

FEATURE



Telling Our School Library Story

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Surely you have seen the heads nodding when school librarians gather together and lament the utter misunderstanding of our very being. In fact, your head may have unwittingly bobbed along with the others. There is a seductive rhythm to the familiar chant “they do not know what we do.” “They” may be any group of educators or administrators—any slice of the school learning community pie. Regardless, the chant goes on, and, trying not to break our arms patting ourselves on the back, we go about our business, expending our energy doing good work in all the right places and tending to keep it to ourselves.

Let’s say we join together to shift that paradigm of telling our story. Each of us could go about it in our own unique way, and still there would be work to be done. One person might call up the local college of education and offer to be a guest speaker in either the undergraduate or graduate curriculum courses. Another might approach his or her school district with a plan to orient student teachers to information literacy and assist in developing lesson plans as a learning outcome for the student teachers’ fieldwork portfolio. Yet another might contact his or her state affiliates of education or subject discipline associations to present at local conferences. If you decide to write for publications outside the school library field, the following action steps can guide your path.

✓ **Keep a Writer’s Journal**

Ideas come to us in those places away from our daily haunts—walking through a park, listening to a symphony, or when we allow our minds to wander—to produce imaginative strands of thought that

we do not want to lose. A simple journal to jot down ideas will serve you well. Even if you have started a piece for publication, you do not want to lose another idea for another topic that may be used in yet another publication. Rereading your notes might shed light on a particular message you feel you want to share, or on a timely concern that you want to address. You might document a quote, record a bit of a conversation with a colleague, or capture the words from the mouths of babes deep in the throes of research. You might brainstorm a theme and attach stakeholders to each tangent. Taking an idea and bolstering it with support from theory and practice paves the way for a meaningful message from your unique perspective. Use the journal as a playground for your ideas. Including the date and place in which you took your notes will help to jog your memory when rereading them.

✓ **Consider Your Audience**

The success of writing outside of our field is a direct result of your understanding of that audience. What is important to them? What are their professional values? What is their vision? What are their mission and position statements? Their burning issues? We now are able to walk in their shoes online without very much searching. Browse their newsletters; study the topics listed in the annual conference programs; and peruse the opinion blogs of some of their leaders. If possible, attend local conferences or meetings; do your homework by reviewing their standards and professional development requirements (or customs) for recertification. What are the local situations, and what are the global issues? Talk to members of that audience. If you do not know

anyone with which you would like to engage in this type of conversation close to home, ask a friend to recommend someone at another district or town.

✓ **Select a Publication Information Gathering**

After some study of your audience, you will zero in on a publication that is a possible fit for your piece. Someone from that audience you spoke with might have made some recommendations for you. Read back issues or seek out online archival issues. This is not a gentle suggestion; revisiting a publication’s past six months (and special issues) is a good measure of the preferred writing style. You will want to visit a school district, college of education, or academic library to peruse print copies. This is every editor’s first advice to authors who are interested in article submission. If you feel that the manner of published articles is not close to the nature of what you might submit, consider selecting another publication. However, if you are interested in contributing to a local newsletter, the editor might be happy to entertain an article of a unique nature. Local newsletter editors usually have some modicum of flexibility as well as the very real motivation to fill their word count allotment for each edition.

Information Seeking

National publications post information for interested authors on their Web sites. Along with author guidelines regarding instructions for article submission, you might find a link to the calendar of themes for issues and the deadline for submissions. Choose the issue wisely, and give yourself a deadline a few weeks ahead of the posted date. On rare occasions, the date posted is

Selected Bibliography: Telling Our Story

Bush, G. "The Changing Role of the School Librarian." *Principal* 85, no. 4 (2006): 56–58.

Format: article

Audience: K–8 principals

Original title was "Keeping the Dreams of Teachers Alive"; just one experience where a title was wildly edited.

Bush, G. "Library Q&A: What Board Members Should Know about School Libraries . . . But Seldom Ask." *American School Board Journal* 92, no. 6 (2005): 24–26.

Format: article

Audience: K–12 school board members

This article was written with the idea that school board members might appreciate not only the answers but also the questions to ask about their school libraries.

Bush, G. *The Principal's Manual for Your School Library Media Program*. Chicago: AASL, 2000.

Format: brochure

Audience: K–12 principals

This brochure was written as a "boomerang" document—principals would read the word "library" and give it to the librarian. The document encourages the principal and librarian to sit down together to assess the library program.

Bush, G. "You Know It!" Video series. General Learning Video, Northfield, Ill., 2000.

Format: teacher's guide

Audience: secondary teachers and administrators

This guide accompanies a four-part video series on information literacy in action. It includes a student council building a handicapped-accessible playground; a house constructed and sold by students; and a water quality issue presented to a school board.

Bush, G., and C. Bogue. "Come Join the Readers' Society: Student-Led Book Discussion Group." *Illinois Reading Council Journal* 27, no. 1 (1999): 8–14.

Format: article

Audience: secondary reading and language arts teachers

This article focuses on a high school book club led collaboratively by a reading specialist and school librarian.

Bush, G. "Creating an Information-Literate School: Here and Now." *NASSP Bulletin* 83, no. 605 (1999): 62–67.

Format: article

Audience: secondary principals

This article is a how-to for administrators; the issue was a special issue edited by Ken Haycock.

Bush, G. "Prophets in Your Own Backyard: Modeling for Lifelong Learning." *Educational Leadership* 56, no. 1 (1998): 46–49.

Format: article

Audience: K–12 educators, administrators, and support staff

The theme of this issue was about the school learning community; the article included examples of demonstrations of lifelong learning pursuits by school faculty and support staff members.

incorrect and subsequently pushed up or sometimes back. Or, perchance (but hopefully not), the time you have earmarked to write your article is the time you come down with a nasty sinus infection that saps the energy you were saving from your usual multitasking feats. Our topics are a stretch for most editors; increase your chances of acceptance by selecting the most closely related theme for that publishing year. Note the preferred bibliographic style, suggested word count, and any specifications regarding submitting photographic images, and prepare the permission form for submission.

✓ Tell Your Story

We all know talented school librarians who regale us with stories about deep and textured units of study that transform the learning environment, but who then claim that they cannot write. Many of us still think that writing about what we do has to read like a graduate paper written in a scholarly tone. On the contrary, share those small and specific moments of magic.

By telling your story, you will be telling our story. Let our colleagues in for a glimpse of how we cast our spells. Relate your story to the goals, visions, hopes, and dreams of your education partners. Find a generous non-school-library-type educator friend to read your manuscript and help eliminate jargon.

As a novice writer, you might feel that your experience is not unique, and that there is a message there that you might not want to receive. Rest assured that lessons learned may include: (1) an overwhelming appreciation of the editorial process to sharpen the focus and intent of your article, (2) a necessary release of your favorite section that is cut due to space considerations, (3) a last-minute sidebar, complete with Web addresses and annotations, (4) an abstract posted or printed that you do not feel reflects the true meaning of your article, and (5) the harsh reality that you may not be able to choose the title, regardless of the pithy offering you sent along with the article.

We are effective in sharing our best practices with each other. Learning from each other is crucial, but not telling our wise and wondrous story to the other members of our school learning community keeps the same old refrain alive: they do not know what we do.



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University in Chicago. She is the author of *Every Student Reads: Collaboration and Reading to Learn (AASL, 2005)* and *The School Buddy System: The Practice of Collaboration (ALA, 2003)* as well as chapters and articles in both education and library journals. Gail is a member of the Knowledge Quest, Teacher Librarian, and School Library Media Activities Monthly editorial boards and is on the ALA Editions advisory board.