

Telling Your Story
Literary Presenters Technical Assistance Program
LitTAP
Facing Pages 2011 – A Statewide Literary Arts Convening
May 16, 2011
at
The Center for Fiction
17 E. 47th Street – New York, NY

For his introductory greeting, and since he was a new face in literature and for many in the room, Robert Zukerman, Senior Program Officer Literature/Theatre, played off the convening theme to tell his story. With twenty-four years at NYSCA, mostly in the Theatre Program, and thirty-seven years as a professional actor, and a Ph.D. in theatre history, Robert has writing credits that include six children's plays. He thanked Kathleen Masterson, former Literature Program Director, for her long service to the literature field and expressed the hope that she would be back in the field before too long in a leadership position. He also touched briefly on the changes at NYSCA, with the departure of its Executive Director and the loss of a third of its staff.

Panel Discussion: *What's Your Story?*

Hoong Yee Lee Krakauer, Executive Director, Queens Council on the Arts, Moderator

Panelists:

Katherine Defoyd, Consultant, Growth for Good

Kerry McCarthy, Program Officer, New York Community Trust

Jamie Schwartz, Program Manager, Council of Literary Magazines & Presses

Deanna Zandt, Social Networking Consultant/ Author

1. What does a written piece (project description, letter of inquiry, web copy, case statement) have to do to make it into the “in” basket?

- Specificity is important in grant writing;
- Show you've thought a project through from beginning to end;
- Research consultants and ensure their fees meet industry standards;
- Assess and address the needs of the project;
- Describe what your group is going to do;
- Who, what, where, when and why are important questions to ask;
- Make the reader want to take part in the experience;
- Create empathy – anything that will make someone want to share the information with others

Q: Do you put money ask up front or bury it in text?

Grant proposals:

- Put your ask right up front;
- For foundations, everything needs to be condensed to a paragraph or one page;

- Include an executive summary with pertinent information:
 - Contact information;
 - Kind of funds (Operating, Project, Capital);
 - Small description of program;
 - Amount of the request;
 - Description of need that has to be met

Social Networking:

- There is a lot you can do to keep yourself fresh and keep audience engaged and it doesn't cost a lot of money to keep it going.
- Social networking is all about relationship management/stewardship tools;
- Fundraising doesn't work well in social networking – bury your ask;
- Best to build your community and relationships first, before you deliver a call to action or fundraising appeal;
- View Social Networking as a cocktail party – do not barge in; you wouldn't jump up on a chair and tell people how awesome you are, for example;
- Keep your fundraising letters short and pay attention to how you ask:
 - You are not asking people to give you money you are asking them to join you in your mission;
 - Explain why you are doing what you are doing before you tell them what you are doing;
 - Build empathy within your written pieces;
 - Tell your story and ask for things you need not necessarily money. If you have a relationship with people, they can donate things to sustain you (equipment, supplies, space)

General Fundraising Tips:

- 80% of all fundraising comes from individuals; if you sit down with someone there is a 70% chance you will get money;
- Fundraising is all about relationships, particularly individual relationships. Engage people, and bump them up the ladder of engagement with you;
- Answer the question that has been asked by the funder;
- Read your answers to grant proposals out loud, hear what you have written and correct mistakes;
- Authenticity of voice is important; be fun and interesting in your writing;
- Do not use superlatives unless you back them up: “We publish the best...” How, why? What defines what you do?
- Do your research – more and more donors are using social networking to interact and learn about grantees;

