

Writing for Professional Development and for the Profession

Richard J. Cox, Ph.D.

The RIM field needs its professionals to write and contribute to the field's knowledge, but many do not do so because they are not aware of many basic, helpful tools available to them.

Records and information management (RIM) practitioners often strenuously argue for the need for good, practical publications to aid their work. Although the major RIM professional associations all feature energetic publication programs, there is a lack of researchers and writers to contribute to them. This is a professional dilemma; without a strong body of knowledge, regularly refreshed, the RIM community has no claim as a profession.

Many factors limit RIM practitioners from contributing to the professional literature. For example, many argue that they do not have time to engage in such activities, which they often consider extracurricular. Many also lack training in basic research methods. In addition, RIM professionals may be reluctant to discuss their own work or records issues related to their organizations due to proprietary and other restrictive issues.

However, the greatest barrier preventing RIM professionals from contributing to the professional literature may be a lack of comfort in writing for publication. Writing well is a skill acquired through hard work, trial and error, and practice. Learning to write also requires a thick skin, developed through criticism, rejection, and experienced mentoring.

Reading to Write

Reading is essential to developing a well-rounded personal and profes-

sional life. Because nearly every successful writer attributes part of his or her success to reading, working professionals must recognize that good reading leads to good writing. There are many practical guides that will help working professionals determine how to write for a professional or scholarly journal. (See sidebar, page 39.)

There is another great way to learn about writing: reading about the experiences of well known, accomplished

fiction and nonfiction writers. (See sidebar, page 40) Fiction and creative writers are generally most useful for comments on style, creativity, the task of writing, working with agents, getting published, and other aspects of the writing life. Writers who have prepared memoirs about their work also can be a big help.

Anne Lamott has written one of the best writing guides. Drawing from her personal experience, Lamott's *Bird by*



Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life is the classic, inspirational guide for those writing. In a witty and lively fashion, the author discusses all facets of writing, from planning a project to dealing with multiple rejections of finished pieces. As she strongly asserts, writing is not a magical process, but it is hard work, marked by trial and error, discouragement, and often, unexpected results.

Tell a Story

Storytelling is a critical aspect of writing. Every writer is telling a story. Stories of great interest may emerge from even the most mundane events or activities. One aspect of professional writing that is often forgotten or minimized is its reflection of living and working. Because RIM professionals spend so much of their life on the job, this is something to keep in mind.

Write to Publish

Over the past 25 years, a number of professional outlets have sprung up for publishing about RIM topics, especially the reporting of research projects. This is especially important at a time when university presses, formerly the main mechanism for publishing research and theoretical work, are releasing far fewer titles. Today, there is no lack of opportunity for publishing in and for the RIM community.

To take advantage of such opportunities, RIM professionals should consider the advice offered by experienced editors and writers. Usually such advisors liken writing to a kind of mental exercise, with discipline as the dominant theme. The greater problem in the RIM field is that dissertations and other research studies tend not to get done in the first place.

Scholarly production is an important component of any profession and its knowledge. RIM professionals are, in one sense, scholars of RIM systems. When confronting a practical problem, they need a knowledge supported by a wide, deep reading and research.

There are a useful group of advice books about the nature of such scholarly publishing and for transforming research into more accessible writing. (See link to references at the end of this article.)

Publishing, though, has always been a challenge – from idea to book proposal and contract to completed manuscript to published volume can be an exhausting roller coaster ride consuming many years. And publishing has become even more challenging as the publishing industry has transformed in the digital era. Reading insider accounts, studies, and historical reviews about the complexities and challenges of the present-day publishing industry can help RIM professionals in their writing, especially since there is an important, necessary, and decided shift toward research in RIM work.

Professional associations, with their long-term commitment to publishing basic RIM texts and guides, have expanded their role to include publishing scholarly monographs (the Society of American Archivists) and even nurturing research (ARMA International Educational Foundation). Such lofty goals can't be achieved, however, if RIM professionals don't hone their skills in professional reading and writing.

