

Practically painless annual reporting

At the society's July meeting, communications consultant Kay Fay shared some tips and traps from her experience of producing effective annual reports.

'Annual reports contain dry official language, supported by statistics and accounts, a summary of their activities. These are seldom read except by students of government and are of very little value in educating public opinion. If reports gave concise information on the organisation and functions of the departments, the advantages would be incalculable.'

Professor F. A. Bland

That comment was made back in 1923. Not much has changed since then. The NSW Audit Office, Treasury and now the Public Bodies Review Committee are still trying to improve annual reporting by government agencies.

Another comment, by the leading American producer of annual reports, is that annual reports are 'an absolute pain'. Although this quote refers to private sector not public sector annual reports, I agree with him.

Annual reports to the NSW Parliament are even more complicated because of legislative demands, and the very short time frame for tabling them in Parliament. There is the added complication of the demands of the agency's Ministry, so it's a bit of a balancing act.

An investigation by the Public Accounts Committee in 1976 indicated that not much had changed since 1923:

'Many public sector annual reports continue to fail to properly address the key areas of an agency's responsibilities that are of concern to readers.'

This comment shows there is still the problem of annual reports not address-

ing what people want to know about the activities of government agencies. That's where the professional editor steps in—to fix this up.

How do you fix the problem? As I see

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Next meeting: Tuesday 3 August 1999

The craft of fiction editing with Carl Harrison-Ford

Fiction editing seems to have a kudos—or an aura—some of which is doubtless warranted. This is largely because of the esteem in which literary fiction is held and the financial value of successful commercial fiction. But what of the editors and their particular responsibilities? In fact what *are* their responsibilities?

Carl Harrison-Ford has been an editor of fiction and non-fiction for 30 years. In 1997-98 he was editor-in-residence at the University of Canberra, and for the last five years has conducted the Canberra Centre for Writing's successful masterclass for novel writers. He is not sure the questions he raises have easy answers, and he has anecdotes to back his doubts.

Level 5, Thakral House, 301 George Street, Sydney (right on top of Wynyard Station). 6.30 pm for 7 pm. Drinks and light refreshments provided. Non-members welcome. **RSVP by Friday 30 July** to (02) 9294 4999 (voicemail). Members \$12; non-members and those who don't RSVP, \$15.

For the diary:

7 September: Mark Macleod of Hodder Headline—on trends in educational publishing.

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it—and this is mainly for government reports—editors should focus on three areas:

- ensuring that the report complies with legislation
- ensuring that it is written in plain English
- ensuring that the report is tabled on time in Parliament.

Complying with legislation

The legislation governing annual reports is mainly in the *Annual Reports (Departments) Act* and the *Annual Reports (Statutory Authorities) Act* and their accompanying regulations. The Acts are just the bare bones and don't give you much in the way of information. For example, the *Annual Reports (Departments) Act* says that 'a department head shall within the period of four months

after the end of each financial year of the department prepare a report of its operations for the financial year then ended'. That's all it says. It doesn't tell you about the structure of the report and the information it should contain.

The regulations flesh out the Act. They say that reports on operations should include the charter of the organisation, the aims and objectives, the address and phone numbers (you'd be amazed at how many people leave this out of an annual report) and the management and structure of the organisation.

As well as the annual reports Acts, a plethora of other compliance requirements have been buried in Treasury circulars and in memoranda from the Premier. These are supposed to be filed by the government agencies and you should ask for them when you start writing their annual report—although you'll get a blank look, I can assure you.

Treasury brought out a guide on compliance requirements in 1994. This is

great because it gives you an overview of what you must include in an annual report. It's called *Excellence in Financial Management: Annual Reports, a Guide for the NSW Public Sector*. But no list has been compiled of the compliance regulations that have been issued since this booklet was published.

If you're asked to write an annual report, the first thing you should ask for is a copy of the last report. The last two would be better. But you should not use them as your bible for structure, content and focus. The chief executive may have decided to contract out production because previous annual reports are a mess. They will contain good background information, though, on the activities of the agency and commitments that were made and should be addressed in the annual report you are writing.

You should think how you can contribute ideas that will move the annual report away from the dry official language so disliked by Professor Bland.

Plain English and more

In annual report writing, editing extends beyond plain English into structure and content. Annual reports are expected to have a realistic balance of good news and challenges, problems and setbacks. They are a review of the year—a balanced discussion of issues and challenges faced by the agency. They include performance indicators—a mix of qualitative and quantitative measures of progress towards an objective.