- Make sure your website is up to date; funders are increasingly looking at web sites to get their information due to pressures on them and inability to travel and evaluate programs;
- Honesty is really appreciated. Lay out the challenges you are facing as well as the plan. When someone is really motivated, it comes through no matter the problems at the organization;
- Threatening approach is not helpful if you want to get funding – “We won’t be able to do this unless you help;”
- Have someone outside of your field read your grant proposal. Make sure that your proposal makes sense;
- Proofread;
- Colleges and universities have to express how project is going to go beyond their walls;
- Respect the reader of the grant; you are writing for humans. Don’t use small print type.
- Make sure you use spacing and paragraphs;
- Digitally – writing for online: It is hard to write your own web copy:
 - Show things to people who are not in your industry;
 - It is impossible to write about yourself in a neutral way; best to hire consultants;
- If you have major, recognized corporate partners such as Kindle or Amazon, include mention of the partnership and history; it lends credibility to your grant request;
- Include dates within narrative even though you may have a separate timetable;
- It is not about style. It is more about how clever you are and resourceful you are in conveying the information;
- Acknowledge world we are living in – it’s OK to talk about hard economic climate, just do it without whining;

Q: How much information needs to be in the first three (3) lines of what a person reads?

You have a story to tell and the funder has a story s/he wants to hear. You need to find where your story and the funder’s story intersect. You need to tell a funder how your story serves its mission. It is OK to call the funder to clarify what they are looking for.

Q: Should you call a program officer?

Yes. However, read the guidelines before you make the call.

Funders are generally open to speaking with applicants prior to proposal submission, since it can save time and energy later on in the grant making process. As a public funder, Robert is

open to answering any question anyone has to ask, and Kerry thinks it's her job to answer the phone when NYC's arts community calls with questions.

Hoong Yee has a system for calls. She stalks. She calls people who have received grants from funders, does online research, reads the guidelines – then she makes the call. Do not ask idiotic questions. Hoong Yee also calls a funder when she gets a grant so she can find out what put her in/got her funded.

Q: Do you write a proposal in first or third person?

First person plural makes it more approachable. However, foundations write about grantees in the third person. Kerry doesn't think it will change the reading of the proposal either way. Jamie suggests writing in the third person if you are writing your first grant, because it is too easy to be informal in your proposal if you are inexperienced. You can change to first person later on if you wish.

2. What are common mistakes people make in telling their story?

- Broadcasting is not OK in Social Networking spaces. You have to act humanly and authentically in those spaces. To create this, establish yourself as a resource:
 - Post things from your community, good things that have happened to people in your program
 - Offer resources, be helpful, and act as filter and curator;
 - Only 20% of information you share should be about you; the rest should be about your networks;
- Lack of specificity, have not read and addressed the guidelines, numbers in budget do not add up. Funder and grantee stories need to have common thread;
- Overstating outcomes...“We are transforming 30,000 lives every year...”
- Co-written grants with any big group that has a high opinion of itself (universities, public agencies) are difficult because their language may be pretentious;
- Not calling to find out what you did wrong (if you haven't gotten funding);
- If you have to look too closely at the material for information, you have a problem.

3. What advice do you have for people who want to write their story for multiple audiences (funders, press, web, constituents)

- Build from the smallest up. Hoong Yee starts with a 7-word story, and then builds elevator speech. She reviews this annually with board and staff to choose 7 words;
- Have one example that you can use with all audiences – show, don't tell. It should be a simple answer;
- Core of who you are and what you do is always the same;

- Know who the reader is and speak their language;
- Write your mission in one sentence and distill it down into what is essential;
- Voice of organization may for a bit formal, but voice of programs that an organization does can be more informal and assume different voices.

Q: What is the best practice in forming your online voice if you are the program person that is making things happen, the voice of g-d or an informal voice?

This depends on staff resources. It makes sense for multiple people to be interacting. If everyone is responsible for responses on your Twitter feed (let audience know this) then there will be a myriad of voices. Social media is a lot like teen sex: “Everybody wants to do it, nobody knows what they are doing, and afterward, everybody is surprised that it was not better than it was.” (Attributed to Google)

Two critique clinics followed the panel discussion. Each was intended to be a safe space wherein it was okay to make mistakes. Colleagues submitted materials for review prior to the convening, and clinic leaders selected materials – both online and in print – that could serve as examples of best and worst practices. Advice and lively discussion ensued. These notes include recommendations and insights without attribution to individual organizations, since readers of this report will not have benefit of visual examples. Organizations that generously shared their materials for review include: One Story, Cave Canem, Adirondack Center for Writing, Just Buffalo, Madison Square Park Conservancy, Lark Theatre Company, Herstory, Poets House and Center for Book Arts.