Basic Writing Tips

The richer the sharing of experience and ideas, the more RIM professionals will assist each other, deepen the profession's knowledge, and enable it to respond to change and challenges. The following eight writing and publishing tips are to help encourage RIM professionals to contribute to the field's literature:

Practical Writing Guides

Cioffi, Frank. *The Imaginative Argument: A Practical Manifesto for Writers*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. – Practical guide to the art of writing

Crider, Scott F. *The Office of Assertion: An Art of Rhetoric for the Academic Essay*. Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2005. – Considering how to reach a particular audience and express an argument

Culler, Jonathan and Kevin Lamb, eds. *Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003. – Transforming research into more accessible writing

Flaherty, Alice W. *The Midnight Disease: The Desire to Write, Writer's Block, and the Creative Brain*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2004. – Overcoming writer's block

Germano, William. *From Dissertation to Book*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. – Transforming dissertations into books

Luey, Beth, ed. *Revising Your Dissertation: Advice from Leading Editors*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004. – Transforming dissertations into books

Miller, Jane E. *The Chicago Guide to Writing About Numbers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. – Advice on how to write about numbers for certain kinds of audiences

Mitchell, Richard. *The Leaning Tower of Babel and Other Affronts by the Underground Grammarian*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984. – Improving writing with humorous commentary on common mistakes

1. **Read widely.** Many RIM professionals read only one or two journals published by their primary professional associations. Such limited scope excludes a lot of interesting, relevant ideas that are valuable for those working with RIM systems. Records managers and archivists need to read beyond their own field because RIM is critical to every institution and individual, which explains why just about every discipline is publishing about RIM issues. These other disciplines can challenge and stimulate RIM professionals in new and innovative ways.
2. **Start from practice.** RIM professionals frequently encounter issues about which they wish they had some reasonable advice or more in-depth information available to them. Archivists and records managers often express concern about how to identify important or relevant topics to research and write about, but the key is the work sitting in front of them. RIM professionals can use what they have learned from their practical work to write for a professional journal; editors are always looking for good, practical case studies.

Needless to say, RIM professionals are also often searching for such case studies, and their commitment to writing and sharing their own may inspire others to do likewise.

3. **Read good writers.** There is no better teacher of writing than the act of reading good writers. Within a professional or scholarly discipline, many gravitate to the leading or well-established authors as role models. An even better idea, however, is to regularly read writers who write well for the broader public (public scholars or intellectuals such as Wendell Berry, Henry Petroski, and Neil Postman). Such individuals tackle difficult and diverse topics with clear writing, great organization, and strong research; advocate reading; and have written something directly related to RIM.
4. **Don't overlook the web.** There is a growing array of e-journals and other resources online that RIM professionals must learn to use. Just a decade or two ago, one of the greatest problems facing RIM professionals was how to get access to government white papers, special reports

published by professional associations and public policy groups, and other such documents. Now, most of this is readily available on the web. However, there is also a rich variety of other resources for assisting RIM professionals in their research needs and, if they choose, writing aims. For example, there is an increasing number of blogs in the field, commenting on professional activities, issues, and publications.

5. **Find a mentor.** Anyone who has ever written anything meant to be read by others will benefit from building a personal relationship with someone who can objectively read and comment on their work. This mentor can be a professional colleague, spouse, or friend who can read for content and writing clarity. Obviously, it is best to establish such a mentorship relationship with someone who has written and been published and who has a good command of the professional and scholarly literature with some relevance to RIM issues. However, just having someone who can critically read drafts for understandability will help potential writers catch obvious problems.

6. **Fine-tune what works best for you.** Every individual works best under different circumstances, and discovering the best environment and process for productive writing can be done only by experimentation. Each person must discover what his or her comfort zone is for writing.

7. **Build a professional library.** All professionals need a working library, sets of working texts for teaching, reference, and writing. Writing is, after all, mostly about storytelling – whether presenting a story about some

Guides to Writing by Writers

Barzun, Jacques. *Simple and Direct: A Rhetoric for Writers*, rev. ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985. – Writing simply and clearly

Bunge, Nancy. *Master Class: Lessons from Leading Writers*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005. – Interviews with successful writers and writing teachers

Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994. – Inspirational and personal guide to writing

Lukeman, Noah. *The First Five Pages: A Writer's Guide to Staying Out of the Rejection Pile*. New York: Fireside Book, Simon & Schuster, 2000. – The art of writing for publication

Yagoda, Ben. *The Sound on the Page: Style and Voice in Writing*. New York: Harper-Collins, 2004. – Developing and mimicking writing styles

research project or an interesting case study or even a theoretical model.

