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TITLE TRAINING THE UNSEASONED TECHNICAL WRITER-EDITOR: FROM THE TRAINEE'S PERSPECTIVE

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# TRAINING THE UNSEASONED TECHNICAL WRITER-EDITOR: FROM THE TRAINEE'S PERSPECTIVE

## ABSTRACT

*Many unseasoned technical writer-editors who are not adequately trained may become seasoned inadequately trained technical writer-editors. This problem can occur when a trainee is involved in an ineffective training program, but it can be alleviated by the trainer's assessing the unseasoned writer's talents, becoming involved with the trainee's growth in writing and editing skills, and helping him to visualize his potential as a technical writer-editor. Assessment, support, mentoring, and nurturing are important elements in the trainee's growth process and in any good training or internship program.*

## THE NEW JOB

When I first began training as an intern at Los Alamos National Laboratory, I was terrified. I was 1500 miles from home and I knew no one at my new job. I left an elevation that was close to sea level to come to work in Los Alamos, which is 7000 feet above sea level. I was surrounded by strange mountain formations and the beautiful scenery of the West. Encompassed by an unfamiliar environment and the state-of-the-art technology of a national laboratory, I begin to feel unsure of my skills as a technical writer-editor. I also felt my own inner pressure and desperation. I wanted to do well and excel at being a technical writer-editor. I wanted to show everyone that I have what it takes to become a quality writer and editor, and I also wanted to prove it to myself. I had the drive and the initiative to succeed. But drive and initiative weren't enough. Without proper and accurate training, I may have given up my goal of becoming a technical writer-editor or I may have chosen another path for my career.

Proper training should be a part of every unseasoned writer's job description. At Los Alamos National Laboratory, training is required for all newly hired writer-editors, including new interns. Los Alamos National Laboratory is managed by the University of California for the Department of Energy. Various types of reports, papers, and other publications are written and published here, and, because of the scientific technology and sensitive nature of the documents, they must be written and edited according to specific standards, policies, and procedures. The Writing and Editing Group at Los Alamos used the guidelines developed by Buehler and Buren<sup>1</sup> to create its own standard four levels of edit. Much of the information was new to me, including the different levels of edit. I had to be trained to fully understand the policies and procedures. Even though I received the best training possible, I was still afraid, and my own inner drive and pressures continued to surface.

Other unseasoned writers and editors share my feelings of anxiety, excitement, and drive. They have a chance to put into practice the knowledge that was squeezed into their minds during college. The question is, how do you as a trainer meet these educated, unseasoned people halfway? How can you as a trainer or mentor take hold of this fear, excitement, and drive and build upon them to create a foundation that is strong, sure, and secure?

Excitement for a new job can be a great motivator. With this new excitement the unseasoned person believes he can conquer the world. Give him a three-week job to do, and he'll try to finish it in a week. This excitement and drive can contribute to a trainee's success because he is eager to learn. Having this excitement is great but it needs to be harnessed. What good is it to the employer if the job is finished in a week but is done incorrectly? You must take several steps to harness this energy to correctly train and nurture the trainee. These steps include assessment, teaching, on-the-job-training, monitoring, and assigning special projects.

## **ASSESSMENT**

The first step for adequate training is assessment. Don't dump the trainee into his new job. As any good writer knows, before you put the

pen to the paper or the fingers to the keyboard, you first have to know your audience. As a trainer, you have to know your trainee. Learn his strengths and current weaknesses. Learn what he needs from you. You can do this in several ways: questionnaires, conferences, and tests.

A questionnaire can be used to allow the unseasoned writer to inform you of what he may know and what he may need to learn to grow as a writer-editor. The questionnaire may include such questions as "What do you feel are your strengths as a technical writer?" "In what areas do you believe you need assistance?" "As a trainer, how can I best serve you?" "What are some things that I may need to know about you to teach you effectively?" This questioning emphasizes the areas the trainee needs help with the most.

Sometimes, depending upon the person, an informal, one-on-one conference with the trainer may be more effective than a questionnaire, or both forms of assessment may be required. This conference should not be an inquisition but rather a time when the trainee can feel comfortable and at ease with the trainer. During this time, you can get to know your trainee and assess his experience and needs. Ask him about his background and where he came from and tell him about his new city (if he is new to the area, of course). You can ask him about his goals and find out what he wants to do and hopes to achieve as a writer-editor. Helping him to visualize his future as a writer-editor is vital in the growth of the trainee. Help him to see what he can do for your organization. At first he may seem overwhelmed by the charge you have given him, but with your help and the help of other seasoned writers, he'll soon feel at ease in performing his duties.