Workshop/Critique Session 1: 11:15 – 12:45

Effectively Telling our Stories in Development/Fundraising/Grants

Leaders: Kerry McCarthy and Katherine Defoyd

10 minute presentation followed by critique and discussion of pieces submitted by participants

- When developing educational materials, it is important to consider plan for sustainability and how you will get teachers to break out of constraints of schedule and regimen to take advantage of opportunities a project is offering;
- Remember the artistic side of things. What is it that you’re actually going to do?
- Begin with talking about why the organization’s important. Move on to “how we do it;”
- Using authors’ names as examples of participants in your program or publication can enhance your significance factor. If you are uncertain about actual authors, use phrases like “might include...such as...” so funder gets an idea of project’s artistic merit;
- If you are going to list people’s names, also give generic qualifiers so the reader gets an idea of his/her status – MacArthur winner, Guggenheim;

- Talk about size and scope of program;
- Back up general statements with specifics. “Literature is treated as a second-class discipline compared to visual and performing arts.” How? Why?
- Is there a shift between writing to individual donors and grant writing?
 - Funders have to make evaluative decisions in a very short period of time with a great volume of proposals:
 - Stick to the criteria;
 - Sometimes repetition is a good thing; you can say the same thing in a slightly different way;
 - When there is a character count/space problem you can sometimes include information in a response to a question that has something to do with another question in the application
 - Cover letters (if permissible) are also a good way to include additional information;
 - If you are asking a foundation for a salaried position, make sure to let it know how you will sustain the position – address this head-on;
 - People like to give money to exciting things. What is advice for less sexy things like establishing a reserve?
 - Stick to your mission, and set up fundraising that is based on the fact that people give to people;
 - Some people give to ideas;
 - Most people give because someone they know asks them;
 - For individual contributions, you don’t need to share a budget, but you should have a number in your head about the total project cost and what the organization/individual is capable of giving based on your research;
 - Mention your total goal (keep it modest so you can have success);
 - Ask for a number then wait and see what they say;
 - Donors are unlikely to give you more than what you ask for; start at high end;
 - Make your piece compelling and stress your success in both;
 - Individual giving letters engage people when:
 - Pictures are top of letter;
 - Descriptive language gives the reader a true sense of place;
 - Possible to add incentive – “if you join today you can get...”
 - Reaching national vs. local appeal: People like to give to something bigger;
 - Figure out what the weakness is and turn it into a strong selling point, e.g. “if you haven’t heard of Gary Snyder, join the other 90% of the nation who hasn’t heard of him, but if you attend our events you will...”

- Say something about why poetry is important to all of us – quote poets who have written about this, e.g. William Carlos Williams.
 - Testimonials in the form of quotes are also useful.
- If your targeted audience is “general public,” what does this mean in a city of 8 million where the projected audience is 800?
- Pod-cast, broadcast can help increase audience numbers. Is there nothing else going on in this area (you cannot drive a cab in NYC without running into several programs that are like your own);
- Use of bullets is good on promotional pieces, however:
 - Bullet points should just be one line. Never wrap to a second line;
 - Economy of words is important. You can use a verb, then list sentence fragments with semicolons following each bullet;
- It is hard to charge admission in a public environment, such as a park:
 - Determine if neighborhood is in need of free programs before sponsoring them;
 - Free outdoor programs may engage people in other programs and efforts

Workshop/Critique Session 2: 2 – 2:30

Effectively telling our stories in PR/Marketing/Branding

Leaders: Julian Montague, Graphic Designer and Artist, Debora Ott, LitTAP Founder /Arts Management Consultant, and Chad Post, Director Open Letters Books

10 minute presentation followed by critique and discussion of pieces submitted by participants

Organizational branding is important to selling your product. People may not know about the authors you work with, but if they recognize and trust your brand they will participate and contribute. We are in a cluttered environment with more and more information coming at us. Resources for doing the work have gone down. The things we do must be high-impact and relevant. We must build our own opportunities.

