents serves important participatory goals, as well as improving the style and clarity of the document.

SPECIFIC TYPES OF WRITTEN WORK

The general discussion above applies, broadly, to all types of written work. It represents a set of considerations which is, however, modified and augmented as applied to specific types of written communication. We have divided the basic types of written communication of interest to the community practitioner into four broad categories. Perhaps most frequently used is *correspondence;* in this category we stress the letter and the memo, which are very common. *Program records* are a second type of writing. Under this heading, we consider minutes and other types of administrative documents which aid in assessing a program's progress and recording its history. These two forms of writing focus on relatively specific and known audiences, so the writer can make some reasonable assumptions about what the reader may know. In the other two cases, readership is less specified or completely general. The third category, *publicity documents,* consists of writing aimed exclusively at the general public or some segment of it. Such items as flyers, brochures, and newsletters belong in this category. Finally there are *substantive documents,* a category comprised of longer, more content-oriented reports, studies, research summaries, and the like. The main purpose of documents of this type is to bring new knowledge to bear in some situation.

CORRESPONDENCE

For the community practitioner, an important part of every day is spent in reading and writing letters and memos. Indeed, this activity seems so much a usual part of the workday that often no systematic attention is given to some of the problems and difficulties associated with it and some of the guidelines which can simplify and improve the process. We suggest, as a general rule, that a specified portion of the day be set aside for this activity. During this time one can read incoming mail and answer it, as well as mail and correspondence from previous days. It is all too easy to let correspondence pile up. Time and again, people claim they did not get notices of meetings, or were unaware of this or that proposal, when the true situation (which they will not admit, or of which they may not even be aware) is that the material is still resting in the "In" box. It is perhaps obvious that an important skill in connection with writing is *reading* —not only because reading gives one examples of a variety of styles and approaches to written expression, but also because one is often writing a reply or comment to something someone else has written; a complete understanding of the original document thus is essential.

Letters

We start from the premise that all letters should be answered. This principle applies to letters of congratulation, comments, requests, and so on. Sometimes the reply may be very brief, a simple thank you. Other times the reply may be negative, as when someone is notified that requested information is not available, or the reply may be quite extensive. In any case, the practitioner should get into the habit of answering mail. Although our "oral tradition" may not emphasize it, written communication is one very effective way in which relationships are built and maintained.

There are many good guides, often designated for "secretaries," on writing business letters. The practitioner would do well to consult one of these as regards format and stylistic conventions. It is not the specific format we are concerned with here, but rather the occasions for use and type of content which might be included.

Thank You Notes. The practitioner should develop the habit of expressing appreciation and thanks where appropriate. All too often it is assumed that people "know" their efforts are appreciated. A useful practice is to consider sending a note not only to the individual but also to his or her superior or boss as well. This way the person's superior knows that you think well of his or her staff. The little touch makes the reply much more meaningful for the subject. In such a note, it is also important to avoid generalizations and to be specific about what is appreciated.

Letters of Agreement. Practitioners meet and discuss many possible courses of action with many persons in the organization and the community. When such a discussion is completed, it is often very useful for the practitioner to write a letter to the person(s) with whom the meeting was held and outline the agreements the practitioner understood to have been reached. This procedure is especially important if matters of finances, space, or any kind of concrete resource allocations are discussed. It is then up to the recipient of the letter to agree or disagree with the written presentation, and substitute his or her own version, when appropriate. In this way, agreements can be captured on paper which would otherwise have remained vague and unclear, or "clear" but contradictory in the minds of individual participants.

Memos

For memos, aspects of format and content are more important than type in designating subdivisions of the category.