You have to assess the information you are given. Does it contain measurable key result areas? If it can't be measured, you need to go back and ask questions: how can progress be measured? For example, just saying that there's been an improvement in customer service is not enough. That is not going to tell anybody anything or generate any confidence in the information. How did they do it? How did they measure the improvement?

In terms of reporting against performance indicators or key result areas, the Public Bodies Review Committee has released a report on 10 annual reports. You can ring Parliament House and get a copy of it.

Unlike the Audit Office, which used to look at reports and highlight the good ones, the Review Committee has gone the other way; they've talked about dreadful ones.

Society of Editors (NSW) Inc.

PO Box 254, Broadway NSW 2007; Voicemail: (02) 9294 4999

<http://www.users.bigpond.com/socednsw/>

Membership

Membership of the Society of Editors (NSW) Inc. is open to anyone working as an editor for publication (print or electronic documents), and anyone who supports the society's aims.

Membership runs for a calendar year. 1999 fees are \$45 for new members (\$25 if joining after 30 June) and \$40 for renewals.

For a membership application form, phone (02) 9294 4999, or write to PO Box 254, Broadway NSW 2007.

Blue Pencil

The society's newsletter, *Blue Pencil*, is published monthly, except for a combined January/February issue. Your comments and contributions are welcome. Mail them to Merry Pearson at 55 Collins St, North Narrabeen, NSW 2101, or fax or email them to her as per the contact details on the back page.

Deadline for the September issue is Monday 9 August.

Advertising rates:

Full page, \$90; Half page, \$50 (horizontal only); One-third page, \$35 (vertical or horizontal); Quarter page \$25 (horizontal only); Sixth page, \$20 (half of one column). Inserts: \$50 per hundred for DL-sized or A4 pre-folded to DL size. Circulation: approximately 275.

Committee meetings

All members are welcome to attend the society's committee meetings. The next meeting will be held on Tuesday 10 August. The Graphic Arts Club has closed its doors, so the time and new meeting venue are still to be determined. Contact a committee member for details if you wish to attend.

Its report includes such observations as:

'One agency reported almost exclusively on how busy they had been—not on what, how or why they achieved what they may have achieved.'

This is a big trap you can fall into. Agencies are not supposed to be talking about being busy; they are supposed to be talking about achievements and how those achievements have been measured.

I teach a briefing on how to produce an effective annual report for state government agencies, and include some plain English writing tips. I also do a quick analysis of two summaries of annual reports. I use local government summaries of annual reports because I don't want to be pointing the finger at a state agency that might have a representative in the class.

(The audience was split into groups, reviewed two summaries of annual reports and gave feedback)

Let's sum up the good and bad aspects.

In the first report, the front cover is awful. The picture is too small. It's a good idea for a report to give a feeling for its geographical area, but this one doesn't show a good picture of the area because the photo is just a sliver of a beach. The inside cover is blank, a waste of space. The councillors' pictures look like a rogues' gallery—what photo-journalists aptly call mug shots. There are a few fuzzy pictures that are too small. Apart from those of the councillors, of the five feature shots, the mayor is in three. And there are two mug shots with her message, just to make sure you don't forget what she looks like.

There is a map, but no identifying roads showing the areas. If I wanted to know which area I lived in, I would have a hard time figuring it out from this map. The body of the report is structured under divisions. The first sentence reads: 'The corporate services department provides information to the public and administrative support to the Council.' Who cares? Nobody would be hooked into reading on.

In the second summary report, the front cover has good people shots and good use of two colours. The inside cover is busy and focuses on the community the council serves in pictures. The councillors are on the back page, along with a map, with the streets marked. The body is structured under services. Instead of the first report's

Tools for producing annual reports

- the agency's last two annual reports
- the agency's publications: staff newsletters, corporate newsletter, media releases, brochures
- the *Annual Reports (Departments) Act* and the *Annual Reports (Departments) Regulations* or the *Annual Reports (Statutory Bodies) Act* and the *Annual Reports (Statutory Bodies) Regulations*, available on the Web at www.afl.asn.au
- *Excellence in Financial Management*, a Treasury booklet
- the *AGPS Style Manual* for authors, editors and printers
- the *Macquarie Dictionary*

heading 'Corporate services', the second says, 'Getting on with the job', which is more enticing to read. The second council obviously had a bigger budget than the first, but it used only two colours. This is not much more expensive than one colour and can lift a publication enormously. Whereas the first report's councillors looked like a rogues' gallery, in the second report they look as if they just might be doing something, even if it's plotting.

