



# Writing FOR Civilians

When we write for the publications our users read,  
we build visibility—and support—in our communities

By Laurie L. Putnam



**L**ove to write about libraries? Many of us do. For our fellow librarians, we speak volumes, clamoring to fill blogs, association newsletters, and scholarly journals. But for our communities? Not so much. The volume drops significantly when we consider the words we produce for publications our users and supporters read: local newspapers and company intranets, faculty newsletters and industry magazines.

These days it's more important than ever to communicate with people outside of the library world—"civilians," as library consultant Joan Frye Williams calls them. Community publications offer endless opportunities to share stories of library resources, services, and needs with our users, potential users, and funders. Let's look at how we can increase the visibility and influence of libraries by writing for publications that matter to our communities.

## Support starts with visibility

When budgets are tight and many around us question the relevance of libraries, we need to be visible, to tell people what we do, to explain why it matters. As James LaRue, director of the Douglas County (Colo.) Libraries, has written in *American Libraries* ([j.mp/KeepingMsgSimple](http://j.mp/KeepingMsgSimple)), "Our persistent loss of public mindshare and support cannot be fixed by librarians talking to each other." But it *can* be boosted by talking with our communities.

There's evidence. OCLC's 2008 report *Geek the Library: A Community Awareness Campaign* made several interesting points about factors that influence library perceptions and support:

- "There is a lot that people don't know about their public libraries." This means we have to talk about libraries more often and more loudly. We have to be present in the life of the community;

- "Perceptions of the *librarian* are highly related to support." Publishing locally can help put a human face on the local librarian and build credibility for the library;

- "Library support is only marginally related to visitation." Many people never come to the library, even if they're library supporters. We need to keep reminding them that we're here doing good things.

Ned Potter has been talking about this for a while now. An academic librarian at the UK's University of York, Potter (whose article "Marketing Your Library" begins on page 50) encourages librarians to reach out to nonlibrarians and the mainstream media—to break out of the library "echo chamber," where words and ideas bounce around among librarians.

There's good news, Potter told *AL*. When it comes to ideas escaping into the bigger world beyond, "There's definitely been an improvement recently." More librarian-writers are focusing on external audiences, submitting articles to civilian publications, and letting their voices be heard by those who may not know what we do or understand our point of view. The rewards can be rich. "Everyone I know who has done it seems to have gotten a lot out of the experience, and of course they've helped the library cause in general," said Potter. "I think it's like a lot of stuff in our profession: The more intimidating it is, the more rewarding it can be when it works."

## Reaching out to users

Beyond books, what are people in our communities reading, and how can we be more present in those places? We can reach out to users through the publications they see regularly. Library staff can write a single article in the local genealogy club newsletter, occasional guest posts on a

## RESOURCES

**The Library and Information Science Publications wiki** ([bit.ly/WcJQBp](http://bit.ly/WcJQBp)) profiles civilian publications librarians can approach. Browse for ideas, or create an account and add to our collective knowledge.

**"Escaping the Echo Chamber"** ([bit.ly/WcKiQ4](http://bit.ly/WcKiQ4)), a presentation by librarians Ned Potter and Laura Woods, encourages librarians to talk more with the rest of the world.

**Collected "At the Library" columns** by Julie Winkelstein ([j.mp/JulieWinkelstein](http://j.mp/JulieWinkelstein)), originally published in San Francisco area newspapers, provide useful examples for any librarian thinking of proposing a column.

**The Great Librarian Write-Out** ([j.mp/WriteOut](http://j.mp/WriteOut)) is a contest that challenges us to write for the public about libraries.

**The OpEd Project** ([theopedproject.org](http://theopedproject.org)) offers seminars and resources that aim to "expand our national conversation" through op-ed commentaries.



faculty blog, or even a regular column in a student or community newspaper.

Regular columns can be long-term efforts with high impact. For nearly six years, Julie Winkelstein authored *At the Library*, a weekly newspaper column on library-related topics that appeared in as many as five San Francisco Bay

Area newspapers. Now a doctoral student in information sciences at the University of Tennessee, Winkelstein was a children's librarian at the Albany branch of the Alameda County (Calif.) Library system during her time as a columnist.

How did she get started? With the support of her branch manager, Winkelstein told *AL*, "I emailed the editor of the local paper and proposed the idea. After reading a couple of samples, she agreed. And that was it!" Hundreds of columns followed—columns that told stories of local library activities; personal experiences with literature; and broader issues of budgets, diversity, and censorship. Winkelstein gave readers a glimpse into the daily life of a public librarian as an approachable member of the community with her readers' interests at heart.

Readers responded. Nearly every 600-word column brought feedback, and Winkelstein became a familiar face in her community. "Through emails, telephone messages, conversations, and letters, readers have thanked, corrected, questioned, and shared with me," she said. "The column drew attention to my library and to libraries in general, and it gave people an idea of what one librarian is like. Writing a library column personalizes the library staff and creates community awareness of critical library issues. It gives us visibility—and visibility is what we want."

