

# Write That Professional Article!

**D**o you have a classroom lesson that is especially effective with your students, or a workshop that has been especially successful with teachers? Then you should consider sharing it. Everyone benefits when teachers share their “best practice” ideas with one another; novice and seasoned teachers alike are delighted to add successful lessons to their repertoire. Besides giving teachers something tried and true to work with, successful lesson plans help teachers reflect upon what makes an approach to language teaching effective in the classroom.

An excellent way to share a successful idea with colleagues is to write down detailed step-by-step procedures to implement the lesson and then hand them out to colleagues. Teachers often eagerly collect such materials; some collections of classroom activities are preserved for years and adapted by other teachers for students of all ages and abilities.

One of the more formal ways to share an idea is to write an article for publication in your English department’s newsletter or in a professional teacher’s journal. Often teachers feel

at a loss as to how to transform a lesson plan into a publication. “I’m not an expert, I’m not a PhD, and I’m not a writer,” they say. “I’m a good teacher, but I don’t know how to write about teaching.” If that statement describes your thinking, you are underestimating yourself. If you can write a lesson plan or present a workshop for teachers, you can write a professional article describing that lesson plan or workshop. As with any complex endeavor, you begin by breaking down the task into several discrete steps.

In 2008 I led a series of professional and academic writing workshops for teachers of English in Uzbekistan who were required to write a professional article every year for their university’s monthly English teachers’ journal. Writing in English did not come easy to many teachers, so they asked me to develop a workshop that would help them meet the publishing requirement. Because many universities in other countries are adopting similar requirements, in this article I will share this workshop that has helped English teachers prepare a successful classroom lesson plan for publication.

## Organizing your article

Before you begin your writing task, think of a lesson you presented in class that went especially well. The students enjoyed the learning experience and felt they successfully mastered the material. You also felt good about teaching this lesson, perhaps because you were helping your students master a language skill that had given them a lot of trouble in the past. Select a lesson you would like to share with other teachers because you believe they would also be successful when presenting it to their students. (Note: If you are writing for publication, this lesson must be your own original idea and not an adaptation from another author.)

So, have you thought of a successful lesson? Whether you want to write a publishable article or otherwise share a successful lesson plan with colleagues, your ideas need to be clearly organized and easy to follow. This requires a special format so that teachers and colleagues will be able to duplicate or adapt the lesson plan in their classes. Five essential steps to prepare your article for publication are described below. As you read the following steps, think of how you can apply each one to transform *your* lesson into a publishable article. (See Figure 1 for a summary of these five steps.)

### Step 1: Create a title for your article

The title should reflect the purpose of your lesson; therefore, it should include informa-

tion about the language skill the lesson will address and the educational or language level of students who will benefit from the lesson. Reflect on the lesson you would like to share and come up with a title that is clear and simple so that your audience (fellow teachers) will know what new teaching skills they will be learning from you. “Creating Speaking Opportunities in the Intermediate Classroom” or “Ways to Improve Beginner Students’ Listening Comprehension” are titles that tell your readers what to expect. When you are writing for the K–12 teacher, your title should be specific about the age of the target students, such as “Strategies for Teaching Writing Skills in the Primary Grades” or “Communicative Activities for Middle School Classrooms” (Rivera 2006). You do not need to be too clever with your title, but you do need to be clear. Look through the titles of articles in any professional journal and notice how the title clearly describes what the article is about, including the language skills addressed and the level of learner targeted. (Note: Authors often revise the title after they have finished writing their article, and you may wish to do the same.)

### Step 2: Identify the problem for the target audience

In general, the purpose of a professional article is to solve a problem for the target audience—in this case, the classroom teachers who will read your article and use the information.

#### 1. Create a title that clearly describes what your article will be about.

- The title indicates your purpose and the language level of the students.
- The title lets the reader know what to expect.

#### 2. Identify the problem for the target audience.

Describe the specific problem learners have and what level of learner your lesson will address.

#### 3. State your objectives.

Describe how the problem will be addressed and what students will be able to do by the end of the lesson.

#### 4. Describe the procedures of your lesson plan.

- Name your lesson plan.
- List the necessary materials.
- Create separate steps for each activity and state whether it is a group, pair, or individual activity.

#### 5. Write the Conclusion.

State the benefits of the lesson and the skills students will acquire. Include options for expanding or adapting the lesson plan to address other language skills.

Figure 1: Five Steps for Writing a Professional Article

While your general target audience is teachers of English, it is better to narrow the target to a more specific group, such as teachers in the primary or middle school grades, or teachers of intermediate English for young adults.

When you write your article, answer these questions for your readers: What is the problem your lesson will address? And what age and language level (Primary grades? Beginner? Intermediate?) will your article focus on? The introductory paragraphs present the problem and introduce the reason why you have created this lesson. For example, if your title is “Creating Speaking Opportunities in the Intermediate English Classroom,” you might state the problem like this:

Many of our students can understand written English, but they have a very difficult time orally expressing their opinions and ideas in English. Students have very little opportunity to speak English outside of class and thus they have difficulty developing this important skill. The classroom may be the only place and time that students will have the opportunity to use their new language skills.