These are examples of areas you should be ready to discuss when you are interviewed for a report writing contract. Critically read and analyse the agency's past annual reports, including the design. Take along examples of good reports and relate them back to the guidelines on reporting against performance indicators, not just talking about how busy they all were. Demonstrate not just your skills as an editor, but your potential to support the entire project—show what a creative and professional report can do for the agency.

Do you get a byline in the report?

No, very seldom with government agencies. But word gets around and they will remember you when they need an annual report written.

Incidentally, when you win the contract for an annual report, you must invoice progressively. Don't wait until the end. I learnt the hard way when the chief executive was shocked at the cost. Be aware that when the same person in a department, usually inhouse, has written the report year after year, using the same information and not structuring the report around key result areas, management isn't going to realise the amount of work you might put in. That's why you should read the past reports, so you can show that you can improve it

here, improve it there, and give them a good idea of the time it will take. Size is not a qualitative measure of an effective annual report. A 400-page annual report might be telling everything about every wrinkle and smile in the agency, but it is probably not going to be read.

You've dazzled them

So, you've dazzled them and you've won the contract. Now you have to draw up a schedule. If you're doing a government report after the end of the financial year, 30 June, you have until the end of October. That's when it must be given to the Minister. Four weeks after that date, it must be tabled in Parliament. You have a safety net in that four weeks because the Minister does not have to receive the printed version. You can move to design and give the Minister a laser printout. You then have four weeks to print the report, ready for tabling in Parliament.

As well as scheduling for presentation to the Minister and tabling in Parliament, include in your schedule the time it will take to:

- gather information for narrative and appendices
- complete the writing
- get final approval for narrative
- finish the design
- organise photography
- complete printing.

Writing and editing

The major work on an annual report is gathering information, writing and editing—and you will be editing and editing and editing. I find that the amount of time seems ridiculous when I draw up the schedule, but that's what it takes.

The other milestone is sending the financial information to the Auditor-General. It has to go to the Auditor-

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A new computer operating system

Alicia Thompson sent along the following poetic contribution that she received from a friend via the Internet:

A Japanese computer company has reportedly announced its own computer operating system now available on its 'hot new portable PC'. Instead of producing the cryptic error messages characteristic of Microsoft's Windows 95, 3.1, and DOS operating systems, the company's chairman said:

'We intend to capture the high ground by putting a human, Japanese face on what has been—until now—an operating system that reflects Western cultural hegemony. For example, we have replaced the impersonal and unhelpful Microsoft error messages with our own Japanese haiku poetry.'

The chairman went on to give examples of the new error messages:

A file that big?
It might be very useful.
But now it is gone.

The Web site you seek
cannot be located but
countless more exist.

Haiku challenge

Let these computer-related verses inspire you to write your own haiku about editing or being an editor. Haiku is a three-line Japanese verse form of 17 syllables.

We'll have a prize for the best effort, but your flu-flattened editor hasn't gotten to that yet. We'll announce the prize next issue and publish some of the best submissions. Send your contributions to: Haiku Challenge, PO Box 254, Broadway NSW 2007, or fax or email to the editor (contact details on page 6).

Chaos reigns within.
Reflect, repent, and reboot.
Order shall return.

ABORTED effort:
Close all that you have worked on.
You ask way too much.

Yesterday it worked
Today it is not working
Windows is like that.

First snow, then silence.
This thousand dollar screen dies
so beautifully.

With searching comes loss
and the presence of absence:
'My Novel' not found.

The Tao that is seen
Is not the true Tao, until
You bring fresh toner.

Windows NT crashed.
I am the Blue Screen of Death.
No one hears your screams.

Stay the patient course.
Of little worth is your ire.
The network is down.

A crash reduces
your expensive computer
to a simple stone.

Three things are certain:
Death, taxes, and lost data.
Guess which has occurred.

You step in the stream,
but the water has moved on.
This page is not here.

Out of memory.
We wish to hold the whole sky,
But we never will.

Having been erased,
The document you're seeking
Must now be retyped.

