

Writing at Work: How to Write Clearly, Effectively and Professionally

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Is there an evolution or progress in the Philosophy of Documentation and Professional Writing? Yes, there definitely is! How do I know? – Because during the past four decades I was involved in various aspects of scientific and humanity-related documentation (e.g. creation of data bases), writing reference and text books, editing of books and several international journals, and publishing of hundreds of articles, essays, book reviews, and reports – as part (or better as a sideline activity) of my pragmatic/practically applied scientific work and university teaching and research. Having checked many books, and bought over 20, on writing (aside from those on linguistics, ...) I am able to do some comparing/contrasting. The book by James (being Executive Director of the Plain English Foundation) is indeed one of the better ones, and thus highly recommended. However, one must realize that some of the older books still have some appeal, exemplified by Tichy (1966).

The Contents list is merely an extremely meager overview of the book, so that only by examining the book from cover-to-cover does one get a clear impression of the author's excellent presentation of really all important aspects of writing. In many of my book reviews I had to suggest that all sub- and subsub-headings within the text ought to be part of the main Contents precisely because the Index being very inadequate. This would have been impossible in the present case because of the unusually large number of sub-headings utilized to offer logically-divided shorter sections; a very welcome approach.

So here are the concise Contents – Introduction, followed by Planning: 1. Readers, 2. Content, 3. Structure; Structure: 4. Focus, 5. Persuasion, 6. Coherence, 7. Design; Expression: 8. Tone, 9. Grammar, 10. Words, 11. Clutter, 12. Verbs, 13. Sentences; Review: 14. Punctuation, 15. Style, 16. Editing, 17. Proofing. Then follows: Further reading, Chapter notes, Acknowledgements, and Index.

Further to the credit of the author, and related to his well-structured format: each major section has a "Tools covered in this section"; each chapter (i.e. 1 to 17) has its own contents list, comprising the sub-headings, entitled "At a glance"; and many numbered lists, tables, and pictorial illustrations plus flow-chart-like and model-like diagrams of information-to-be-highlighted are used instead of long-winded sentences and paragraphs. I also like in particular his willingness to ignore the widespread public's 'aversion to Plato's and Socrates philosophies' by suggesting classical rhetoric

(logic, thinking styles/patterns, argumentation, persuasion, proof analysis, fallacies, etc.) as part of rational/systematic research methodology – naturally, in support of good writing.

This subject being a long-time hobby horse, allow me to list a few relevant books I have had for years to support those ancient thinkers listed by James:

Blaxter, L. (2001), *How to Research*, 2nd ed., Open University Press, Buckingham.

Wycloff, J. (1991), *Mindmapping: Your Personal Guide to Exploring Creativity and Problem Solving*, Berkley Books, New York, NY.

Fogelin, R.J. (1982), *Understanding Arguments: An Introduction to Informal Logic*, 2nd ed., Hartcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, NY.

Fearnside W.W. and Holther, W.B. (1959), *Fallacy: The Counterfeit Argument*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood, Cliffs, NJ.

Engel, S.M. (1982), *With Good Reason: An Introduction to Informal Fallacies*, 2nd ed., St Martin's Press, New York, NY.

The 2001 book by Blaxter *et al.* is one of the best (again, I can only point to the excellent style of presentation in addition to the book by James) I have seen in describing the research process. The other books cognitively-cum-intellectually support James' discussions about rhetoric/argumentation, with Wycloff's emphasis on utilizing diagrams-cum-models.

Here is just one exemplar of a chapter divided in this neat way by sub-headed sections (see pp. 12-9): 1. Readers. At a glance – The toolbox: Work at cooperatively with your readers, Understand the communication process, Apply the reader checklist; The living language: Why audience was the focus of classical rhetoric, How we lost sight of the reader, Restore the reader to your writing; Power tools: Test how well your documents work, Record your readers' responses, Review your reader's needs, Assess your text against standards, Run reader surveys and focus groups, Conduct usability testing, Run some field tests.

