

Pamela Palmer and Chris Matz

# Promoting writing among nontenured faculty

Seven up, seven down

**W**riting—and writing successfully—for publication is the most difficult professional communication most librarians will perform. It is time-consuming and unwieldy to work around other duties, and yet it is often critical to promotion and tenure status. Since successful writing does not spontaneously generate itself, administrators and supervisors must facilitate an optimal environment for it. Seven factors that can support quality writing by tenure-track “junior” library faculty are listed here, along with seven circumstances that tend to discourage those efforts. A writing group for junior faculty members is recommended as a method of managing the scholarly writing process in academic libraries.

## Lessons learned from a writing group

The demographic composition of the faculty at the University of Memphis (UM) Libraries has changed dramatically since 2001. There are now eight junior faculty members on tenure track, while five years ago there were none. The UM Library tenure and promotion guidelines for the library faculty emphasize scholarly publication, and yet for most of the junior faculty, this was the first time that writing was emphasized as a professional requirement or a criterion for tenure. Senior faculty members were comfortable to act as mentors for every facet of the tenure process . . . except writing. What could be done to maximize the publication success of the junior faculty?

To investigate this further, the UM’s experience with a writing group was analyzed. The authors’ were part of the group from

its origin in 2003; Pamela Palmer founded, planned, and implemented the group while serving as chair of the tenure and promotion committee; Chris Matz has been an active participant from the start and comes up for tenure in fall 2006. From writing group experience and examination of the literature, we identified fourteen key points, crucial to writing group success.

## Seven conditions that stimulate writing for publication

**1. A quick introduction to publication expectations.** Many junior faculty members will come to their first assignment without any formal experience or education in writing (the LIS curriculum is already badly over-burdened<sup>1</sup>). It is vital that they become aware of the need to write and be published. Ideally as soon as they accept the new position, they should formally review the tenure and promotion requirements and gain a coherent understanding of exactly what is required of them. If it’s a precise number of articles or book chapters, the beginning is the best time to comprehend the requirements with crystal clarity.

**2. Supportive department heads.** Being a “good” supervisor is an amalgamation of many elements. Those who wish to encourage their junior faculty to write are “good” when they substantively advocate for writ-

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ing, provide opportunities such as flexible scheduling (see below), make introductions to editors or publishing forums, act as a sounding board for ideas and research, and generally demystify the writing process.

**3. Flexible scheduling.** Research and writing take time, and personal timetables must reflect that need. Public service librarians tend to have more control over their daily schedules than technical services librarians. Yet, if the junior faculty members in each unit are being assessed by the same tenure guidelines, similar accommodations must be sought. Expecting librarians to do their writing on their own time is plainly unreasonable.

**4. Supportive peers.** Other junior faculty members are in the same boat, if at various stages of the tenure process. It's sensible for them to share their experiences, even casually. This can lead to formal collaborative writing efforts<sup>2</sup> or simply provide a way to build collegiality between librarians who would rarely meet otherwise. Those benefits extend far beyond the parameters of tenure and promotion.

**5. Supportive administrators.** Upper management must do more than state a priority for junior faculty members to publish, they must demonstrate it. The easiest way to do this is for them to publish regularly themselves. Evidence of their scholarship should be readily available, and that of senior nonadministrators, as well. Coordinating immediate supervisors to bolster the writing process is also crucial.

**6. Supportive working environment.** Acknowledging the accomplishment of library faculty authors can go a long way towards encouraging more scholarly output. The Mississippi State University Libraries, among others, have created a Web site that lists faculty publications and even exhibits the published works to the public.<sup>3</sup> When junior faculty publications are noticed and rewarded, the authors are both encouraged to continue and in turn become strong mentors themselves, perpetuating achievement.

**7. Supportive finances.** Professional development is expensive enough for senior faculty members. Junior faculty members with lower salaries are even more heavily dependent on travel/professional development funds for research trips, participation in conferences, and involvement with professional organizations. Expenses should be covered to the fullest extent allowed by the development budget; some libraries may even wish to consider nontenured members first in the allocation of travel funds.