Brevity. A memo should be brief. Our experience is that a single page, or at most a two-page memo, is the optimal length. This judgment is based on common sense and practical politics—a message written on one page, or on both sides of one sheet of paper, is usually more likely to be read than longer efforts. Practitioners and students often complain that content cannot be reduced to a page or two, but we judge this reasoning to be false in most cases. Rather, it is a question of taking time, and developing the ability to achieve economy in redrafting. T. S. Eliot once excused verbosity by explaining, "I did not have time to write it briefly," and this reason often explains why so many people cannot (or claim they cannot) write crisply. They do not take the time.

Arrangement of Content. The specific substance of the memo will be a factor in its arrangement. However, there are some overall steps that one can use as a guide.

1. State the problem or the issue which occasions the note; refer to other relevant documents as appropriate.
2. State what information this memo has to offer with respect to (1) above; *do not* put "report level" detail here, but refer to attachments or offer to produce them, if needed.
3. Offer any conclusions suggested by (2); be sure to differentiate between *your personal* conclusions and factual ones stemming directly from the data.
4. If it seems appropriate, conclude by offering to meet and discuss or do further work.

It is our judgment that almost everything with respect to a content area can be placed into these categories.

Use of Attachments. Since we define a memo as being brief, it typically cannot, and should not, contain the specific substantive content which leads to a conclusion. Rather, it is a summary of that content, which can be presented in full detail in a report. The relationship between a memo and a report is one of "attachment"—that is, where appropriate, the report is attached to a memo. Other material, such as relevant letters, other memos, and the like, can similarly be attached to a memo. Then the memo reader has the substance of the point in a short document, with additional documentation attached for perusal by those who want more detailed information. The advantage of this arrangement lies in the fact that one can be crisp in the memo and more thorough in the report. Many persons make the mistake of attempting to combine the memo and the report, thus producing a document which is too short to be informative as a report, but too long to be a concise and effective memo.

Salutations and "Carbon Copy" (cc:) Procedure. Practitioners often ignore the fact that the salutation, that part that says, "Memo To:__________", conveys a message. Care should be taken to use the appropriate title of the person, or persons, receiving the note. Similarly, the order of names needs careful attention. If there is an organizational hierarchy, protocol demands that the highest ranking person be listed first, followed by the next highest ranking, and so on. When this procedure is followed, the titles of the persons follow their names, and the first person on the list gets the ribbon copy. If titles are not used, the names should be placed in alphabetical order, or the readers will assume that the order of names reflects some loose level of organizational prestige. Similarly, care should be taken with respect to the "cc:" notation, since it is not always clear who should get copies, and why. Although there are no rules here, the practitioner should be sensitive to the implications of sending copies around. If, for example, a memo is sent not only to Practitioner X but also to his or her employer or supervisor, the notation serves as a prod (welcome or unwelcome) to X. Letting someone know that his or her superior has been informed of a situation will have an effect, and the possible results must be taken into careful consideration.

PROGRAM RECORDS

Program records are any and all documents which relate to an identifiable "program," function, or task with which a practitioner is associated. If, for example, the practitioner is working on a block club development, all materials, reports, correspondence, and minutes of meetings should be kept and filed under the record for that program.[3] Thus, many types of written communication can be included in the program records. However, there are three types which fall specifically within the category of program records—logs, minutes, and annual reports.

Logs

Logs are primarily for the practitioner's own use, although they may also serve as bases for discussions with supervisors and superiors. A log is helpful in keeping the worker on the track and is also useful when the worker is making periodic reports. Basically, a log consists of a daily record of activities and could include calls made, letters written, and so on. Logs fall into two types: process and substantive.

Process Logs. The process log details how all the time during the day is spent by the practitioner. Included are not only the specific actions but also the practitioner's observations about, interpretation of, and reaction to what occurred. Generally, these logs are more useful to beginning practitioners than to more experienced ones.

Substantive Logs. The substantive log is a recording of the key elements of the content of what happened during some specified period of time. All of the detailed and inclusive recounting of particular instances is eliminated from the substantive log, and only the essential conclusions, or elements, are recorded. This approach to recording is especially helpful in noting those decisions and actions which have implications for the future. It may help to eliminate the tendency for something one must do in the future to become lost in a welter of detail.

