

LITERATI
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Write Right First Time

by Robert Brown

The dream of all authors and editors is to be able to write and receive a steady stream of articles that are perfect to go to print just as received. The bad news is that it is just a dream. The good news is that a process called action learning can help bring the dream a little closer to reality.

What Is In This Article For You?

Whether you are reading this as an author or an editor, my guess is that one of your fondest desires would be to get journal articles published with less trouble than you currently have to endure. However, as Dr Johnson observed, what is written without effort is in general read without pleasure, so don't imagine that I am going to tell you about some magic wand, because I am not. Action learning is not a substitute for effort, but it is a way to make the effort more productive. At first, it may even take you a little longer to achieve what seems like the same result, but, in the long run, you will have every chance of turning out more papers that are closer to being "right first time".

Accordingly, I have set out to tell you the key things that you need to know to be able to convene your own action learning sets of authors.

You can use action learning on three levels. The first one is the obvious, but comparatively superficial, level where people focus solely on the document itself and on getting it into shape. The second level is where people try to improve their writing style, so that subsequent documents also benefit. Working at these levels can produce useful outcomes, but good writing touches the soul just as much in non-fiction as it does in fiction. Therein lies both the problem and the solution, and it takes us to the third level. I know very few people who find serious writing truly easy. I think the reason for this is that, unconsciously, we all know that writing bares parts of our soul, and we fear that some parts are safer kept hidden. Thinking that way is an error. Inside everyone is so much gold that there is no reason to keep anything hidden - our own misunderstandings are all that prevent us from seeing that. If you can start to understand that, you can also start to understand that, because writing is so difficult for so many people, it also creates an opportunity for real personal growth and a greater understanding of why we are here. Action learning is a vehicle to help seize that opportunity.

So, in a nutshell, action learning provides opportunities to become, not just a more competent writer, but also a more competent person.

How I Came To Be Writing This Newsline

things that scientists do, like publishing research papers, refereeing for journals, serving on the editorial boards of journals, and so on. However, half-way along, and probably for all the wrong reasons, I took on managing the publications of one of my organisation's research branches. I had jumped onto a parallel track (although I didn't know it at the time); I kept on being a scientist and publishing research, but I started to see things through the eyes of someone trying to manage the process.

For me, it was soul-destroying. It didn't seem to matter whether I did a great job or a rotten job: the good authors kept on being good authors and some of the poorer authors became more skilful, but there always seemed to be an endless supply of inept authors to take their place. I knew there had to be a better way, but it took me some years to find it. It has been an uncomfortable progression, but as the saying goes, the best steel passes through the hottest fire.

In 1991, I started an action learning MBA with the International Management Centre (IMC) and I focussed on how to use action learning to develop the subtle skills that scientists need to have to publish papers in scholarly journals. I was no longer working in "hard" science, but I found my research background invaluable and, to my total surprise, the work turned out so well that I ended up being the joint winner of the Revans' Trophy for the outstanding IMC masters' graduate of 1993. IMC's Principal, Dr Gordon Wills, happens to be the Literati Club Chairman, so he urged me to put pen to paper. This article draws on what I learned from that work and the work that followed it.

Scholarly Publishing Under the TQM Microscope

Put simply, TQM (Total Quality Management) is about creating production systems that provide the feedback needed to make continuous improvement to the product.

Early in my MBA studies, I made a flowchart of how my organisation published its research. In the journey into print and onto a reader's desk, I identified ten points where a paper could fail in its primary task of transferring ideas from its author's head to its reader's head (interestingly, three of these occurred after publication).

Accompanying these points were many feedback loops to revise defective manuscripts, but all of them arose after the author had written the manuscript and sent it for review!

In TQM, the most elementary trap is to try to inspect (edit) in quality at the end of the assembly-line rather than building it in at the outset. When I looked at the flowchart, I knew that we had fallen head over heels into just that trap. In hindsight, it is such an elementary error that it seems incredible that we could have made it. On the other hand, we had plenty of company because the rest of the world also seems to tackle this problem exactly the same way. I think that this has happened because we all decided, probably unconsciously, that trying to fix faults before a paper was written was a problem for the "too hard" basket.

