

The Writing Wheel

Presented by Beth Carson
At the ALA Annual Education Conference
San Francisco, CA
Wednesday, April 20, 2005
2:15 – 5:00 p.m.

According to the program description for this session, "Among the many tasks of an administrator, you must be able to produce well-written communications quickly and creatively." This two-part session explored brainstorming and drafting techniques that maximize our capacity to produce these communications, and helped us learn how to use these techniques to organize and strategize our writing projects. Ms. Carson presented a four-stage process for planning and drafting that can be passed on to others. Additionally, to give us a way to map the project, she presented a method referred to as "whirling" on The Writing Wheel, and then she topped off the program with some basic writing suggestions.

We start with the four stages of successful planning for our writing projects. These stages are structured to help the writer approach each project in an efficient and non-linear method to plan and outline. The stages are:

- Madman (brainstorms)
- Architect (designs)
- Carpenter (builds)
- Judge (inspects)

As a writer, when we approach a project, we need to work through the process in each of these four "roles," so to speak. Ms. Carson walked us through the various elements of each role. For example, as the Madman our role is to think of as many and varied things as we can that we want to say about the subject at hand. No thoughts of structure or judgment regarding the content are allowed at this phase. We only want to put down ideas -- lots and lots of thoughts written as quickly and freely as possible. The sequence, the appropriateness or even the wildness of these ideas does not matter at all. It is only important that we get down as many ideas as possible in the shortest amount of time in any random order.

Next we wear the hat of the Architect. As Architect our job is to arrange the ideas presented by the Madman and develop a plan that shows the steps or outline of the project from beginning, through the middle, and all the way to the end. This is a very linear approach. How formal it may become will depend on our audience and the specifics of the piece. Our job as Architect is to structure the pattern and development of the project. During this phase we strongly consider our purpose, audience, tone, point of view, organizational patterns and overall patterns of development.

Once we have an architectural plan, we then put on the working uniform of the Carpenter and begin writing in earnest. The Carpenter follows the plan and specifications provided in the last step and builds our first draft. Here we write quickly, "treating the outline as a simple series of gaps that must be filled in (caulk talk)." Don't slow down to edit as you go, just keep in the mode of the Carpenter and keep building until all of the steps outlined by the Architect have been filled in and the first draft is fully completed.

Finally we don the Judge's robes and take over while wearing the mind-set of the fourth role. As Judge we do everything that remains. We fix and repair, we correct and edit, we check punctuation and spelling. Our job here is to strictly concentrate on the cleanup and polishing. This is where we bring critical inspection and adjustment into play to deliver the piece to its final stage.

The full slideshow presented by Ms. Carson is provided here as an attachment. If you check the second slide on page 15, you will find a diagram of The Wheel. When I tried this method and set my own Madman free to "whirl" on the Wheel, I found it works. It is a simple and effective way to generate ideas.

The slides following The Wheel provide guidance on how to use this tool and expound further on the duties of Madman, Architect, Carpenter and Judge. Additionally they cover some helpful hints regarding phrasing sentences, and other considerations.

Overall, I believe that this training session provided valuable information for legal administrators who want to develop written communication skills. It achieved the objectives outlined in the program brochure, and it was well worth the investment of time. If you are interested in learning more about strategies for using The Writing Wheel, Ms. Carson's presentation is excerpted from Legal Writing in Plain English by Bryan A. Garner.

***Submission to Gateway ALA Chapter
from Bert Gagnon,
Director of Practice Support Services
Thompson Coburn LLP***