Minutes

Minutes of meetings are the most common forms of writing that the practitioner undertakes. Minutes of meetings are critically important as a part of the formal record of a committee or group and serve as a guide to "what happened" at a meeting. Minutes can be written in different ways, which, in essence, correspond to the styles described for process logs and substantive logs. Process-oriented minutes reflect everything said by everyone, and are as close to a verbatim transcript as can be achieved. Substantive minutes, on the other hand, tend to reflect the main points of view and main decisions made, without recording every word. Substantive minutes demand great judgment on the part of the

[3]Implicit here, of course, is the fact that there may be more than one copy of letters and memos "for the file," and duplicate materials may be simultaneously filed under several separate headings. We do not wish to discuss filing systems themselves but only to note that any system which has full information by assignment or program is acceptable.

practitioner, because he or she must reflect what happened in such a way as to be accurate and fair to all points of view, while omitting unnecessary details.

The style of minute-taking is not entirely up to the group and the practitioner, however. There may be rules and bylaws or traditions which govern the form in which the minutes must be taken; there may be, in certain situations, laws governing the content of records. It is the task of the practitioner to find out what, if any, these restrictions are.

Annual Reports

We believe it to be sound practice for the practitioner to file an annual report when he or she has completed a year with a project. Many practitioners think of annual reports as something put out only by corporations. The annual report, however, is appropriate for every project the worker undertakes. Community organizers frequently work on such diverse assignments that, unless they take the time to compose some sort of a formal report, they cannot provide information on the status of any given project. The annual report thus provides an occasion for the worker to determine and clarify his or her own assessment of progress on each project or program. Additionally, the status of the project is communicated to all other interested persons or parties, including those involved in funding decisions. The annual report (see Figure A.1) thus becomes a vehicle which encourages both accountability and proper evaluation.

The fact that practitioners are being asked increasingly often to evaluate their work, or to have it evaluated, means that annual reports are going to become more common. Some kind of ongoing log may well be kept even by more experienced practitioners, as the basis of the annual compilation. The importance of ongoing records, as well as annual ones, is further increased because of the possibility that the worker may be transferred to another assignment, and a new worker may enter the picture. This new professional needs to have complete records available in order to begin work. The log is thus analogous to the medical record a physician keeps on a patient; it is needed so new and different physicians can become involved.

FIGURE A.1
Outline of Suggested Content for Annual Reports

1. General introduction and overview; plans for coming year.
2. General summary of results obtained during the past year.
3. Specification of mandate, listing of formal changes, etc.
4. Specification of main activities leading toward the accomplishment of the mandate.
5. Specification of any problems of a special nature encountered during the year.
6. Specification of personnel involved; time spent by each.
7. Specification of financial information—costs of supplies, equipment, etc.
8. Specification in more detail (than in No. 1) of plans for coming year.
9. Summary and conclusion.

APPENDIX

Attachment of budgets, reports, publicity, etc., which substantiate or relate to sections of the main body of the text.

If final report, follow Nos. 1 through 9 and insert before Appendix:

10. Evaluative overview, problems and prospects, comparison with other projects; recommendations, if any.

Note: The order of items is not crucial; the list represents the main topics we have found to be generally useful in pulling together an annual document. It is important that the initial section present a true overview, so that the casual reader can get the gist of the report without reading through all the details.

Interim Reports. Logs and annual reports represent the two ends of the spectrum with respect to time covered by records of program activity. It thus is sometimes difficult to work directly from daily or weekly logs to produce an annual summation. Recognizing this fact, people who work with finances insist upon the production of periodic reports. We believe this practice is a sound one and should be adopted by practitioners for their own work in community organization. This practice can be especially important if the program is in trouble or beleaguered in some way. Interim reports can also serve as a kind of newsletter of activity and let the community of interest know what is going on.