Serious error.
All shortcuts have disappeared.
Screen. Mind. Both are blank.

OPPORTUNITIES ... FOR EDITORS

IDG Books Worldwide, Inc, which produces the successful For Dummies reference series, has formed a joint venture company, IDG Books Australia Publishing Corporation Pty Ltd. The new company will be publishing for the local market in a variety of subject areas including business, sport, home and garden, and computer software instruction.

IDG Books Australia is searching for experienced and professional freelance editorial staff including technical writers and editors, copyeditors, proofreaders and indexers with internet access and advanced skills in style and templates in Word 97 for PC. Experience in Quark and Pagemaker for Mac is desirable but not essential. If you are interested please contact:

**Freelance Staff
IDG Books Australia
PO Box 935
Mona Vale NSW 2103**

COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES

The 1999 committee met for the fifth time on Tuesday 13 July 1999.

Standards and accreditation issues

(working group: Rhana Pike, Cathy Gray, Jo Healy-North, Bruce Howarth)
The NSW group has been researching venues for the meeting of the national standards working group (convened by

SA's Kathie Stove) due to be held in Sydney in late July. The meeting aims to compile a draft for discussion by the various state societies (see flyer enclosed with this issue).

Editorial Services Directory

Letters promoting the *Editorial Services Directory 1999-2000* have been sent to all those who ordered previous editions.

Mailing lists of potential new customers have been developed and promotional material is being prepared for distribution later this month.

The searchable version available on the society's web site is being promoted at the same time. This may decrease sales of the print edition, and a 'hit counter' is to be incorporated into the web site to monitor its use.

Member survey

The results of the 1999 survey are currently being analysed and will be published in a future issue of *Blue Pencil*.

Training

The Grammar for Editors workshop was held on Saturday 24 July; other workshops will be confirmed once the member survey results have been analysed.

1999 Spring Writing Festival

Instead of operating a stall at this year's NSW Writers' Centre Spring Writing Festival, the society has decided to sponsor a session. 'Show and Tell: the writer-editor relationship' will be presented by long-time editor Barbara Kerr-Wilson in partnership with an author, and chaired by society president Cathy Gray.

Although she now lives in Queensland, Barbara was in fact the founding president of the NSW society and we'll take the opportunity of exploring her memories of those early years while she's in Sydney.

Other matters

If you'd like to contribute in any of these areas, contact one of the committee members involved (see list page 6).

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General within six weeks of the end of the financial year, and the Auditor-General has 10 weeks to respond. Obviously, you would not be expected to know what should be in the financial section of the annual report; leave it to the accountants. The letter from the Auditor-General must be presented in the report exactly as it is, with the logo, etc. It's a boring letter with a boring logo, and you may have to fight a designer tooth and nail not to tamper with it and pretty it up. But the agency could receive a nasty letter from the Auditor General if it were changed, and that won't help you get the job the following year.

The client is usually impressed if the subject of scheduling is raised and drawn up in consultation with them. One of the pitfalls that can arise from scheduling is that senior management often wants to be interviewed. This is a very cumbersome way to go and a waste of time. They see it as an opportunity to bang their own drum and give you information that is project-based, rather than based on key result areas.

I am dealing with this situation right now. What I will do before the interview is develop the structure of the report. Each chapter will report against the department's objectives. That's easy if they have done this the year before, but they probably haven't because you have been called in as the fabulous fix-it person. Therefore, get the last annual report and analyse it to see how it reports against objectives. Go into the interview armed with the department's objectives and lead the interview with those.

You need to lead them into reporting problems and difficulties. They won't want to talk about it. I use as an example a report for the year that a Minister was sacked for harassing staff. Of course, the Ministry investigated and it was a dreadful reflection on the whole Ministry that this had gone on for as long as it had, but it was reported. If it hadn't been, the report would have had no integrity.

Another area you can work on at an interview is the focus of the report. I try to develop one or two suggestions beforehand. There is nothing worse than developing a great focus, writing the report around it and then having to go back to the drawing board because the chief executive doesn't like it.

Back to Bland

The bottom line, then, is to educate public opinion, as Professor Bland said. To do that, you need to move from the drab and bland approach of annual reports and show you can provide the information that the readers want as well as the image the agency wants to promote. That's the role of the professional annual report editor.