The reader may agree that each chapter having such a detailed complementary (secondary) contents' list would have been too cumbersome as part of the main contents.

Finally, here are exemplars of James' excellent style in presenting the well-selected information – nearly all as point-by-point lists and tables (some comparative/contrastive):

- reader check-list (pp. 16-19);
- 10-scale levels of document testing (23-4);
- selection of document tests (25-6);
- three types of Contents (judicial, deliberative, ceremonial (38-9);
- list of proofs (40);
- list of evidence (41);
- six contemporary creative content-techniques (43);
- mind map (46, 48);
- seven common document-architecture models (51);
- structure check-list (65-6);

- thinking structure: The Scientific Method (89);
- key parts of an argument (98);
- value analysis check-list (102);
- three modes of persuasion (105-6);
- proof analysis check-list (108-110);
- fallacies (115);
- elements of coherence (117-133);, e.g. paragraphing;
- unifying text (125);
- checklist of paragraph structure (126);
- subsection check-list (131);
- transitional words (132);
- graphics check-list (design) (148-9); and
- tone scale (155) and check-list (164-5).

As to the chapters on Expression (six sections) and Review (four sections) James' approach is likewise frequently unique, e.g. see:

- tables of officialese (191-4);
- readability (i.e. Fry graph) (198-204);
- grammar check-list (215-245);
- rhetorical touch to sentences (245);
- types of sentences (252-258);
- comma check-list (263);
- guide to hyphenation (273);
- four principles to guide style choice (281-4);
- capitalization 20-part check-list (285);
- four elements of editing (299) and check-list (301);
- editing 20-part spectrum (302);
- seven-part scope of editing tasks (306);
- proof check-list (316); and
- top 10 proof-reader's tips (323).

Surely, the above should be sufficient to highlight the book by James as one of the more unusual and pragmatic toolkits for anyone involved in writing, editing, peer-reviewing, publishing ... Congratulations to all involved!

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Reference

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User-Centred Library Web sites. Usability Evaluation Methods

Carole A. George
Chandos Publishing
Oxford
2008
244 pp.
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Book reviews

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User-centred design is very much in the focus of current software development. There are many different methods that can be used to gather user feedback before and during the development and to evaluate the finished product. This book aims to guide the developer through the usability evaluation methods “from the early stages of design to the late stages of testing a finished web site”.

The book starts with the description of user-centred design: how it developed through time and what it means today. The end-users’ needs and requirements and principles of user-centred design of web sites are discussed. The first chapter ends with a brief list of general guidelines for web site design.

Chapter 2, *Getting started*, describes the first steps of web site design: assembling the development team and defining the project requirements. All usability evaluation methods, described in detail later in the book, are briefly mentioned. Finally, there are recommendations on how to select and recruit a representative group of users to participate in usability testing.

Chapter 3 deals with user needs analysis. The author focuses on task analysis and the survey as the method of gaining information. Different types of questionnaires and interviews are described in detail including their respective advantages in disadvantages.

Participatory design means including the stakeholders in all phases of design and development and Chapter 4 describes the methods of acquiring user feedback during the process. Affinity diagramming, card sorting and prototyping are discussed.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on usability testing: first heuristic evaluation and cognitive walkthrough, followed by observing users using the finished product using think aloud protocols.

The final chapter gives guidance on communicating the findings in formal or informal written reports and oral presentations.

In the Appendix, there are examples of documents from different studies: request for participation, screening questionnaire, post-test questionnaire, and reviewer’s form for heuristic evaluation. There is also a Glossary and short Bibliography.

This is a valuable handbook for any practitioner involved in web site design and development. Many methods are listed and presented in context, including practical guidance and caveats. Even some less known methods such as card sorting are included; on the other hand, log file analysis, which is widely used and documented, is unfortunately missing.

The manual will be particularly useful either as an introductory reading or as a complement to other similar resources of which there are many examples. Any

practitioner, when actually performing usability testing, will need additional information and guidance. For that, many more references to other manuals or reports on usability studies would be appreciated.