Final Reports. Whenever a project is completed, a final report should be prepared. This rule obtains no matter how short a time has elapsed between the last annual report and the termination of the project. If it appears that those dates are going to be close together, they can sometimes be made coterminous, and the last annual report can be the final report.[4] Sometimes, of course, a short program ends before there is an opportunity to have an annual report, in which case only a final report would be submitted. The final report should contain, in addition to the general content of an annual report, some explicit attempt to assess the success of the project in achieving the goals set out for it, and some assessment of the reasons that these goals were or were not accomplished.

PUBLICITY DOCUMENTS

The practitioner often needs to write documents for purposes of public information. Press releases, newsletters, flyers, and brochures are among the most common examples of these. Perhaps the two key concepts which inform all writing of this sort are (1) brevity and (2) factual accuracy and completeness. Space is always at a premium in this kind of writing, usually because of either costs or competition. The standard rule of journalism—that information on "who, what, where, why, and when" should be provided in the opening paragraph—supplies the razor a practitioner can use to cut his or her copy to the very bone.

[4]It should be noted that annual reports can be due on any date, because they come at the anniversary of the beginning of the project, rather than coinciding with the dates of the beginning or end of the fiscal or calendar year.

Press Releases

The use of the press to make an announcement is a time-honored technique of all those dealing with the "community" and may be used as a sort of official recognition of "what's happening." There are often special formats to be used in preparing copy for the press; one should check with the local papers to find out if there are any particular local requirements of deadlines which apply.

The practitioner should remember that newspapers cut material from the bottom, or end of an article, up toward the beginning. Thus, all of the information provided by the "five W's" should be in the initial paragraph, with elaboration and specification following in later paragraphs. Then, if the paper cannot use the whole release (which is likely), at least the essential information will be printed.

Although many practitioners seem to think that press releases are prepared mostly for routine announcements or crises, nothing could be further from the truth. Any notable activity of the agency or program can be the subject of a press release. For example, when the annual report is completed, a one-page summary of the entire document can be provided to the press. Promotions of staff, changes of the directorship, election of new members of the board, or the completion of a significant report—these and many other activities can be used as the basis for a press re-

lease. One should not think that such releases serve only the interests of the agency, either; they serve the broader community by informing it of the activities of the agency, program, or specific local group.

Practitioners often seek out the press; however, there is one generalized type of instance in which the press seeks out the practitioner: when there is trouble or controversy of some sort. This type of situation is the one in which practitioners are most often unprepared. When the phone rings and it is the local newspaper or TV or radio station asking for a statement on a recent firing, on the conditions of facilities under investigation by a community group, as likely as not the practitioner will not be prepared with a statement. Thus, our suggestion is that when an issue develops that seems as if it might be "hot," or controversial, the practitioner should prepare press releases in advance. In many cases, one may not wish to volunteer these statements to the paper; however, if the press calls there will be something coherent and accurate to say. Those who have had experience in this area know that it is very difficult to think as clearly as one would like and to secure the proper clearances for a public statement when someone is on the phone or at the door waiting for a response. If, however, advance preparation is made a routine matter of business, these kinds of problems can be minimized or avoided.[5]

Flyers and Brochures

The flyer or brochure usually has one overriding purpose—to inform people about the essence of an issue in such a way as to interest them in getting more information. Sometimes this information is distributed to those who write for more detailed accounts (as is the case with a brochure on agency objectives and practices); sometimes it is passed out to those who come to a public meeting or a mass rally, etc. From a communications point of view, a flyer is most effective when people are already aware of some aspect of an issue, and their awareness is being expanded in some important way. Thus, in the case of a practitioner's putting out an election flyer for a candidate, although the recipients might or might not be oriented to the content of the flyer, they would probably be oriented to the fact that there is an election coming up. Alternatively, a community group may be waiting for information on an issue, and the flyer may be the most efficient and effective way to provide it. The flyer may thus reach an entirely uninformed readership, so it must be carefully designed and worded.

