

## **Tales of an Editor: Helping Scholars to Write for the Public Audience**

### **Abstract**

For a number of reasons, the ability to translate the findings of academic scholarship into everyday language is of great value in today's world, and the techniques needed for doing this can be mastered. The present essay maps out some pointers, specifically for librarians who want to write for a popular audience themselves, or to enable their patrons to do so. Recommendations include the importance of reading good writing, adopting a confident voice when writing, listening respectfully to the counsel of one's editor and their knowledge of the audience, complying with stated deadlines, and learning not to be anxious about the need to say anything new: it's more important to say something worthwhile than it is to say something new.

### **Introduction**

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, I was a librarian. A slightly shorter time ago, in a galaxy much closer to home, I became a magazine editor.<sup>1</sup> Along the way I learned some things that are worth knowing for people who wish to share the results of their academic research with "the average person."

Anyone who wonders whether this task is worth doing need only look at the daily headlines. Discussions in our courts, legislatures, schools, and churches could all benefit from the infusion of thoughtfully considered and compellingly written scholarship in popular arenas. In addition, I believe that wisdom is a gift from God, to be used for the greater good, and that sharing that wisdom is part of God's calling on each of us.

As librarians, I suspect that many of us also believe this, but as a further testimony, I can do no better than quote my assistant editor, Dawn Moore, on this point, when I told her I was working on the present essay:

To own a gift of deep knowledge on a given topic is to have a great responsibility to use that knowledge and to share it where appropriate. Just like all good things (the wine in my basement?), wisdom should be shared and not just with those who live in the academic world. It's more valuable than money and perhaps easier to share. It is a high calling to bring academic material from the ivy tower to the world, even if just to enlighten or educate folks who don't have the means to study the topic in depth.<sup>2</sup>

But even if we accept that this is a worthwhile task, we may still wonder how to go about it. That's what this essay is for. My area of academic subject specialization is *Christian History*, and ATLA is an organization of theological librarians, so I will assume that the scholarship in question for most of my readers here is religious scholarship. But the advice and lessons have broader applicability to a whole host of academic subjects.

In what follows, I also assume that I am addressing two audiences. First, an audience of librarians who themselves might want to write solid scholarship for the average person, either around library-related topics or around the topics they may have studied for subject masters' degrees and doctoral degrees. Secondly, an audience of librarians who may find themselves called into service to help scholars at their institutions with this kind of writing.

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<sup>1</sup> "How I Became Post-Ac and How God Loves Me Anyway," *The Well*, March 10, 2014, <http://thewell.intervarsity.org/in-focus/how-i-became-post-ac-and-how-god-loves-me-anyway>.

<sup>2</sup> Dawn Moore, e-mail message to author, December 11, 2015.

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Jennifer Woodruff Tait is managing editor of *Christian History*, content editor for The High Calling at the Theology of Work Project, and the author of *The Poisoned Chalice: Eucharistic Grape Juice and Common-Sense Realism in Victorian Methodism* (2011).

## Guidelines

Here are the guidelines I would give, either for your own use or to pass along.

### Read

Read the kind of writing you want to do yourself. Popular scholarly writing differs from scholarly writing for academic journals in a number of ways, which I will outline below, but, in addition to following those guidelines, it's essential to get good, popular scholarly religious writing into your ear by *reading* it. Naturally, I'd advise you to read my magazine in the field of church history,<sup>3</sup> but there are plenty of other sources to check out. *Biblical Archaeology Review* has been doing this kind of thing for decades.<sup>4</sup> For Biblical exegesis aimed at the average person, try the Theology of Work Project website.<sup>5</sup> The monthly magazine *Books and Culture* does a great job of reviewing academic works and providing thoughtful commentary in everyday language.<sup>6</sup> If you never thought religious statistics could be readable and compelling, visit the blogs *Charting Church Leadership and Sociological Reflections*.<sup>7</sup> For religious biography and literary criticism, you might try Alan Jacobs's book on C. S. Lewis, *The Narnian*; for Augustinian theology for teenagers (it's true!), Beth Felker Jones's book *Touched by a Vampire*.<sup>8</sup>

You may already know some of these magazines, blogs, and books, but what I'm urging is that you *read them like a writer*. How do they do what they do? How do they use anecdotes and data? What tone do they adopt? What do they say and what do they leave out? When do they cite authorities? When do you want to turn the page and when does your attention lag? Not only can you learn better writing from these authors, but you can also begin to think about what kind of market you're interested in for your own work, and what audience you want to speak to.