When I reviewed the ten failure points, it became clear that much of the failure was due either to the author's having nothing original to say, or else saying it so clumsily that readers did not understand it (and, of course, the two can overlap as an original idea can seem unoriginal if it is poorly expressed). Of the two, lack of originality seemed to be a much less common problem than clumsy presentation of ideas that would otherwise have been worth reading.

There is a saying that clumsy sentences can be a perfectly accurate way of expressing clumsy, half-formed thoughts. Therein lay the key. It also seemed to explain why the problem had been consigned to the "too hard" basket: most people naively expect editors to straighten out tangled text but do not stop to wonder whether that is a doable task. Untangling half-formed thoughts is difficult enough for even the most skilled editor, but nobody can edit in thoughts that an author is yet to have (even though they are often the very bits needed to make a document coherent!). In the light of this, the obvious solution seemed to be to intervene closer to the point of assembly to help authors get their thoughts into better focus and to do it before they wrote their first draft. If we

"think" it in, action learning seemed to be the vehicle to provide the solution. First, it could provide a forum for authors to explore and focus their ideas. Second, it could provide an on-going forum for authors to test out how well they were succeeding in translating those thoughts into words for their readers.

What You Need to Know to Convene an Action Learning Group

So much for the background. The following section tells you what you need to know to set up your own action learning group. Basically, you need to know how to constitute a learning set and to have a process to follow for reviewing the manuscripts as they take shape, but, before we get into that, let's pause to compare conventional reviewing with what happens in an action learning review.

Action Learning Involves Face-to-Face Reviewing

Manuscripts are traditionally reviewed by experts at arm's length. Reviews by journals are usually anonymous and even reviews commissioned personally by the author are often done by mail. Only occasionally does an author have the chance to work through a paper in person with a reviewer so that they can elaborate on points and explore alternatives, and it is rare to do this as a group exercise where reviewers can build on each other's comments. Even rarer is the review by someone from outside the author's field of expertise and who comes unencumbered with the assumptions of that discipline.

All these things change in the learning set. Reviewing in an action learning set is explicitly face-to-face and collegiate.

Just What Is a Learning Set?

A learning set is a group that meets regularly to talk about common problems and to look for solutions. A learning set of authors provides face-to-face reviewing by friends, most of whom lack preconceptions about the content of a paper or its context. This approach has strengths that blind refereeing can never provide. It provides an immediacy and support that allows authors to get deeper into their papers than they would otherwise do. Because it is done among friends and usually on a you-review-mine-and-I'll-review-yours basis, there is less defensiveness and this makes it easier to see the grains of truth that lie in most criticisms. After a few meetings, it can also bring authors to profound insights about themselves and their work.

However, also understand clearly that the learning set is not a substitute for review by experts in the relevant discipline. The two are entirely complementary, so all authors should be encouraged to get expert comment from colleagues within their discipline and to do this in parallel with the activities of the learning set. Advice from experts outside the set and advice from non-experts within the set will both alert authors to important points that need to be attended to, but they will focus on different things, so neither should be ignored.

Constitution of the Set

A good learning set is not just any old bunch of people. There are two guiding principles to follow in putting one together.

First, go for diverse sets. Sets drawn from within a discipline tend to get captured by the discipline and not ask the "dumb" questions that outsiders sometimes ask but which can also lead to important insights.

Second, the ideal set size is five. One way to sabotage action learning is to pack in too many people so that none of them get enough air time. With four other set members and a set advisor offering comments and questions, it is easy to spend an hour or more on each paper. (This should also give you some idea of how long to allow for a

Learning sets usually operate better with a set advisor. A set advisor is an extra person whose role is to guide, advise, and offer the occasional prod. With writing, a set advisor has two important roles:

- (a) to keep the questions and comments squarely focussed on how the authors develop their arguments rather than on the content of the argument as an end in itself; and
- (b) to nudge the set when it retreats to safety rather than taking the risks that lead to growth.

Sets that meet without set advisors tend to underperform because it becomes easier to stray from the real task. I think the ideal set advisor would have (in decreasing order of importance): (a) experience as an author, (b) an understanding of and a willingness to come to grips with the emotional difficulties that authors meet, and (c) experience as an editor.

The Review Process -

An Eight-Question Structure

The key to reviewing manuscripts well is to make the most important things explicit.