Because flyers are intended to convey initial information on one page which can be left on doorsteps or posted on bulletin boards, maximum information should be presented in simple form, similar to—but even more abbreviated than—that of a press release. Attention to graphics is important here and in brochures; a picture, a boldly lettered word, or any other device which will catch the attention of the reader visually can be useful. The initial eye-catching design will usually be accompanied by a brief text outlining the specific factual information. Be sure to include *all* the pertinent information. For example, when a meeting is being announced, information as to time, date, place, purpose, sponsoring group, fee (if any), and contact person should be given. It is surprising—and frustrating—how frequently one or more of these crucial ingredients is neglected by even the experienced practitioner.

A brochure follows the same principles as a flyer, except that there is an intent to convey more information about a topic. Normally, while a flyer reaches people who may know either a great deal about a topic, or nothing at all, a brochure reaches people in the middle range of this continuum. That is, they are likely to have moderate but limited knowledge of and/or interest in the subject. The information presented thus may be fairly complete, but must be very basic. Things which the practitioner might take for granted must be explained in a brochure, since it must be assumed that the reader is a novice in the area.

Newsletters

Unlike the flyer or brochure, the newsletter is a regular publication aimed at a wide readership of both the informed and the uninformed, friends and those not so friendly. Its purposes may be informational, public relational, intellectual, and personal, among others. A newsletter may carry pieces on times, places, and dates of meetings; columns encouraging a large turnout at an upcoming event; a feature piece discussing in depth some issue in the agency or program; a list of persons who have been honored recently in the community or agency; advertising; and so on. It is this mixture of purposes which is the ultimate downfall of most newsletters. In trying to do too much and to be all things to all persons, they may end up serving no real purpose and having no consistent audience.

Thus, the first task of the practitioner putting out a newsletter is the editorial one of deciding upon the primary and subsidiary missions and purposes of the newsletter. Once these decisions are made, the practitioner can order and arrange the newsletter in a way that makes internal sense. Indeed, the practitioner is likely to be as much an editor as an author, although in the case of smaller newsletters the worker may do as much writing as editing.

In any case, the worker should be aware of some editorial guidelines. As an editor, one is involved in cutting and shaping the work of others. Regardless of the source of the material, it is important, as we have indicated before, to keep in mind what the readership is likely to be and what type of service the newsletter is assumed to provide for them. While it can be hoped that writers will be sensitive to the needs of the newsletter's readers, many will not be. Their work will have to be reshaped to fit the purpose and space of the particular newsletter. Good initial information from the editor on the specific requirements of the newsletter can help avoid a situation which might later be the cause of bad feelings. It must also be remembered that, depending upon the purpose of the newsletter, "good writing" may not be all that important. In a community setting, for example, it might be most important that community members express themselves in writing within the local context; extensive editing for editorial reasons could be offensive. Indeed, sometimes the fun of putting out a newsletter can overshadow

[5]Although beyond the scope of this article, it should be noted that the mass media may be used for tactical purposes. Familiar to those who are abreast of political strategy, particularly at high levels, is the "news leak," press briefings that are given with the understanding that the source will not be identified in the press. These are used to test public reaction before decisions are taken. Another tactic is to create a media event that cannot be ignored by the press, designed to bring attention and favorable public response to some program or event. A third tactic, used by Saul Alinsky and those inspired by his work, involves the discussion of actions to be taken by a community organization that can be highly embarrassing or disruptive to the target of the action. The discussion is arranged so that it takes place before persons who relay the plans to leaders or officials in the target organization. The intention is to bring the target group into a bargaining relationship with those planning the action without actually having to carry out the proposed action.

the purpose—which should remain in the forefront of the editor's mind.