I am also puzzled by the fact that the title of the book refers to library web sites, yet the content does not reflect this at all: everything described is applicable to any web site, even any computer software in most cases. In addition, the few times the library context is mentioned, it is only about academic libraries. Why is there the assumption that only academic librarians would be interested in web site design? The book definitely would be useful for others and definitely not only librarians.

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Metadata

Marcia Lei Zeng and Jian Qin

Facet Publishing

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365 pp.

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According to David Evans (2008), a futurologist with Cisco:

By 2010 all the information on the internet will double every 11 hours. Ten years from now, it will double every 11 seconds. That will fundamentally change how we search for information.

Whatever the accuracy of this prediction, there is no doubt whatsoever that the exponential growth of the Worldwide web has had a most profound effect on professional conceptions. Metaphors such as “The Web is an enormous library” and “Metadata is just another name for cataloguing” now ring hollow. Yet, as the authors of this excellent book point out, “the first metadata scheme targeted for Internet resources [was] the Dublin Core Metadata Element Set...proposed in 1995”, which fact may have generated these metaphors. More recently, the extraordinary phenomenon of social networking has created not only a huge increase in web content, but is creating ways of communicating and sharing which are perceived to be undermining the traditional facilities for browsing and retrieving information. Weinberger (2007) argues that there are “three orders of order”: the first where physical objects are ordered (e.g. shelf arrangement), the second where surrogates are ordered (e.g. the card catalogue), but that now we are faced with having to order the bits into which content has been digitised. Weinberger then says “The power of the miscellaneous comes directly from the fact that in the third order, everything is connected and therefore everything is metadata.” In other words, he claims that we are now breaking away from hierarchical order to the infinite linking to be seen on the Internet, linking between resources with whatever labels anyone wants to place on electronic resources.

The authors of *Metadata* reflect an aspect of this resource variety in Part I of their book, which surveys the various metadata standards that now exist for application for

general purposes (Dublin Core, Metadata Object Description Schema (MODS) and the MARC family); as well as a range of specialist standards for cultural objects and visual resources, educational resources, archives and preservation, rights management, scientific material, multimedia objects, and finally metadata describing agents – that is people and groups of people.

It is no insult to the authors to say that reviewing this book is rather like reviewing a railway timetable. It is a solid piece of work that must have required much effort to compile, designed as “both a textbook and an instructional guide for practitioners”. It is to be hoped that the authors are prepared to work on later editions in this fast changing world. In its 365 pages, the book contains no less than 111 illustrations, 25 exhibits (taken direct from web sites), ten tables, a seven-page Glossary, a Bibliography of nearly 400 references, and a seven-page Index.

Part II contains the meat of the book, covering the definitions and discussion of Metadata elements, Element sets, Value spaces, Application profiles and Crosswalks. Here, we enter the often subjective world of the information architect, and the authors are helpful and honest in their appreciation of the difficulties faced by those working in this area. The section opens with these words “Intelligent [metadata] decisions are integral to successful implementation of the project. In the previous chapter we introduced some standards utilized by different communities; however, in most cases, the development of a digital collection does not start (or end) by adopting an existing standard without some adjustment or adaptation”. This potential divergence from proffered standards raises important issues to do with quality and effectiveness, and interoperability, issues which the authors deal with in later chapters. Their Glossary defines “Element” as “a formally defined term used to describe one of the properties of a resource of a particular type or for a particular purpose. For example, the “publisher” of a book, the “format” of an electronic file, or a “restoration date” of a building”. The Element set is then the complete list of defined elements. Each Element may then have a “Value space”, which in turn is supported by (usually external) encoding schemes, which may be “syntax encoding schemes” (e.g. the convention for the format of a date – notably different in the UK and the USA), or “vocabulary encoding schemes”, such as the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) or *RFC 4646 – Tags for identifying languages*. This last feature is, of course, a huge area in its own right, and the authors sensibly confine themselves to giving examples and a few references.