Some authors write for their own ego, and, as a consequence, they often find it hard to get published. Real authors know that they must write to benefit other people: some manage to do this instinctively, whereas many others thrash about without ever fully mastering the task. However, even those who do it instinctively often benefit from having a more explicit structure to follow, so I ask authors to write explicit answers to the following eight questions:

- (a) who are the intended readers? - list 3 to 5 of them by name;
- (b) what did you do? (limit - 50 words)
- (c) why did you do it? (limit - 50 words)
- (d) what happened? (limit - 50 words)
- (e) what do the results mean in theory? (limit - 50 words)
- (f) what do the results mean in practice? (limit - 50 words)
- (g) what is the key benefit for your readers? (limit - 25 words).
- (h) what remains unresolved? (no word limit).

The word limits are arbitrary, but important for the discipline of getting down to the essence of what needs to be said. The second last question (about the key benefit) is the most important and the others stand largely to help the author to answer this particular question. (If you have picked this as a framework to get authors to understand that scholarly writing is just another form of marketing, you are dead right!)

The last question is to help make explicit the areas where the author feels uncertain and to flag them as areas for advice from the set.

The Most Common Error

results mean in theory, what their results are good for in practice, and what the likely benefits are for their readers. This is important because it is only by attending directly to these latter four topics that authors can provide the planks to build a bridge between their own reality and their readers' reality. Moreover, only when that bridge is built can a writer step into a reader's reality and make real communication happen.

Checking For Congruence

I require authors to put the answers to all eight questions at the start of every draft. The main task of the set colleagues then comes down to looking for discrepancies between the paper's stated aims (i.e. the answers to the questions) and what it actually delivers. When a discrepancy is found, the author's job is to adjust either the text or the answers to the questions. The draft in which nobody finds any more discrepancies to reconcile is the draft to submit for publication.

Discrepancies are where you find them, so nothing is off-limits but, to the extent that sets need guidance, I also find it useful to tell them to look carefully at the title, abstract (or summary or conclusion), introduction, and discussion section to see how clearly the author flags the key benefit for the readers. A good author will use different words each time, but a reader should always be able to find the echoes of the key benefit in all of those places. When readers cannot find them, it is usually because the author suffers from the "save the best until last" syndrome and writes in the suspense format. This is a great format for writing detective novels, but it makes non-fiction hard to read. Unfortunately, it also seems to be the format of first choice for many writers, perhaps because it is a logical extension of the school report.

Traps That Sets Can Fall Into

Sets are a lot like marriages: they succeed or fail according to the will of the participants to make them work, but, even with the best will, there are still traps for the inexperienced and they will always make a set underperform. The following six are all traps that I have unwittingly let sets fall into at one time or another; you would do well to avoid them.

The first trap is to let the set put off reading the draft papers until they get to the set meeting. This will ensure they don't have enough time to read them properly, much less form a considered opinion, and so will be restricted to giving the author only superficial feedback.

The second trap is to focus on the content of the paper as an end in itself rather than as merely the information the set needs to have to help the author build a seamless argument. People can make two sorts of errors here. One is to argue over matters where they have no expertise; the other is to read a document, find nothing to disagree with, and so tell the author that everything is fine. The latter is the more common error. The job of a set member is neither to agree nor disagree with the author; it is to reflect back what the author seems to be trying to say and to explain areas that are confusing or misleading from a reader's perspective. The overall aim is to help the author both to find any gaps or inconsistencies in the argument and to refine and polish the key benefit so that it shines out for the reader.

The third trap is to be afraid to make mistakes. Elbert Hubbard, the American philosopher, said that the greatest mistake a man can make is to be afraid of making one, and he could not have been more right. If some "dumb" questions are not asked, the set is not doing its job.

The fourth trap is to treat the exercise as a purely intellectual one. Writing is psychologically scary for most people, including yours truly. One colleague aptly described it as intellectual streaking. These fears are irrational, but one of the biggest myths we have is the notion that human beings are rational. The way to beat fear is to confront it and it is important to do that because fear is corrosive. Left to itself, un confronted fear will corrode a set. The set is often unaware of its happening but it will happen just the same, and,

they have written but what they haven't written, in other words, it is to confront their reasons for their not doing things that they know in their hearts they could be doing. Often, those things underlie a writing block or a failure to express themselves clearly. The reasons can be threatening and most find it more comfortable to avoid them, but that doesn't lead to learning. Thus, part of the set meetings should be devoted to silent time for people to write down what they have learned, what they plan to do differently, and what remains unresolved or unclear.