During the conference you will need to find out what skills he has as a technical writer. Ask him about his background in writing and English. To know at what stage your trainee comes to you, you will also want to ask him about his writing and copy-editing skills. If he has completed a questionnaire, you can use it as a basis for the conference.

The trainee may feel uncomfortable discussing his history with you, but you can help him to feel at ease and reassure him that you will do your best to help him realize his goal in becoming not only a writer but a writer-editor who is creative, responsive, and effective.

Tests are another tool that you can use to evaluate the unseasoned person. As a trainee and intern, I believe tests intimidate trainees and make them feel even more uncomfortable. I am not saying people should not be given written tests. In one way or another, they will be tested once they are on the job full time. The test trainees will face in the real world ~~doesn't~~ will not give them a chance to learn at their own pace. In the real world the trainee is in a sink or swim situation. Is it not better to test and evaluate in preparation for more effective training? By having identified the trainee's needs, you can provide him with the training that ensures his success when facing the ultimate test of the real world.

Although I dislike tests, I must acknowledge that they can indicate how good the trainee's copy-editing skills are. They can also indicate the trainee's writing skills. When testing, though, you have to remember that not everyone is a good test-taker. If the trainee feels particularly uneasy, his performance and the test may not reflect his actual skills. For this reason, test scores should be compared with another assessment method to fully evaluate the trainee's capabilities. If you use tests, gear them towards helping the aspiring writer-editor. The trainee should know he is being tested to be helped. And once you have evaluated the test, have a conference with the him to discuss the results.

## **THE TRAINING PROCESS**

### **Classroom Training**

The formal or classroom training should include what the trainee will encounter on the job. The writing and editing training program at Los Alamos is an extensive, thorough, and intense seven-week course. It covers common usage problems in writing, mechanical editing at Levels I and II, substantive editing at Levels III and IV, writing abstracts and summaries, Laboratory policies, and processing and publishing a report or other document. Along with <sup>me</sup>myself, ten people, with various writing and editing backgrounds, participated in this training course. Examples of the training course included practice exercises in sentence structure, identifying misplaced modifiers, subject/verb disagreement, and writing effective memos. We also edited actual reports at all four levels. This practice was extremely helpful because we saw the technical nature of

the reports, how reports at the Laboratory were formatted, and how to edit them correctly. This is not to say that all the reports published at the Laboratory are technical in nature. Many documents are published for general audiences. Each report has to be written in a certain way to reach its audience. In training, we learned the different ways a document can be constructed to reach different audiences. The training class also covered the policy and publication issues of the Laboratory. The rules that govern the writing, editing, and publishing of Laboratory reports seemed endless. The rules included how front and back matter should be presented, the use of the Laboratory's logo, formats for the different types of reports, etc. Training in these issues made us aware of these policies and what we need to do as writer-editors to follow them.

Role-playing was an interesting part of training. Role-playing allowed us to observe how conferences with authors should go and how conferences should not go. Author conferences are important because accuracy and clarity are essential. We discussed interviewing skills and what questions we should ask during the conference. Through role-playing we learned how to be courteous to authors who may be emotionally injured by having their papers covered in red ink. A conference is also important to authors because it gives them a chance to explain their subject area clearly. Some authors do not feel comfortable expressing themselves in a written document, but they can do a good job verbally in getting their point across. Once the author explains the content of his document, the writer-editor can use this new awareness to help the reader better understand the author's report. Role-playing was a very important part of training because it showed the unseasoned writer how to get the job done professionally.

The training process should cover more than writing and policy issues. The trainee should also be introduced to his new working environment. This introduction can occur during the formal training process. One of the first items on the agenda in the writing and editing training program at Los Alamos is learning about the Laboratory's history and its mission. A person new to the job should be informed about his employer and introduced to his fellow employees as soon as possible to give the trainee a sense of whom he is working for. He becomes informed about the company and its goals and objectives.

## **On-The-Job Training**

Once the on-the-job training actually begins, the trainee must stay in contact with his mentor. My mentor and I have set a goal to meet once a day to discuss the work I am doing and the projects I am working on and to discuss her work and projects. It is extremely helpful to listen to her discuss her work because, although I may not work on the same type of project she is working on, I can learn how she attacks problems in writing and editing and how to start and complete a large-scale project. This feedback is helpful and necessary to accelerate the growth of the writer.