It follows that the larger the element set, with its accompanying value spaces, the more complex the system becomes and the danger of ambiguity grows, particularly when elaborated with refinements or sub-elements. For example, the Dublin Core Metadata set (version 1.1) contains just 15 elements, but in the UK. The Office of the e-Envoy produced an ambitious and mandatory metadata standard based on the Dublin Core, to be used by all public bodies on their public-facing web sites. This standard contained (in version 3.1), 25 elements, many of which were subdivided into sub-elements, numbering over 80 in all. One element “Type”, carried an Encoding scheme containing over 80 descriptors, such as Article, Report, and Policy. The Element ‘Subject’ was divided into several refinements, including Classification – using as a mandatory encoding scheme, the *Government Category List (GCL)*, specially prepared to support the standard; and allowance was made for a second refinement, ‘Keywords’, which was open to users for the encoding of their resources using their own thesauri. They were also then invited to map such thesauri onto the *GCL*. The point of including this brief case study is to underline the remarks made by the authors

concerning the usual need for determining purpose, understanding user needs and for careful design.

This Section closes with three important chapters: the first dealing with Application profiles, noting that an enterprise-wide metadata standard may well need to adapt its implementation to satisfy the requirements of different application, such as a web site directory taxonomy and a business classification supporting a file plan; the second with Crosswalks, defined as “a mapping of the elements, semantics, and syntax from one metadata scheme to those of another”; and the third with metadata encoding schemes, most notably XML in some of its manifestations.

So far, the book has concentrated on applications within the enterprise, but Part III enters the open environment, an area which surely will become a growth industry. Mention was made above of that misleadingly simple word ‘mapping’, which computer specialists often seem to regard as simple string matching, whereas the information architect must pay attention to the underlying concepts. Zeng and Qin recognize the growing importance of interoperability when they say “It is becoming generally accepted in the information community that interoperability is one of the most important principles in metadata implementation”. One can go further by saying that the Semantic Web is most unlikely to succeed unless the whole range of tools is effectively deployed, including metadata sets, encoding schemes, XML and/or RDF, and exchange formats such as SKOS. Clearly, though, interoperability is now far too complex a problem for most individual agencies to tackle, and so a number of metadata services are evolving. The authors present valuable descriptions of metadata repositories and metadata registries, the former being used to support federated searching and the latter providing a central facility for information architects to access metadata tools. An important example of a metadata repository given in the book is the National Science Digital Library (NSDL) established by the National Science Foundation in the USA. This facility is described on the NSDL web site as “...organized access to high level quality resources and tools that support innovation and teaching at all levels of science, technology, engineering and mathematical education”. Zeng and Qin add in their book that “In addition to the thousands of item-level metadata records for individual items in the repository, it also holds collection-level metadata for each collection included in the NSDL”. An enterprise of this size and complexity clearly requires governmental funding. The metadata registry, on the other hand is defined by the authors as “A formal system for the documentation of registered element sets, schemas, application profiles, encoding schemes, element usage information, and element crosswalks. A good example of such a facility is provided by the CORES Project, an international European consortium that created some foundation work for a metadata registry intended to support the Semantic Web. The Registry lists contributing agencies and their downloadable element sets, elements (a large number of these, which again emphasises the complexity of metadata work), encoding schemes, application profiles and element usages, this last giving details of how each agency is using the elements in their particular applications.

In conclusion, it is clear that Weinberger, and Zeng and Qin agree on the growing importance of metadata, but there are apparent differences in their enthusiasms. While Weinberger promotes social networking and the free use of tagging and linking, Zeng and Qin argue for the importance of standards. While Weinberger criticises the Dewey Decimal Classification (a *de facto* standard in large areas of the Western World) for its hierarchical approach, Zeng and Qin describe the growing availability of a vast

number of encoding schemes. It is quite possible that these two positions are not incompatible, for social networking involves communities, and if each wants to promote some degree of interoperability within their community, then metadata standards become useful; whether they be a combination of Dublin Core and DDC for the public library community, or an oenological taxonomy for wine lovers. It can be expected that specialist metadata registries will grow and evolve to meet the needs of all sorts of communities, and that there will be a constructive junction of the freedom of social networking and the discipline supplied by standards.