## **Seven conditions that hinder writing for publication**

**1. Inadequate personal time management.** It's easy to get caught up in the excitement of a new position. There are so many duties competing for a junior faculty member's attention, and the realization of just how much time is required to write for publication may be dangerously long in coming. Taking responsibility for prioritizing one's professional time towards writing is key, and the earlier done, the better.

**2. Overwhelming committee assignments.** Of course, the junior faculty members hardly set their personal agenda in a vacuum. It is common for new hires to be immediately assigned to committee vacancies. As academic libraries continue to resemble a business, the committee structure is a basic expression of the new culture. That aspect of professional service must be moderated, however, if a librarian is expected to publish successfully.

**3. Underrepresentation of the importance of publishing.** If administrators do not publish, and department heads do not publish, and senior colleagues do not publish, it will be difficult to genuinely impress the priority upon junior faculty members. Further, publication should be clearly tied to financial reward and/or promotion within the library (which would certainly promote continued writing by librarians who have been granted tenure).

**4. Poor definition of publishing requirements in tenure and promotion**

**standards.** Academic libraries echo the frequency and tone of university reassessment patterns. This can lead to frequent revisions in criteria and imperfect understanding of expectations. Even when a stable set of requirements exists, junior faculty have difficulty translating the words into a call to action. A writing group can hone in on the meaning and importance of critical elements of the standards and provide a forum for discussion.

**5. Absence of an effective road map.** As many academic libraries undergo a culture shift to learning commons, the previous working model of when and how scholarly writing is accomplished can be lost in the transition. Sometimes it's just a matter of remembering how to begin.<sup>4</sup> Beyond that, clarifying the status of publishing as an integral career-long focus is essential. Junior faculty are rightly confused when they see senior faculty are inactive authors.

**6. Role models are hard to find.** During earlier decades, libraries may have placed less emphasis on scholarly publication, leaving relatively few senior faculty with strong writing credentials. Making formal writing mentoring part of the regular schedule puts it on firmer footing. As Level and Mach said, "Time scheduled for the meetings gives credibility to the group's importance as part of professional development."<sup>5</sup> Without this level of structure, contact with role models may be fleeting.

**7. Nothing new under the sun.** First, have something to say": this bit of wisdom may serve to smash down the best intentions of many young librarians, who upon review of the professional literature feel they have nothing to contribute. While there is room to legitimately critique the oeuvre,<sup>6</sup> each librarian has a unique perspective on their world of work. No library requires a peer-reviewed article or chapter right out of the gate, and there are many forums available to sharpen writing skills and confidence while working towards a major scholarly publication. Consider your library's or state organization's newsletter, and don't over-

look online journals like LIScareer.com or Info Career Trends.

## Addressing the issues

Academic libraries talk a good game about the importance of producing scholarly writing, but it's uncommon to find one that supports it fully. A mechanism like a writing group can help address many of the factors listed above. Writing groups ground junior faculty members in a comfortable setting with other peers and catalyze the writing process. By providing the opportunity to engage in practical exercises—such as reviewing research methods, composing sample thesis statements, and exploring publishing guidelines for various journals and monographs—they offer practical insight into the process and content of writing for publication. In the end, however, it comes down to the individual librarian to strike the proper balance between scholarly writing and other professional responsibilities. The writing group can only show them the way.

## Notes

1. Cheryl L. Davis and Barbara B. Moran, "Preparing tomorrow's professionals: LIS schools and scholarly communication," *C&RL News* 66 (2005): 24–27.

2. Margaret Foote, "Collaborative authorship in North Carolina libraries: Past, present, and future," *North Carolina Libraries* 59 (Spring 2000): 20–24.

3. Deborah Lee, "Mentoring the untenured librarian: The research committee," *C&RL News* 66 (2005): 711–713, 724.

4. Rachel Singer Gordon, "Getting started in library publication," *American Libraries* 35 no 1 (January 2004): 66–68.

5. Allison V. Level and Michelle Mach, "Peer mentoring: One institution's approach to mentoring academic librarians," *Library Management* 26 (2005): 307.

6. Rodger C. Lewis, "Publish or perish? Looking at publication for tenure from the other side of the street," *C&RL News* 61 (2000): 606–608. *zz*