The sixth trap lies in being too pressed for time to discuss the reflections. Reflection is useful by itself, but it is much more powerful when it is shared. It seems to me that there are only so many scripts in life, but that there are also endless variations on each script. Once people start to discuss what they have learned, what they need to change, and what they still need to work on, they also start to see that so many of them share variations on the same theme and that opens the way not only to greater set cohesion but also to greater learning. On the other hand, people learn only when they are ready to learn, so not everyone will take this opportunity, but it is important to provide it for those who are ready, especially as they often encourage the more reluctant ones to take the leap too.

In other words, if a set is to perform as a true learning set, it is important that everyone (a) comes fully briefed about each paper, (b) focuses on the big picture of what an author is trying to say, (c) asks "dumb" questions when they genuinely don't understand, (d) is willing constructively to confront their own and their colleagues' fears, (e) is honest with themselves when they reflect, and (f) openly discusses the fruits of their reflections.

Outcomes of Action Learning For Authors' Successes With Journals

The success that authors achieve through action learning can be truly spectacular. In late 1992 and early 1993, I had telephone calls from four authors and each of them had three things in common: (a) they had participated in one of my action learning programs; (b) they were novice authors and had just submitted their first or second paper to a refereed scientific journal; and (c) each was calling to tell me that that first or second paper had just been accepted without change by a journal of international standing.

I was stunned because, in science, fewer than one paper in fifty is published without revision (many journals publish annual statistics on this). Thus, many scientists go right through their careers without ever publishing a paper that did not have to be revised after being reviewed by the journal. For novices to do what seasoned veterans often never do demonstrates how powerful action learning can be.

I have also had calls from many other participants to let me know that they had also had a paper accepted for publication. Most were from novices, but some were from veterans. Moreover, a good proportion were accepted with such minor revision that the changes may have been less a reflection of any serious flaw than of the reviewers' need to prove that the paper had been critically examined. In each case, the authors attributed part of their success to the things that they had discovered in the action-learning programs. The bottom line seems to be that action learning creates an environment for authors to develop the clarity of thought that they need to have to publish with a minimum of fuss.

On the other hand, do not get the idea that action learning is some kind of magic bullet that fixes everything. I have had authors drop out because their own bottom line was that they weren't willing to put in the necessary work and there is a limit to how much an action learning set can help compensate for an intrinsic lack of motivation. I have also had two authors report having had papers rejected. (Of these two, one paper was average and the other was much better than average, but all journals publish some papers that are not worth publishing and reject some that are worth publishing; that is just how things are - I think that both papers will fare better with other journals.)

"Jigsaw" Successes For Authors

What the missing part might be depends on the person and cannot be anticipated, but you will know when it falls into place because that person's writing will take a quantum leap. To give you an idea of the transformations that are possible, one author went from being a writer whose colleagues dreaded having to read one of his manuscripts (because they were a boring litany of facts piled one on top of another) to a writer whose manuscripts were good enough to go to a journal on the first draft. What he learned to do was to punctuate his facts with general observations about what the facts added up to. Another learned that simply reversing the order of information in some of his sentences made all the difference between leading his readers down a logical path of argument and leaving them stumbling around in his paragraphs trying to make sense of apparently unrelated information.

On a deeper level, another author learned that he did not have to stay hidden behind his professional mask. Once he understood that, he freed himself to talk directly to his readers instead of straining his words through a sieve of academic pomposity. Enthusiasm and directness entered his writing and his text became a pleasure to read.

Those are only a few of the transformations that I have seen, but there is a common thread that runs through all of them. The thread is that there was nothing grammatically wrong with the individual sentences they wrote, but their writing was the sort of writing that makes most editors despair because the whole was less than the sum of the parts. What made the difference was the action-learning environment. It gave them the opportunity to explore their writing with supportive colleagues and, in the exchanges about what they were doing and how they were doing it, they found the keys to unlock some of their personal shackles. Action learning gave each of them an opportunity to explore and to learn what is rarely available from conventional reviewing and, importantly, it let them do it at their own pace so that they could learn when they were ready to learn.

In Case You Missed It Earlier...