This book is to be recommended without hesitation, and congratulations are due to Facet for re-publishing the American edition; it deserves a wide audience.

Alan Gilchrist

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What Happened to the Ancient Library of Alexandria?

Edited by Moustafa El-Abadi and Omnia Mounir Fathallah

Brill

Leiden

2008

259 pp.

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What Happened to the Ancient Library of Alexandria? originated from a collection of conference papers given in 2004. Each of the thirteen chapters discusses a different aspect of the library's history, role and chronology but takes as its central driving question the ultimate fate of the ancient library. This gives the volume cohesiveness in what might otherwise have become a very general history of ancient Alexandria.

The underlying question of what happened to the library is undoubtedly the strength of the book, which comes to the consensus conclusion that while exactly how the library was destroyed is unknown, the evidence seems to strongly indicate that it continued to have a popular and cultural impact in some form long after its destruction. As co-editor Ismail Serageldin suggests, Alexandria "continued to be a renowned seat of learning in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages" (p. ix). For library historians this challenges some of the accepted scholarship that the public library as a cultural centre of learning began at the start of the modern period.

The level of scholarship is impressive, with source material taken from key Egyptian, Arabic and classical texts, and the Bible as well as a comprehensive list of secondary material. There are some fascinating reproductions of classical images, mosaics and library architecture. The contributors themselves are some of the most impressive names in the field and between them offer a rich variety of discourses on ancient Alexandria. The chapters cover four broad themes; the evolution of the library

institution in ancient Egypt; the threat to the Ancient Library in late Ptolemaic and Roman times; intellectual culture in Alexandria in Late Antiquity; and the relationship between the Arabs and the Alexandria Library.

The book does assume quite high levels of existing knowledge; it is not a book for the interested amateur. Having its origins as a collection of conference papers becomes most evident here, where, unless you have some knowledge of the political and social affairs of ancient Egypt, you may be left faltering in places, such is the depth of historical detail.

That said, there are some fascinating anecdotal points to take away from this volume. Of particular interest to documentation scholars, Mounir Megally's discussion of the systemisation of knowledge (if you can read the French in which it is written), and Fayza Haikal's distinction between archives and libraries in relation to the linguistic differences in hieroglyphics used by priests. Terms such as, when translated, "the hall of written documents", "the house of papyrus rolls" and "the house of life" (p. 41). Haikal's contribution also offers a fascinating insight on ancient forms of knowledge management as library scrolls were arranged in size, according to their importance, from large religious works, to smaller draws of letters and bills.

There are also some intriguing discussions by Grzegorz Majcherek, Georges Leroux and Maria Dzielska which show a tradition of oral knowledge, lectures and education taking place within the ancient library. The sixth century writer, Elias, describes lecture rooms in the library to be "in similarity to theatres, are often round in plan so that the students can see one another as well as the teacher" (p. 201). This suggests that the library of Alexandria was much more of a cultural and intellectual centre than simply an ancient repository for written material.

The one real limitation to this collection, and it is a significant one, is that of translation. While commendable and important that research on this topic is being translated into English for greater dissemination, in places the language is stilted and ambiguous. Of the thirteen chapters, two are in French whilst the rest are in English. At no point is this referred to or explained within the volume which gives it an oddly disjointed feel, and quite why the publishers felt it was appropriate to offer a book in two languages is unclear. Unless you are fluent in scholarly English and scholarly French there are some immediate and fundamental barriers to comprehension.

For those with little or no existing knowledge of the classical age in Egyptian history this collection is probably not the best place to start. However, there is some fascinating material here, if you can work through the issues with language, offering an insight into the ancient history of libraries, in contrast to the more oft-studied early modern and modern periods of documentation developments.

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