On-the-job training should be actual work that writers and editor do. In some intern programs trainees are given insignificant or trivial work that no one else wants to do or they are simply given real but unchallenging work. They may act as gophers, secretarial assistants or do meaningless paper work. This is an injustice! It is not only unfair and detrimental to the trainee's progress, it is also a waste of human resources for the employer. How can the trainee learn the role of a writer-editor if he isn't given the work writers and editors do? If the trainee has a chance to work with seasoned writer-editors, he will be able to meet the high standards and expectations that will be placed on him once he is on the job full time. It is important to remember that a training program is the stepping stone to a trainee's future and it should involve challenging writing and editing. The trainee will carry the valuable lessons and experiences he learned from you wherever he goes, adding to the professionalism of technical communication.

Employers who use interns effectively increase the value of their staff. Interns are a great source for support when work is piling up and missed deadlines are too often a reality. Interns also give the employer flexibility for dealing with fluctuation of workloads. Once an intern's assignment is over he goes back to school. No one had to be fired or laid off because of the decrease in work. Another benefit of using interns effectively is that they bring new blood into the organization. Recently arriving from a collegiate program, interns have many new ideas that they may wish to implement or discuss with a seasoned writer-editor. These

new ideas may stimulate thought and discussion within the organization, bringing about additional ideas and new ways of getting the job done.

## **MONITORING GROWTH**

Once you have assessed the unseasoned technical writer-editor's needs, you must have a way to monitor his growth during the training program. Most unseasoned writer-editors may feel unsure about their new environment; to grow and mature as writers, they will need some way of confirming their growth. They need evaluation and feedback. This monitoring does not necessarily have to come from the person officially designated as trainer; it can also come from fellow writers-editors who let the unseasoned person know that he is welcome and that he has a place with them. Feeling like part of the team is an important aspect of a trainee's progress in reaching the goal of being a seasoned writer-editor.

A trainer or mentor can use several tools to monitor growth. One tool is homework. Giving the trainee exercises and assignments in writing and editing allows him to apply the theories and the rules of writing that you have taught him. The trainee needs the formal classroom training, but it's the actual hands-on work that can really help him to succeed. But it cannot stop here. Review and evaluate the exercises to mark progress. Again, use conferences to discuss with the trainee his progress and improvements that he may need. These conferences will also give the trainee the chance to express his thoughts on training and to discuss with you what he needs from you as a trainer or mentor. Each person is different, so his needs will be different from those of the other trainees. During these conferences you will learn the trainee's specific needs so that you can be sympathetic to them. Being aware of his needs will help you to develop his ability and skill as a writer-editor. You can learn only by effectively knowing the trainee and watching his progress.

## **SPECIAL PROJECTS**

Special projects are usually fun to work on and be a part of. Special projects can enhance the unseasoned person's training. Projects

such as writing papers for submission and publication, giving presentations, or working on a planning committee can help build the trainee's confidence and self-esteem as a technical writer. To excel in these projects, the trainee may request your help and guidance. He may need your advice on a topic for a paper, ~~what journal should he~~ submit a paper to, ~~what are~~ the steps to get a paper published, etc. As the excitement for the project grows, so will he.

Working along with seasoned writers on special projects teams will also be beneficial to the trainee. A project team may be created for the writing and production of a manual, to work on a video script, or to write articles for a special publication. Being part of a team will allow the trainee to interact with fellow writer-editors and will also give him the chance to become a team player.

Getting the trainee involved with a professional organization, such as the Society for Technical Communication, will help him to continue to grow. Many professional organizations send members newsletters and/or quarterly publications. These publications have articles and information that are of interest to writer-editors, including those in training. This form of professional development is needed for stimulation and continued growth. Professional organizations also offer the trainee the chance to meet other technical writer-editors outside of his place of employment. These meetings, formal or informal, may give the trainee additional insight into the world of technical communication. Being part of a<sup>n</sup> organization will also give the trainee the chance to establish professional contacts. These contacts may help the trainee to locate a service or person he may need to help him with a project. These contacts may be able to give him valuable information that he could not easily obtain from other sources. Organizational contacts can be a great source of information sharing.

## CONCLUSION

A training program that emphasizes the needs of the trainee will undoubtedly produce good technical writer-editors. A good training program includes assessing, supporting, mentoring, and nurturing the trainee. At Los Alamos National Laboratory, the training program

involves a formal classroom structure and on-the-job-training. The training program is wholeheartedly supported by management and seasoned writer-editors who also participate in the program. A successful training program benefits all involved: trainees, companies and fellow writer-editors. Once a trainee is on his own, he is able handle a variety of situations because of the five stages of training. He is a confident, self-assured writer who truly knows his craft.

## REFERENCE

1. *The Levels of Edit*, 2nd ed. (Jet Propulsion Laboratory, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, California, 1980).