New members

A warm welcome to the following, who have joined the society recently:

Monique Cipponi
Carol Dent
Jacqueline Eyers
Virginia Fischer

Necola Hoare
Sue Irvine
Mark Marusic
Michael Siemianowski

1999 COMMITTEE

President: Catherine Gray

Phone/fax : (02) 9130 8331 (w & h)

Email: cgray@mpx.com.au

Vice President & Secretary: Rhana Pike

Phone: (02) 9569 7831 (h)

(02) 9562 5317 (w)

Fax: (02) 9569 1641 (h)

Email: rhanap@ozemail.com.au

Membership Secretary: Robert Pearson

Phone/fax: (02) 9913 7799 (h)

Email: mmripear@ozemail.com.au

Treasurer: Alicia Thompson

Phone: (02) 9909 3346 (w & h)

Email: alicia_mtb@one.net.au

Newsletter Editor: Merry Pearson

Phone/fax: (02) 9913 7799 (w & h)

Email: mmripear@ozemail.com.au

Newsletter Assistant: Catherine Hockings

Phone/fax: (02) 9568 2618

Email: chocki01@postoffice.csu.edu.au

Publicity Officer: Terry Johnston

Phone/fax: (02) 9337 4126 (w & h)

Mobile: 0413 801 948

Email: terry.johnston@tafensw.edu.au

Website Coordinator: Bruce White

Phone: (02) 9955 0344

Email: white@msn.com.au

General Member:

Jo Healy-North

Phone: (02) 9331 7751 (h)

Email: jhn@bigpond.com.au

Member discounts

Don't forget to show your society membership card if you're shopping at the following retail outlets:

Bookshops

Abbey's Bookshops

131 York St, Sydney

(02) 9264 3111

10 per cent discount

Pentimento Bookshop

275 Darling St, Balmain

(02) 9810 0707

10 per cent discount

Computer equipment

OmniSystems Network Solutions

Unit 2, Burwood Rd, Burwood

(02) 9744 7638

Up to 25 per cent on computer hardware, software and training

NOTICEBOARD

Standards workshop

See the enclosed insert about the Saturday afternoon workshop to discuss the draft national standards for editing that are being developed by the Council of Australian Societies of Editors (CASE). All members are encouraged to participate as these standards will, in a sense, form the core of our profession in future. Contact Cathy Gray (details at left) for more information.

Galley Club meeting

The Galley Club AGM will be held on Wednesday 18 August. Location and cost to be advised. For information, contact Anders Hagberg (phone 0414 851 437). RSVP to Hari Ho (fax 9878 8122 or email hari.ho@gbpub.com.au).

WiP activities

Women in Publishing are presenting a seminar entitled Drafting Copy on Tuesday 10 August at the Lansdowne Hotel. The Lansdowne is at 2-6 City Road (just off Broadway). Parking is available at the Broadway shopping centre. For information, phone (02) 9281 0240 or fax (02) 9281 7219.

In cooperation with City Desktop Training, WiP is running some two-day courses in a range of computer packages. Discounted for WiP members (\$345), upcoming courses are for Web Pages and HTML, Saturday 4 and 11 September, normal price \$585, WiP discount \$300, and Adobe Photoshop 5, Saturday 13 and 20 November, normal price \$585, WiP discount \$345. Contact City Desktop Training, Level 1, 363 Pitt Street, Sydney. Phone (02) 9267 2203, fax (02) 9267 8665.

Bookstaff retires

Alison Aprhys is retiring from Bookstaff. As of 31 July 1999, Bookstaff will close. In line with the confidential nature of the business, all candidate files (electronic and paper) will be destroyed.

Alison would like to thank the Australian booktrade for their support and encouragement over the past five years. She says, 'We have been very fortunate to have worked with some of the best people (as clients or candidates) in the booktrade.'

Alison also acknowledges the support, loyalty and hard work of current staff manager Melinda Bufton and administrator Rebecca Maidment. 'They have been the most marvellous employees. I feel very privileged to have worked with them both—particularly with Melinda, who has been with Bookstaff for over three years.'

Over the past five years, Bookstaff has assisted with the placement of more than 150 people in publishing, bookselling and related positions. Alison now plans to take a well-deserved break and before seeking a new career challenge.

Alison Aprhys, Melinda Bufton and Rebecca Maidment can be contacted on (03) 9602 5622 or 041 201 2904 (phone), (03) 9602 5625 (fax) or bookstaff@books.aus.net (email) until 31 July 1999