A hard but very useful truth: unless you had an excellent doctoral advisor who also taught you how to write clearly and confidently, you will have to *unlearn* a lot of what you learned in graduate school about writing. Popular scholarly writing is a lot of things academic scholarly writing is not. It's a lot more like explaining your thesis to your neighbor or your nephew than it is explaining it to your dissertation committee.

Here are some cases in point:

The kind of writing I'm describing

- States things clearly, in subject-verb-object sentences with a minimum of meandering inserted clauses.
- Uses interesting and varied language, but avoids multisyllabic words that are colorless (no *optimizing*, *foregrounding*, *assessing*, *problematizing*, and the like.)
- Uses active verbs. (You can immediately make yourself a better writer for a popular audience by taking your last piece of scholarly writing and revising it to turn 95 percent of the passive verbs into active verbs. I'll let you off the hook for 5 percent.)
- While it describes and outlines nuanced approaches to the topic, it almost never refers to both sides of an academic debate unless the subject at hand is extraordinarily crucial and widely contested. ("Some scholars say.... But I say..." If you already know which side you are taking, take it.) Along with this, resist the temptation to play out such arguments in the footnotes. In fact, skip the footnotes altogether unless you have a very compelling reason to include them, as anything important enough to be in a footnote is important

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/magazine/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theologyofwork.org/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.booksandculture.com/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/chartingchurchleadership/>, <http://johnwhawthorne.com/>

<sup>8</sup> Alan Jacobs, *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C. S. Lewis* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2005); Beth Felker Jones, *Touched by a Vampire: Discovering the Hidden Messages in the Twilight Saga* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2009).

enough to be in the body of the text.<sup>9</sup> (This surprises a lot of people who write for *Christian History* when they first turn in their manuscripts.)

Popular scholarly writing avoids overly clunky scene setting (“In this essay I will explain three ways William Penn misgoverned the colony of Pennsylvania”; try “William Penn proved an unsuitable leader in several ways. Here are three,” instead.) It opens with vivid, attention-getting statements or stories, and it closes with a punch. Here are two great examples of this; an article from *Christian History* about Charlemagne by theologian Sarah Morice-Brubaker, and an op-ed in his local paper by Reformation scholar David Steinmetz on the Amish school shooting some years ago.<sup>10</sup>

If you haven’t read your Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style* for a while, get it out and dust it off.<sup>11</sup> Even if you disagree with half of the recommendations, you’ll still come away from an hour with the book sounding more like E. B. White, who was one of the clearest writers of the twentieth century. This can only be a good thing.

### Don’t forget that you are the expert

If you’ve been asked to write for a magazine or website, or if you are querying some publication about writing for them, presumably it’s because you know something about a topic of interest to their readers. When you come to write your article, don’t disappear behind the over-qualifications and over-explanations you might make in an academic paper. If you’ve been studying temperance for years and think that our stereotype of temperance reformers as rural and backward is wrong, say so. If you’re an Old Testament scholar and believe your interpretation of Isaiah 7:14 is correct and your opponents are misguided, say so. It’s much harder to edit writing that waffles than writing that takes a position, confidently and vigorously.

### But also listen to your editor, if you have one.

The editor has probably been editing the magazine, working for the publishing house, or managing the website for some time. He or she knows the readership: the level of vocabulary they can comprehend, their background knowledge of the topic, the biases they will bring to the material, and the like. By all means stick to your facts, which you know better than the editor, but avoid being defensive, and let the editor shape how you need to express those facts for the audience, which the editor knows better than you. I once had an author insist that our readers *should* understand the vocabulary the author was using, no matter how much evidence I presented that they would not be able to. The author further insisted that the fact they would not understand the author’s vocabulary was a condemnation of the American school system. All of this may have been true, but it nevertheless represented a formidable barrier on the part of that author to communicating with our actual audience.

And pay attention to what the editor asked you to do at the beginning. If you were asked to write about the history of wine consumption in the Bible, write about the history of wine consumption and don’t switch to beer in the middle. Deliver the facts you agreed to deliver.

If you’re used to writing for academic journals, the amount of editing that a popular magazine article receives may surprise and shock you. The first time it happens to you, sit down with a glass of scotch or a cup of tea, take a deep breath, and look at what the editor has done. Take note of why, and then smile graciously and say thank you, unless the editor has screwed up the facts.

Alternately, if you’ve decided to start blogging as a means of reaching a public audience, you won’t have an editor. Consider yourself both blessed and cursed, and take the rest of this article to heart and write it on your doorposts.

<sup>9</sup> If you are wondering why I am using footnotes, my *TL* editor requested that I do so as a matter of consistency with *TL*’s submission guidelines!