Special attention needs to be given to the overall format, the use of graphics, and the layout of the individual pages of the newsletter. The format and style used for different newsletters varies considerably according to the newsletter's purpose, the readership, the funds available for production and distribution, and the philosophy, skills, and inclinations of those who are producing it. The newsletter may thus be anything from a sophisticated, professional, organizational bulletin, to a hand-done, "down-home" chronicle of community events. As it is likely to be somewhat longer than other pieces of writing geared for public distribution, special care must be taken to make the newsletter visually appealing and interesting. A sample front page of a newsletter is given in Figure A.2. Such a simple two-column format can be quite attractive and effective. Note the inclusion of volume and issue numbers, as well as dates, to establish the unique identity of each issue. The use of space and headings can be important and should not be dismissed as trivial. Graphic aids such as "press-type" should be investigated; many of them are inexpensive and easy to use, and they can add drama and interest to relieve the monotony of a series of uniformly typed pages.

Above all, it is important to remember that the newsletter must be read in order for any of its purposes to be accomplished. Because of this, anything that makes it more readable should be encouraged, and anything that makes it less readable should be avoided or discontinued.

FIGURE A.2
Sample Newsletter

THE COMMUNITY COURIER

Volume 2, Number 4 *Donations Welcome* August 19—

From the Editor

In this hot weather, if you can't keep cool you can at least take your mind off the heat by keeping busy. One good way to keep busy is to help put out the *Community Courier!* We need more volunteers and invite you to join your hands with ours to get the news out!

Contributions are also welcome, so if you have a news item, a poem, or an announcement for us, please let us know.

This issue features a list of exciting "Coming Events," news on nutrition and the newborn baby, the first in a cartoon series by our own Jackie Porter, some tips on landlord-tenant relations, and some price comparison between name brands sold at local grocery stores. (Cont'd. on page 3)

!! COMING EVENTS !!

— Playground activities continue this month at Cedar Park. Call for schedule information.

— Don't forget to vote on local issues in the August 23 special elections. Your voice can count, so come out and be heard!

— The Third Annual Community Health Fair will be held in mid-September. Call Mrs. Green at the Center if you have suggestions or if you can volunteer some time to help out.

— A new shopping service especially for senior citizens will begin this month. Call the Salvation Army for details.

(OVER)

West Side Community Center
401 West Locust Street
Bigtown, Anystate USA 49106
Phone: (313) 343-9216

SUBSTANTIVE DOCUMENTS

The longest and most complicated pieces of writing that the practitioner will undertake come under the category of substantive documents. These documents include proposals for grants, reports on results of original research or community studies, reports on library research, and the like. In one sense, the practitioner may have an advantage in this type of writing, because these documents are the ones which most closely resemble those he or she may have written in school. On the other hand, the format and style of presentation as well as the purpose of these documents are quite different.

Generally, the purpose of substantive documents is to convey a detailed—often extensive—array of information, based usually on research and scholarship. Thus it is important to cover methodology as well as substance, since some of the confidence readers have in the findings will depend upon the degree of satisfaction they have with the method. As with the newsletter, however, the practitioner should seek to determine the key readership and purpose of the document *before* writing begins. In that way the document can be directed, even in its early drafts, toward serving the intended goal.

A second point of importance is to construct an outline. Substantive documents contain relatively large amounts of material. In the writing, it is likely that some of this material might be mislaid, forgotten, or otherwise unintentionally omitted. The outline ensures that questions of *content* can be answered independently of questions of style of presentation. Since the first problem of the document is the presentation of content, such a helpful technique should not be ignored. One of the greatest problems many practitioners (and students) have in writing is their failure to use the outline method. They often begin directly with the first sentence and have only the most crude idea of the overall structure to follow. Naturally, the anxiety of the whole enterprise falls heavily upon that one sentence. Use of an outline gives confidence that all matters will be discussed in turn, and each will be given its appropriate share of attention.