As in the above example, you can simply state the problem as one that English language learners routinely encounter and that your lesson seeks to remedy. Or, if you want to be more creative with your problem description, you could describe a classroom scene where a student is having an especially difficult time or the teacher is frustrated and discouraged. This sets the scene for your lesson to solve the problem. Remember, the problem statement only introduces a particular problem students and teachers face in the classroom. The next section on objectives will describe what will be done to address this problem.

### Step 3: State your objective

The objective addresses the problem identified in Step 2 and is what the students *will be able to do* as a result of this activity. This section may consist of one or more paragraphs. The author of “Creating Speaking Opportunities in the Intermediate English Classroom” could write something like this:

The purpose of this article is to share with teachers a speech activity that my

students have enjoyed. The objective is to provide new vocabulary and then allow students to practice their oral skills with interesting topics that make students eager to express their opinions and describe their experiences. This speech activity will motivate students to develop vocabulary and use their English language speaking skills.

### Step 4: Describe the procedures for the lesson plan

In this step you will clearly describe the procedures that will permit other teachers to replicate the lesson plan in their classrooms. This step will form the body of your article, and has the following elements:

- **Name your lesson plan or activity.** Give your lesson or activity a descriptive name and provide a brief overview of what students will do.
- **List the materials.** What materials are required to perform the activity? Will there be worksheets or handouts, prepared posters, or audiotapes? Will the students require pens, paper, notebooks, or other materials? Will the teacher require a computer, tape player, or other audiovisual equipment?
- **Explain the procedure for the lesson.** Explain how to conduct the lesson by carefully describing each step that is necessary for a teacher to follow your plan. Note whether it is a group, pair, or individual activity, or a combination of these configurations. For example, you might start with a group activity and then change to a pair activity and then go back to a group activity. Be sure to include a separate step for each activity. If necessary, include the time you allow for each step. To make the procedures perfectly clear use numerals to list each step, and use bullets or letters to list activities within each step.

Following is an example of how to apply these elements to describe the procedures for a speaking lesson:

#### Name: HI-LO Speaking Activity

Tell the students the class will first develop vocabulary, as a group, and then practice speaking in pairs about an experience they

have had within the past 24 hours. This experience will be either the high point of their day or the low point of their day. Whenever possible, give students a choice of topics; this will give them feelings of independence and ownership of their learning (Chapman and King 2009). Remind students that they will be telling their stories to classmates, so they should not relate something they are uncomfortable sharing with others (Sokolik 1996).

The HI-LO Speaking Activity will begin as a vocabulary lesson, including words that signal time order and transitions. The activity will then transition to a fluency exercise with several pairs and conclude with a group session where students can reflect on the lesson with the whole class and the teacher. Reflection and feedback create opportunities for students to again take ownership of their learning and for teachers to consider adapting the lesson accordingly (Chapman and King 2009).

**Materials:** Blackboard and chalk (or whiteboard and markers) and student notebooks

#### Procedure:

1. Group Activity—Vocabulary on Board
  - a. Begin by brainstorming. Ask the class to think of the best thing that happened to them yesterday and also the worst thing.
  - b. Ask the class to call out words that describe the BEST thing that happened to them yesterday. You are looking for adjectives like *wonderful, good, sweet, kind, amazing*. Write their words in a vertical list on the board. Give definitions, examples, or synonyms for unfamiliar words. Continue writing on the board until they have no more words to offer.
  - c. Ask the class to call out words that describe the WORST thing that happened to them yesterday. Ask for words and adjectives that describe feelings. They may call out words like *sad, terrible, horrible, awful, mean, embarrassing*. Write these words also on the board, next to the BEST words.
  - d. Because students will be narrating an incident, ask them for vocabulary that signals time order, such as *before, first, after, later, when*. Point out that

these words will help them organize their story and connect events (Bonner 1994).

#### 2. Individual Activity—Vocabulary in Notebooks

- a. Have students write the BEST and WORST vocabulary words in their notebooks. The words can be used later in speaking, writing, and vocabulary activities.
- b. Have students also write words that show the order of events, such as *before, while, during, after*, and phrases that signal transitions and chronological order, like at *first, after that, and as soon as* (Oshima and Hogue 2006). These time expressions will be useful in organizing the narrative.

#### 3. Pair Activity—Fluency Exercise

- a. Put the students in pairs and have them select which experience they want to tell their partner—the HI or the LO point of their day.
- b. Each student has three minutes to tell his or her partner about an experience. The teacher keeps track of time and ends the activity after six minutes.

#### 4. Repeat Pair Activity with new partners

- a. Students tell the same story to another partner, but this time they have only two minutes each to tell their story. Remind students that the objective is to tell the same story they told to their first partner. They have less time, but they must give all the same information.
- b. Repeat this pair activity with another new partner, but this time they have only one minute each to tell their story. Again, students are to give all the information they told their first and second partners. The objective is not to shorten their story but to improve fluency with repetition (Burk 2005).

#### 5. Group Activity—Reflection and Feedback on Activity

Ask students the following questions:

- What did you find most interesting about this activity?
- What was most difficult or frustrating about this activity?
- Should we do anything differently when we do it next time?