8. **Network.** Building a network of colleagues offers invaluable assistance for staying current in the field and stimulating new ideas for writing projects. The value of this should be obvious; it provides the opportunity to build relationships and a forum for discussion about issues in the field and areas of RIM work needing new ideas or the testing of old ones. Such a forum opens possibilities for collaborative research and writing; because the RIM field is becoming so complex, it is rare that anyone can feel completely comfortable in mastering more than a few topics.

Not too long ago, establishing and sustaining a network required physically attending conferences. Today, virtual networks can almost accomplish the same goals. There are a growing number of workshops, public lectures, and listservs available online. All are full of possibilities to connect with peers and share RIM knowledge; in this, one can't help but discover new writing and publishing possibilities.

There may be an endless set of basic advice that could be offered to help individuals start or improve their writing. What is most important to remember is that every working RIM professional has, first, a responsibility to contribute to the field's knowledge and, second, something useful to offer to this knowledge. So, start writing. Start contributing to the professional literature. **ENR**

Writer's Wanted

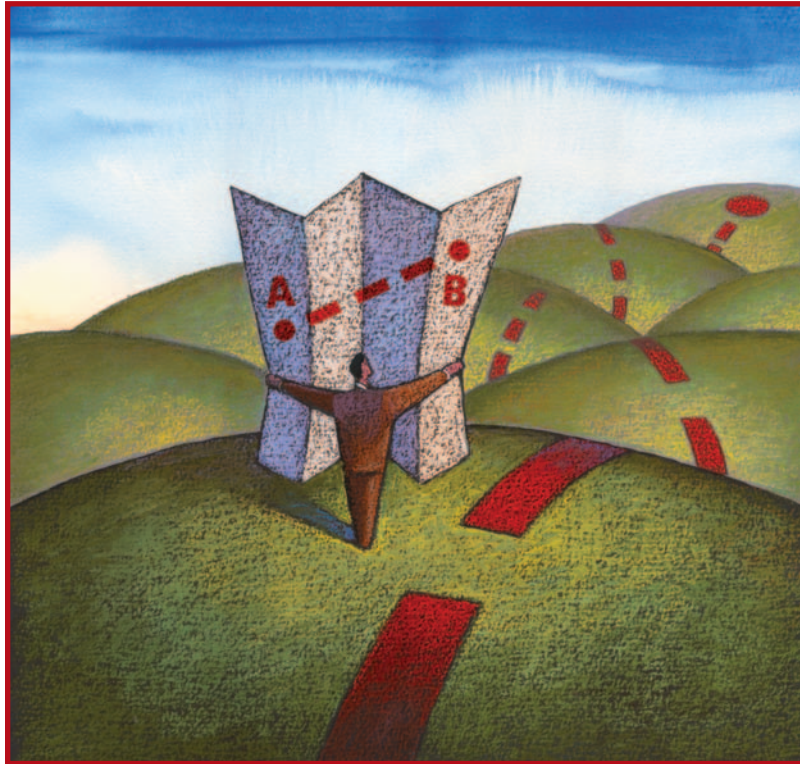
For Information about writing for ARMA International, see www.arma.org/im/authorguidelines

See page ?? Richard Cox's bio.

See references for this story at www.arma.org/

????

Where's Your Career Headed?



Now there's a tool to guide you, available only from ARMA International: **The RIM Self-Assessment**

Regardless of what stage you're at in your career, this online tool will help you identify your strengths and any gaps in your skills and knowledge. It will even point you to resources that can help you address those gaps.

The tool is easy and it's **free** to members of ARMA International. And your results will remain confidential. Start your RIM Self-Assessment today at

www.arma.org/competencies

