Writing for Publication: It's Not a Term Paper

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The adoption of the codex or book format was a publishing technology revolution more than a thousand years before the printing press. Like the major changes in publication and society brought about by the printing press and the Internet, it did not happen all at once (McKnight, 1979). During these transitions, the new technology was hailed with praise and ridicule, enthusiasm and skepticism and no one could see the eventual societal implications of its use. I suppose that there were similar mixed feelings whenever writing replaced reliance on human memory. In all four instances, the older medium survived, but its use changed. We still memorize, write with pens, use scrolls (think of the Torah) and treasure some things in print while we adopt new uses for online communications.

What has remained constant is the both the thrill and terror of exposing to the world one's words, be they in an epic poem, historical account, novel, report of scientific research or web accessible video. Composition and writing for oneself poses no risk and writing a term paper for a class involves some risk. But only with the serious risk of submission for publication comes the real opportunity for public reward and conversation. That gets you a line on your resume.

I teach a course in the School of Library and Information Science at LSU called "Publication for Librarians." How I wish I had had a course like that in my own LIS master's program! To some extent it's an expiation of my own shame over not submitting for publication something I wrote back then. I simply did not understand how different the publication process is from writing a term paper.

While working on that degree, I was curious about the transition from the roll to the codex. Concerning the extant documents from the Eastern Mediterranean countries in the Roman period some scholars at the time were mostly interested in the medium or format while others were more interested in the textual content. Interested in both, I wrote a write a term paper for a history of books and libraries course on the role of the Christian community in the third century CE in that transition. The paper got an "A" and the LIS professor submitted it for a prize for unpublished student manuscripts, which it won. Then he encouraged me to rewrite it as an article to submit to the *Journal of Library History*. Fearing that it was "not good enough," I embarked on another furious spree of searching and raising new questions. You know what happened; I graduated, moved away and never touched it again, and never submitted it. I read widely, but for years could not even start writing because the shame of not having "finished" my codex manuscript haunted me. There was so much I did not know about the supporting and interactive process of publishing in professional journals.

Carol Kuhlthau has extensively studied the normal emotional stages of term paper writing. (Kuhlthau 1993, 2004). These stages bring to mind Kübler-Ross' emotional stages of grief (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Perhaps writing school term papers sometimes inoculates professionals against ever writing again. It does not have to be that way.

As I wrote in "Professional Publication: Yes, You Can!"an editorial for the *Journal of Academic Librarianship* (McKnight, 2009), there are at least six major ways that writing for a professional journal is different from writing a term paper:

1. You get to pick the subject. You write about something you really care about, something that interests you. You write about something you have learned that others would probably like to know as well. If a question is on your mind, you do your research and share with

your colleagues what you found out. It's not just writing for the instructor; it's participating in the professional conversation.

2. You do not write it alone. You can write with one or more colleagues with different strengths. You can, even should, ask for help. You can ask people to look over your draft and make suggestions. That is not cheating.

3. There is no due date or "drop deadline". You will not "fail" if you don't turn it in on someone else's schedule. You submit when you have a good finished draft.

4. Yes, you read that right. You submit a thoroughly developed and polished *draft.* The version you first submit is not the final version that will appear in print. Reviewers and editors will help you revise it. It is a very interactive process.

5. The process is not either win or lose. Peer review rarely results in an absolute acceptance or absolute rejection. Your reviewers will usually want minor or major revisions. (For a minor revision, only the editor checks on it. For a major revision, it goes through peer review again.) They will give you advice. So will the editor. If your article is not appropriate for their journal, frequently they will suggest one that is a better fit. Editors of professional journals want and need manuscripts that will appeal to their readers. They are not self-absorbed divas like Miranda Priestly played by Meryl Streep in the movie *The Devil Wears Prada* (Frankel, 2006). Like librarians, they are very aware of what their readers want and need. Get over the romantic myths of terrible rejection or glorious accolades. This is not the Great American Novel swimming upstream in a vicious market where only the strong survive.