We suggest that the writer use the page-per-time technique when working to meet deadlines. After an outline has been completed, it may be helpful for the writer to establish a set number of pages per hour which are to be produced. We have found between three and six pages an hour—or about 750–1,800 words—is reasonable for a rough draft. We use the words "rough draft" literally, believing that it is often much easier to revise, to cut and paste, and to reconstruct once something is on paper. Thus, we urge the practitioner to write, write, write! Pay no attention to misspellings or awkwardness, but get the thoughts down. There will be time to polish them later. As one uses this technique, it is likely that each subsequent draft will improve. Of course, this style can be used to varying degrees. Some people prefer to write as closely as possible to the final version, leaving only the finer points to be checked and reworked. Others may prefer to work very quickly and depend upon later, major revisions to smooth and tighten the original rough version. The latter approach is suggested for those who have difficulty getting started.

The format of a report is extremely important. If it is very long, a table of contents is useful. Throughout, the use of side and center headings (as we have used in this article) helps the reader to move through the piece logically and smoothly. Unlike the scholarly document, in which the reader is led from the problem through the evidence to the conclusion, the format in this case should begin with a brief state-

ment of the problem or mission, then a statement of the findings, followed by details of the evidence. As with memos, the most important element is to get the key findings immediately before the reader, with the support for those findings following.

The practitioner should be aware that there are texts available which can serve as guides to various forms of substantive writing. Proposal writing, in particular, has been covered in a number of publications, and there are also excellent workshops and courses on the subject in many areas. These may be quite useful to the worker in learning how to interpret and fulfill the requirements of grant requests, which are often quite confusing. Regardless of the degree of complexity of the document, the practitioner will do well to keep in mind our previous reminders: direct the writing toward its purpose and readership, work from an outline, choose a format for its simplicity and clarity, and write boldly and quickly, allowing for subsequent revision.

CONCLUSION

In this article we have stressed the importance of written communication to the practitioner in community organization. We have presented some basic concepts and suggestions which should be helpful as "refreshers" for the experienced practitioner-writer and may provide the beginner with some elementary guidelines.

We have categorized the most typical kinds of writing with which the worker might be involved under four major headings: correspondence, program records, publicity documents, and substantive documents. Within each category, we have reviewed some of the most salient characteristics and requirements of the various types of writing, including letters, memos, logs, minutes, annual reports, press releases, flyers and brochures, newsletters, grant proposals, and scholarly reports.

Although each specific type of writing has its own peculiarities, we believe there are some generalizations which can be adapted and applied to all, with modifications when necessary:

1. Be sure to proofread carefully and repeatedly, to check for ordinary errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation, and typing or reproduction.
2. Be aware of the power of the written word to solidify and rigidify positions and concepts. Make sure that whatever is written conveys precisely what is intended.
3. Be accurate. Always verify names, dates, monetary amounts, quotes, etc. Even a very valid position or statement is easily weakened if it can be demonstrated to be based on false or inaccurate information.
4. Write simply and clearly. Most readers truly appreciate economy and directness of language much more than elegance of style or use of jargon. Because of this, one's efforts are much more likely to be read if they are expressed concisely and straightforwardly.
5. Plunge fearlessly into a writing task. Once something is on paper, it can and should be revised several times. When time permits, the draft should be submitted to others for suggestions, which can then be incorporated into the final manuscript. Initial production, however, is obviously essential and should not be needlessly delayed because of hesitancy to make the attempt.
6. Remember to keep in mind the purpose and the expected readership of whatever is written. The style, format, and content are dependent on these factors, since any piece will be effective only to the extent that it accomplishes its purposes by reaching and affecting its readership.

A final reminder: Writing improves only through practice. The worker who awaits a magical transformation into a talented and prolific author will inevitably be disappointed. For some people, writing will never be enjoyable or easy; for most of us, however, it is a necessity. Most practitioners can develop the capability to write carefully, appropriately, clearly, and directly—and these simple skills, as we have seen, are crucial for increasing the effectiveness of written communication.