

How and Why to Write About Chinese Medicine to the Public, Part Two

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Editor's note: Part one of this article appeared in the September issue.

Personal Versus Academic Style

You may get big points using technical words and dense phrasing when writing to your peers, but you won't reach the lay audience. When I went to ToastMasters to learn public speaking, I found that academic people tend to lean too heavily on their knowledge.

In both speaking and writing, be clear, enthusiastic, inspiring, simple and fun. Obviously, any of these can be taken too far, but if you look at your writing and one of these elements is missing completely, it's time to rethink - and rewrite.

One way to overcome the academic habit is to make lists - they're simple and easy to read. Make them practical. As David Letterman has proven, people love "top ten" lists. I did an article called "My Top Ten Favorite Things About Oriental Medicine" (viewable at www.pulsemed.org/toptenfaves.htm). It includes real examples and experiences (not just ideas) and benefits (see #7 in the article), and it's personal, fun and imaginative. Its only fault is that it might be a bit long.

News You Can Use

It took me a while to learn, but what readers care most about is, "What will I get out of this?" and "What can I do that's easy?" If you give them simple tips and tell them how they'll benefit, you'll go far. Also, you can anticipate the obstacles they'll encounter in trying to follow your advice, and give them tips about how to overcome them.

Writing is Work

Not just anyone can write well. Good writing requires a number of different efforts:

- Read a lot. If you'd never heard anyone talk, your speech would sound pretty weird. It's the same with writing, and if English is your second language, you'll need to read, talk and listen to a lot of English. One solution that has worked for others in this regard is ToastMasters (www.toastmasters.org).
- Read good writers. Check out the different styles of the greats: the literary works of Hemmingway and Fitzgerald; the motivational work of Norman Vincent Peale and Napoleon Hill; popular medical writers Andrew Weil and Deepak Chopra; and the inspirational *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series. These books aren't well-known just because they were promoted, but also because their styles reached their audiences.

- Read about writing. Two indispensable texts are Strunk & White's *The Elements of Style* and William Zinsser's *On Writing Well*. The former is short and pithy. The latter is brilliant, entertaining, and contains lots of examples of good writing.
- Write a lot. Writers write. As soon as you get an idea, write it down - don't expect to remember it. The Chinese have a saying, "The weakest ink is stronger than the strongest memory." Use that ink, or get a tape recorder for memos on the go.
- Get feedback. You have to see how and where people misunderstand you to prevent it from happening again. You'll be amazed how often they misunderstand you. You'll learn how to be more clear. For a while, acupuncturist Laurie Burton edited some of my work for *The Pulse*. She has a strong literary background. If you don't have a literary background, get help from those that do.
- Be patient. Writing has great benefits, but it requires work and time. You can sit down and bang out some unrefined thoughts, but real writing starts after that. If you get the books by Strunk & White and Zinsser, you'll understand. If writing is for you, you'll do the work, but you must also persist in that work if you want to be successful.
- Most importantly - rewrite, rewrite, rewrite. Writing *is* rewriting. The fact is, somebody has to do the work - either the author or the reader. If you skimp and leave the work for your readers, you'll lose them. William Strunk rewrote everything nine times before publishing. I find that even four or five rewrites makes a huge difference. I'm not talking about grammar and spelling here; that goes without saying. I'm talking about eliminating unnecessary words; rephrasing; clarifying; adding missing assumptions; possibly even restructuring the whole piece. Read the books by Strunk & White and Zinsser to learn the basics of rewriting. The more rewriting you do, the better your first drafts will get. Edit both on-screen, and on printouts of rough drafts, and you'll find more of what needs rewriting.
- An example of rewriting: After writing the first draft of this article, I "tracked changes" in Microsoft Word. If you want to see how much I rewrote it, you can download the edited version from www.pulsemed.org/rewrite.htm. In Word, under the Tools menu, choose "Track Changes" and select "Highlighted on the Screen."

I've written more than 200 articles for *The Pulse* since 1999, and about half a dozen for *Acupuncture Today*. I have made very little money from this directly, but this work is probably the main reason why a young guy like me secured a literary agent, and why I now have five publishers interested in my first book.

You don't have to write a book. If you write articles to get patients, what you are really doing is called *branding*, and brand marketing requires many public exposures over time to create momentum. Marketing your services requires a different approach from marketing products. For more about that, read Harry Beckwith's *Selling the Invisible*.

Where to Write to the Public

Local newspapers. Write a regular column. Target not just the big city papers, but the smaller ones in outlying areas. The latter may be easier to convince into letting you write.

Magazines. Get an online subscription to Writer's Market (www.writersmarket.com). You can search for magazines by topic. They give you all the information: how many people they reach; how to get their writer's guidelines; how to query a magazine about an article; and so on. You'll find that some magazines may not be open to Chinese medicine ideas: they may conflict with their medical ideas (e.g., Western medicine orthodoxy, or the "single herb" mindset) or their advertisers (who market the misuse of *ma huang* or *zhi shi*). However, many of them will be interested if you find the right topic and write a good query.

The Pulse of Oriental Medicine. I had to say it. That's all we do at PulseMed.org - write to the

public. You can get more info about writing for *The Pulse* at www.pulsemed.org/pulsewriters.htm.

Just Do It

This may all sound overwhelming, but you can do it. Just get started. Feel free to email me for help; you can reach me through this feedback form: www.pulsemed.org/feedbackform.htm.

OCTOBER 2003