- Most people expect things to be very interactive;
- Publishers have kept their audiences at a distance. Bring them closer. Don't preach to them;
- A lot of people think good design is expensive and hard to get. It is really about finding the right designer and forging a relationship with him/her; much better than using an agency;
- Consider how you frame your information then break it down. You can section off information by audience...“for the playwright” “for the audience member”
 - Avoid having too much text;
 - All headers should be set off and easily readable;

- Technique of setting off names within text – use of bold type and contrasting color – is good;
 - Make the right pictures large when possible;
 - Images used should convey intent;
 - Mission standing out is good;
 - What is the eye drawn to first?
 - Generalization is a disaster
- If you are receiving state and federal funding, there are state/federally mandated web and print guidelines for visual presentation;
 - Some rules of and suggestions for design:
 - Don't ever use papyrus as font;
 - Books with green (or brown) covers don't sell;
 - Don't use drop shadows;
 - Using san serif font for blocks of text is harsh;
 - Flash menus are annoying
 - Don't tri-fold through the middle of a block of text. In any event, days of tri-fold brochure may be numbered;
 - Think of cover of brochure like it is a cover of a book
 - Piece as an object may be more important if you are reaching out to individual donors;

Q: We have a tendency to say all of what we do all on one piece. When you have an organization that is very complex, how do you boil this down in this type of context? How do you mix the artist appeal into all of this?

- People can come into the organization because of one program, but may not know about other programs;
- Get at basic nuts and bolts of what organization does;
- Communicate affect of the work organization does...get your audience active;
- Brochures are passive. Have more information online. Designers will have to design for iPads, phones, web site. Best to have built of information online;
- Big question: How does your audience interact with your information? If your audience is hyper-literary and you have a lot to say about what you do, best to do it on the web;
- **Everything should be directing everyone to your web site all the time.** There is unlimited space online!
- Once your drive people to your site, be clear about what you want them to do;

- Discover their entryway –why most people are engaging with the web site. If it is with the blog, that could be your entry point into the site;
- Web site home page is an opportunity to make a first impression:
 - Having images and words – like a book cover – gives you a sense of what the organization is all about;
 - Home page for organization should be one page where you don't have to scroll at all; this is not true for blogs
- A lot of people find things on Flickr; it's a good place to share your photographs;
- Viewer/reader should not feel like they are being attacked/bombarded by information;
- Visual identity is important, and design can subtly indicate quality; thus is helpful

Q: How do you build a relationship with a good designer and stay on budget?

- There are all kinds of jobs in graphic design, and if you put the word out there, you can find people who are willing to do the work for you at a reasonable rate;
- Interns are more work than they are worth;
- People will want to do creative things for you and get paid a little less;
- Having someone in the office design something isn't always free;
- Sparked is a free design resource

Tip: Queens Council on the Arts got a grant from Causality for marketing, branding . There are matching grants and non-matching grants. YouTube is not one of the biggest search engines. Hoong Yee studies Google analytics like the bible. Where are your visitors going on your web site? Design accordingly.

Tip: Postcards are effective to leave in places for people to pick up. They do not cost that much money and they can also function a bit as a business card

Advocacy Update

Elliot Figman, Executive Director of Poets & Writers, and Laurie Dean Torrell, Executive Director, Just Buffalo and member, Greater Buffalo Cultural Alliance

An experienced literary arts advocate, Elliot spoke about the work LitNet did to save fellowships for creative writers at the National Endowment for the Arts. There was discussion about the lack of any organized advocacy efforts for literature at NYSCA, and attendees talked about efforts to advocate and harness strengths through telling individual and collective stories. Robert Zukerman urged participants to actively reach out to their elected officials (local, state and national), and advocate for increased allocations to Literature in the current and future NYSCA budgets.

Genius Bar with Peers

Geniuses: Hoong Yee Lee Krakauer, Julian Montague, Chad Post, and Jaime Schwartz