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Morice-Brubaker, “The Idea of Christendom,” *Christian History* 108 (2014), <https://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/charlemagne-idea-of-christendom/>; David C. Steinmetz, “Forgiveness Springs From Their Faith,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, October 13, 2006, <http://homelesstheologywanderings.blogspot.com/2011/02/forgiveness-as-way-of-practicing-peace.html>

<sup>11</sup> William Strunk and E. B., White, *The Elements of Style* (London: Longman, 2008).

Popular magazines, newspapers, and websites measure deadlines in days and weeks, not months and years.

Librarians already know this, I think, but it's worth reiterating to your scholarly-writing-hopeful patrons. Used to being in the neighborhood of meeting a book contract deadline if you miss it by six months? This would not work if you were writing for *Christian History*, where we publish a magazine every three months. Editors are understanding if you can't meet a deadline, to be sure, but let them know in a timely fashion, and accept that the extension you'll get might be a weekend or a week, not a month or two. Surprisingly, you may find as you do more and more of this type of writing that you can write faster than you thought you could at the start. (More on that in a moment.)

It's also worth stating that if you get called by someone from the media wanting expert commentary on an issue in an interview, answer them *that day* regarding your availability. Within a few hours, if you can. We could use many more thoughtful scholars being interviewed in popular forums. Be the expert the reporter respects and returns to for future commentary by showing your consideration of the fact that they are probably on a very tight daily deadline.

And a word about deadlines and perfectionism: the good part about having an editor on the popular level is that *what they are there for is to edit*. More than once I've had people say they are late getting things to me because they are tinkering with sentences, niggling with word counts, adjusting footnotes (see my previous caveat about footnotes), or otherwise agonizing over minutiae. If you are at the point of agonizing, *send the article to the editor*. He or she would much rather have it on time and have you leave the tinkering to them. I've written whole introductions and conclusions for people. I've torn articles apart and put them back together. I've cut 3,000 words out of an intended 2,000-word article that was turned in at 5,000 words. This is what I get paid for. Turn the article in on time, and let the editor do her job.

Your task in a popular article is to explain scholarship, not (usually) to advance it

More than once I've had an author refuse to do an article on the grounds that they don't have anything new to say about the subject. The first goal of popular scholarly writing is not to say something new, but to say the things that are already known about the topic, in a clear and compelling way, so that people without your historical, theological, or exegetical background will nevertheless be able to use the information to illumine their understanding and even guide them in their reactions to current events. (My doctoral advisor, who *did* try to teach us how to write clearly, used to say: "Write for your educated grandmother.")

If you think about the examples by Morice-Brubaker and Steinmetz which I cited earlier, in neither case were they adding to our store of information on either Charlemagne or the Amish. Instead they were referring to that information and explaining it in a way that helped non-historians apply it to current events: the perennial struggle between church and state in one case and the ability to forgive a specific heinous crime in another.

This also leads me to why I *think this kind of writing is, or can be, faster than academic scholarly writing*. I've done both kinds, and I know the difference: when I have been working on an academic paper for a conference, I've had all manner of books stacked by my computer, Internet browser tabs opened, and highlighted, dog-eared articles all around my desk. But when I get to write a popular article, my desktop is much neater. I still begin by refreshing my memory of the scholarship involved, but then I usually close the books, put aside the scholarly chatter, and swing for the fences. Probably eight or nine times out of ten, the article is in my wheelhouse anyway, or I wouldn't have been contacted about it. Only when I've written the first draft article do I open the books back up and begin the necessary fact checking ("OK, when *was* Carrie Nation born?"). You know your own subject material better than anyone. Trust yourself.

I wrote an article for *Christianity Today* on the topic of my doctoral dissertation and first (so far, only) academic book.<sup>12</sup> I never once opened the book while I was writing the first draft of the article. But the years I had spent immersed in the history of temperance informed every word. (Yes, I *did* open it for the second draft. I didn't make all those statistics about alcohol consumption up.) You have the immense benefit of years spent immersed in the history of something, too. You'd be surprised how much you already know, and you might be surprised at how fast you can write for the sheer joy of it.

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<sup>12</sup> Jennifer Woodruff Tait, "The Teetotalers I Never Knew," *Christianity Today*, 58:2 (June 2014), 42-45. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/june/teetotalers-i-never-knew-alcohol.html?share=mXj9%2f6lyffFUqTzvrBk3EE6SQqvlOPDZ>

**Summary**

That, in slightly more than a nutshell, is my advice. Ponder it, inwardly digest it, and hand it out to any aspiring scholars who frequent your reference desk. You'll be making my job easier, and you'll be helping develop more informed citizens and congregations.