6. Expanded Activities
  - a. Have students write a paragraph about the experience they talked about.
  - b. Organize students into pairs and have them read their paragraphs out loud to their partners. Chapman and King (2009) point out that students often recognize grammar errors when they read their own work orally.
  - c. In a Language Experience Activity (Chapman and King 2009), the teacher models how the spoken word becomes written by taking dictation from a student and writing the narration on the board. This experience trains students to write the words as they say them. Editing, clarifying, and revising come in later steps of the writing process.

#### Step 5: Writing the conclusion

In the conclusion to your article, you tell how your students usually respond and the skills they acquire from your lesson. The conclusion may also mention problems that students may encounter during the lesson and how teachers can anticipate and address these problems. When you prepare to write the conclusion of your article, consider the language skills students acquire and what they especially enjoy about this lesson. Are there any problems the teacher could anticipate? Are there alternative ways to conduct this lesson? How can the lesson be expanded to address other language skills?

The following conclusion to the HI-LO Speaking Activity states the language benefits to the students:

When teachers offer this activity regularly, students will begin to eagerly look forward to discussing their HI and LO experiences with each other and start to think about the vocabulary they will use in class to describe their experiences. By repeating their story three times, they develop confidence in their speaking ability. Students will notice an improvement in their fluency and vocabulary with each repetition. In fact, teachers may find it difficult to get their students to stop speaking with their third conversation partner. Students may want to expand the activity so that they have

more time to respond to each other and have a real conversation about the events they share.

A good conclusion will also show how the activity can be expanded in response to student feedback. Adding additional activities gives the students important opportunities to listen, read, speak, and write in every class, and teachers will be especially pleased with lessons that give examples of how to incorporate all four language skills. For example, the conclusion could describe how to expand the HI-LO activity from speaking to writing:

This speaking activity can easily be expanded to a writing activity. Students will learn, “If I can say it, I can write it” (Chapman and King 2009). The HI-LO Speaking Activity motivates students to express themselves because the events they want to relate—about family, friendships, student life—are relevant to them. Speaking and writing about familiar themes become language tasks that students enjoy (Sokolik 1996).

When writing their stories, Prince (1994) suggests that students need to know how to organize their narrative into three parts: (1) give background information to put the incident in a context so the reader can better understand it; (2) focus on the incident, describing what happened in chronological order (this is where their vocabulary notebooks will be useful); and (3) describe the result—what happened after the incident and what the author’s reaction to the incident was.

Students then share their written stories with classmates who read each other’s paragraphs, give feedback, ask for clarification, and help edit one another’s work at various stages in the writing process. Thus the HI-LO Speaking Activity can be expanded to incorporate all language skills—speaking, listening, writing, and reading.

The success of your article can be gauged by how easy it is for another teacher to follow the lesson and by how successful the lesson is

in obtaining the stated objectives—improving students’ English language skills. After you have written your article, ask a colleague to proofread it, looking especially to see that the lesson plan is clearly described so your fellow teachers can successfully reproduce it.

### Collecting, sharing, and publishing

If you have a “lesson that works”—one that teachers will enjoy teaching, and students will enjoy learning—share it with your colleagues. There are many ways besides publishing to facilitate sharing our best teaching practices. Ideas can be shared in regularly scheduled meetings where teachers bring written copies of successful teaching activities. These copies can be distributed, or they can be collected in binders and organized by level of learner and language skill addressed. Teachers can post lessons to an online departmental website, start a local English teachers’ blog, create their own webpage, or contribute to other English teaching websites.

However, one of the best ways to disseminate your lesson plan to a wide audience is to get it published. When you submit an article for publication, it must not only be clear and well organized, but it also must be your own original idea and not something you adapted from another author. Readers of professional journals also like to see that your ideas are grounded in accepted teaching theory and supported by references to previously published work.

Opportunities for sharing are limitless and very much appreciated by new and experienced teachers alike. Writing for publication is an important part of your professional development, so start writing that professional article today!

### References

- Bonner, M. 1994. *Step into writing: A basic writing text*. New York: Addison-Wesley.
- Burk, A. 2005. Keep talking: Methods in teaching conversation. Professional development workshop presented at the World Languages Institute, Arabev Kyrgyz State Pedagogical University, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.
- Chapman, C., and R. King. 2009. *Differentiated instructional strategies for writing in the content areas*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Oshima, A., and A. Hogue. 2006. *Writing academic English*. 4th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- Prince, E. 1994. *Write more! An intermediate text for ESL writers*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle.
- Rivera, C. 2006. Communicative activities for middle school classrooms. *English Teaching Forum* 44 (2): 34–36.
- Sokolik, M. E. 1996. *The Newbury House guide to writing*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle.

---

**ANNE MARIE BURK** has taught writing and ESL at universities in Washington, Wisconsin, Kentucky, and Oklahoma. She has been a Senior English Language Fellow in Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, and the Republic of Georgia and an English Language Specialist in Uzbekistan. She currently teaches writing courses for the ITT Technical Institute in Washington state.