6. You can recycle your work. You could submit your term paper for only one course, but as a professional you can write up different aspects of a given piece of research for different audiences and different purposes. If your manuscript does not fit the first publication to which

you submit, you take some of the reviewers' advice, revise it and send it to another that is more appropriate. (Submitting to more than one at a time is a no-no.) You develop different articles at different times as your understanding of your subject changes. The process does not end with the semester.

With my codex paper, I used number three for procrastination and gave up because I did not understand four, five, and six. I had no idea how much I needed that review before I considered adding more material. The reviewers might have given me a different direction for my article than I might have taken, thus saving my time and effort. They probably would have helped me strengthen the article. I had no idea how the conversation of publication worked until I was appointed to the editorial board of my professional association's quarterly journal. Reviewing those submissions was a real revelation!

Each summer in my online publication class at LSU SLIS, the students start off with a subject search and market review of possibly relevant LIS journals for their own projects. I often invite editors of their target journals to join the online conversation with advice and answers to questions. After the students submit their finished drafts they do double blind peer reviews of other students' manuscripts. Most get new ideas for improving their own articles as they go through the process of looking at articles from the reviewer's viewpoint. On the basis of the blind reviews, they revise their articles to turn in at the end of the course. I give them a few last comments and then they submit to their target journals before fall semester begins. At least they are supposed to.

All of those students who submit their articles to their target journals eventually get them published, sometimes without any further revisions being necessary. Unfortunately, just like me long ago, some still cannot let go of their work. A major reason for not submitting is the belief

that with a little more work, the article could be "perfect". No article is ever "perfect". Perfectionism may kill more potentially useful writing than procrastination. As one of Voltaire's maxims is loosely translated, "Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good" (Voltaire, 1772).

Of course, no MLIS students have to publish to graduate, but many academic librarians do have to research and publish for promotion and tenure. And those without that requirement should do it anyway for two reasons. First, they should take part in the professional conversation of reading and writing and second, they should have first-hand experience of the process in which their faculty clients are so involved.

The text we use for the course is Rachel Singer Gordon's *The Librarian's Guide to Writing for Publication.* (2004). I also recommend the new collection of essays by published practitioners that Carol Smallwood recently edited, *Writing and Publishing, The Librarian's Handbook* (2009).

While there are many books available as guides through the academic publishing process, remember to read the appropriate style manual for your publication. Use *The Chicago Manual of Style* or the *Publication Manual of the American Psychology Association* for more than a reference work for your questions about citation style. Actually browse and read it for guidance in your writing. It can help more than you may realize.

For the normal emotional issues of the process, I recommend psychologist Robert Boice's works, particularly *Professors as Writers: A Self-Help Guide to Productive Writing* (1990), and *How Writers Journey to Comfort and Fluency: A Psychological Adventure* (1994). Perhaps his best advice is not to wait for inspiration or a large block of time to write. Brief regular daily sessions of as little as fifteen to thirty minutes are more likely to pay off with good work than "binge writing".

Even someone as busy as you can do it. You owe it to yourself, your colleagues and your profession. If you have nothing in progress, start today.

Postscript:

As far as I can remember, there were never more than a handful of copies of that codex paper I wrote. It was typed on an IBM Selectric® typewriter. I believe I had four or five photocopies made and bound at the local Kinko's store. Years later, I was demonstrating WorldCat in an online searching course I was teaching and needed sure-fire an example of a search with zero hits. Imagine my surprise when after typing my name in the author field I pulled up a record for that paper! Somehow the American Bible Society had acquired a copy (perhaps I gave it to someone?) and cataloged it. What seems very funny to me is that even though it was never really published, there is a record for it today in Amazon.com, obviously imported from WorldCat. While writing this article for *Codex,* I emailed the current librarian at the American Bible Society and sent her an early draft. She replied immediately that it is still there.

Author note: In addition to dozens of articles and book chapters, Michelynn McKnight is the author of *The Agile librarian's guide to thriving in any institution*, to be released by Libraries Unlimited in January of 2010.

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