(Or, in case you skipped to the end to find the bottom line) here is the main message. Action learning provides a supportive, reflective environment in which authors can sort out just what it is that they want to say in an article and how best to frame their thoughts so that readers cannot fail to grasp them. Key tools for achieving this include working to an explicit eight-question review format and understanding that writing is a mix of intellect and emotion and that both parts need to be understood and respected.

Feedback Loop cum Help Line

"Plans get you into things, but you have to work your way out" (Will Rogers). I suspect that I have made action learning sound simple and neat so far, but, of course, it isn't. When you try it, some parts will go well and some parts won't and it is practically impossible to know which parts are which ahead of the event. Nevertheless, collar some colleagues, organise a soiree, lay on a keg, or do whatever it is you have to do to get a set together and (to use the Australian vernacular) "have a go", because there is so much to be gained.

I would like to hear how you get on. I may be able to help with some of the bits that don't work and I am more than happy to learn from your successes. We may even generate enough insights to warrant a sequel to this issue!

My mailing address is Robert Brown, Agricultural Production Group, Queensland Department of Primary Industries, GPO Box 46, Brisbane, Australia 4001, or you can telephone me on 617 239 3515, or fax me on 617 239 3558.

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Dr Robert Brown

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Literati Club is delighted to publish Robert Brown's advice and guidance on how to work with colleagues to write better articles with a greater probability of publication. MCB University Press is committed to providing all the support and assistance it can to enable good ideas and rigorous research to get into print.

We sincerely hope you will find it of benefit. If you have your own ideas and/or successes, please write to Dr Gordon Wills, Literati Club Chairman at the below address.

An Outline of Action Learning

Some of you may be unfamiliar with action learning, so perhaps I should give you a thumb-nail sketch.

Above all, action learning is cyclic. It is about taking action in the real world, reflecting on the results of that action, drawing conclusions from the reflections, planning how to do it better next time, then repeating the cycle by taking more action, reflecting on the new action, and so on. With writing, it means doing some writing, reading and thinking about what has been written, reviewing it to see which parts work and which parts don't, deciding what needs to be changed, and then repeating the cycle by making a new draft. For many authors, that may seem to be what they do already but it is also something that they do alone and that is why it is important to understand that action learning is about taking action in the real world. Things that we do by ourselves take place in our private world where we can and do see what we want to see, and so we do not always see clearly. The real world is the world of others and, when action learning comes to writing, it does so as a group process so that the written words are tested in the real world of readers. It is that external testing that forces a clarity and rigour on the written word that can otherwise be elusive.

I cannot overemphasise how important it is to understand both the cyclic nature of action action learning and its four stages. Many of us think that we learn from our actions but, in reality, we just oscillate between "plan" and "act". Unless we interpose reflecting and concluding between those other two stages, we cut ourselves off from much of what we need to learn and so nearly always end up repeating the same old mistakes.

call them "fuzzy" problems because the problem itself is often hard to define and that makes the answer all the more elusive.

To date, action learning seems to have found its biggest application in education itself and in management education, perhaps because learning to learn is such a strong component of both disciplines. However, learning is a skill that none of us ever completely master, so action learning has a much wider application and it is hard to imagine a discipline where it couldn't be used.

Revans coined the equation $L = P + Q$, where L is learning, P is programmed published knowledge, and Q is questioning insight prompted by having to grapple with *a problem*.

Like all really important insights, this equation seems entirely obvious (but only once it is pointed out!). To me, its great value seems to lie in reminding us that we so easily lose sight of the fact that published knowledge often provides only an approximate answer to problems and that, to get a more complete answer, we need to question its application and bend it to fit our circumstances. So it is with publishing. The bulk of the published advice (good that it usually is) is so general that it is of limited use when it comes to actually writing an article. It is easy enough to get guidance about the trivia of writing, such as which words one should capitalise, but where are the rules for the big questions like:

"How does one decide what to put in or leave out?"

"Who constitutes the audience?"

"At what point in the argument should a particular piece of evidence be offered?"

Without answers to these sorts of questions, many would-be authors never get out of the starting blocks and plenty of others stumble so many times during the race that they never line up again. However, it doesn't have to be that way. Action learning helps writers both to get out of the starting blocks quicker and to stumble less often, so read on.

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