## Raising awareness with influencers

Visibility can also be generated through the publications read by library funders and influencers, especially our parent organizations and local political entities. Each of these groups has its own inner circle of publications: the newsletters, magazines, and websites that serve our governments, universities, and companies. When we're present in those publications, we can build awareness of libraries and position ourselves as leaders—collaborators in education, experts in information and literacy issues, and vital contributors in the community.

For public libraries, consultant and educator Ken Haycock recommends looking at what local politicians and their

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senior staff read—magazines like *Governing* in the US and *Municipal World* in Canada—and trying to strategically place articles in those periodicals. (To learn how, see the sidebar "How to Write for a Civilian Publication.")

"We have so many great stories to tell about what we do every day to advance a municipal agenda,"

Haycock wrote in his *Library Leadership* blog. "We need to ensure that funders see them as part of their regular information diet." Yet articles about libraries are noticeably absent from these publications. "Other municipal departments have their own associations and publications too, but they still manage to ensure that their celebrations and concerns are front and center with those who make decisions affecting their future." Libraries can too.

Case in point: *Municipal World* recently published an article about the role of public libraries by Anne Marie Madziak, a consultant with the Southern Ontario Library Service. Madziak approached the editor at a conference, pitched her story idea, and found the editor supportive. The key? Being clear about her objective, choosing the right vehicle, and presenting her idea in a way that met the editor's needs and resonated with the target audience: municipal administrators and elected officials. "I wanted to try to influence and expand what they believe about public libraries and contribute to a better understanding of how libraries contribute to municipal priorities and overall community well-being," she told *AL*.

Madziak's article, "Public Libraries: Helping Communities Thrive in a Changing World," appeared in the July 2012 issue of *Municipal World*. It's her first article for lay readers, but it won't be her last.

## Give it a try

Ready to try? Here's an extra incentive: a contest, complete with prize money. In January, organizers of the Great Librarian Write-Out will select the year's best library-related article published in a nonlibrary magazine or journal. The winner's purse is currently \$800. Patrick Sweeney, branch manager of the East Palo Alto (Calif.) Library, initiated the contest and donated \$250 in seed money for the award.

The Great Librarian Write-Out is now in its second year, and Sweeney hopes to make it an annual event. Submissions are welcomed ([j.mp/WriteOut](http://j.mp/WriteOut)); to be eligible, articles must be published in a print-based nonlibrary publication between the 2012 and 2013 ALA Midwinter Meetings. "I would love to see the contest flooded with



entries,” Sweeney told *AL*. “It’s time for us to remind the public how great libraries are, and reminding librarians to remind the public is what this project is all about.”

## The stories just get better

We live and breathe libraries. We’re experts in information issues, infused with ideas about programs and services, and surrounded by stories of how libraries touch users. Every day. In every library.

“There is no shortage of examples of libraries doing wonderful things in the community, helping the community be the best it can be,” said Madziak. Those are the stories we need to tell, loudly and clearly, in the places our users, supporters, and influencers look for news.

“At the same time that we’re telling these stories,” added Madziak, “we need to be out there collaborating, connecting, strengthening the community in important ways.”

That’s where the narrative begins, ends—and continues. While our words are hard at work building community understanding and support, new stories spring from our community engagement. The word spreads. Our voices get stronger. And the stories just get better. ■



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## HOW TO WRITE FOR A CIVILIAN PUBLICATION

**M**any commercial publications depend on freelancers, even if they don’t advertise it. And many noncommercial publications, like school and club newsletters, are eager to accept relevant, well-written contributions. Your first story probably won’t run in the *New York Times*, but editors may be more approachable than you think. To get started, look to the publications read by the users and influencers in your community.

**Choose the right publication.** Identify the audience you want to reach (Your local public? Your government officials? Your school faculty or administration?) and find out what they read. “We have to learn to think about the reading habits and information-gathering practices of those we are trying to influence,” said library consultant Anne Marie Madziak. “In public libraries, that means our municipal leaders and community leaders.”

**Get to know your target publication.** Read back issues and see how—or whether—the publication has covered libraries in the past. Review the submission guidelines. If you don’t find guidelines, query the editor.

**Focus your proposal.** Pick a topic that’s timely and relevant. Then imagine how your story would fit into the publication. Try to see your proposal through the

editor’s eyes. If you’re proposing a column, write some samples.

**Know your audience.** Find out what you can about the publication’s readers and write with them in mind. “It’s all about empathy—putting yourself in the shoes of the publication and its readership,” said academic librarian Ned Potter. “What do the readers of this newspaper or that magazine or that journal really care about? That’s how you need to focus the article.”

**Keep the tone conversational.** When you write, imagine talking with one of your readers over coffee. “Whatever you choose to write about,” said library columnist Julie Winkelstein, “I think it should come from an urge to share rather than lecture. Make it personal—even if it’s an academic topic.”

**Skip the jargon.** Don’t talk about OPACs and ILLs when you’re writing for laypeople. “As librarians, we need to get very good at speaking the language of our funders and other target audiences,” said Madziak.

**Test your draft on a nonlibrarian.** Ask your mother to read it, or your neighbor—or, better yet, someone who represents your particular target audience. Get an honest reaction and listen to the questions that come up. Then revise.

