

Boise Non Fiction Writers' Group

Notes from Meeting of October 1, 2008

Speaker: Peggy Jordan

Peggy's topic: Why our book is not our book

Warning, fellow writers! BNFWG gatherings are definitely becoming a habit and could be addictive. But whether you are merely thinking about writing, in the throes of your latest writing endeavor, or working towards getting your masterpiece published, the first Wednesday of each month gives BNFWG attendees access to a terrific resource—other, experienced authors who are willing to share their knowledge of the many aspects of publishing. October's speaker, Peggy Jordan, proved no exception.

Jordan is a writer, book-writing coach, trainer, speaker, and author of ***Write that Book...Instead of Just Talking About It***. Along with a BA in English, Technical Communication Emphasis, and a Certificate in Dispute Resolution, both from Boise State University, Peggy also spent five years in the private business sector in marketing communications and technical literature departments before starting her own business, **Working Words Copywriting**. Her aim for the company is to further the cause of plain English in marketing communications and business writing.

In opening her presentation, Jordan asked us to consider on a deeper level than we might usually, who our audience is for the material we write. Approaching our own non-fiction writing from a copywriting/marketing angle, she said, can be invaluable in targeting and communicating with our audience.

She challenged us to answer why we have the urge to put words on paper in the first place. Replies were varied. Some answers were that we write the story we want heard; we write as catharsis; we write for the money, and we write to connect with the brain of someone else.

In expounding on the importance of connecting, Jordan talked about the "limbic brain," an adaptation exclusive to mammals that generates our emotions. This portion of our brain is all about connections—humans are not closed-loop systems, and we depend on contact and communication with others for survival as well as pleasure in our lives. When we meet certain people or read certain passages, we feel a welcome jolt of recognition and camaraderie. The phenomenon is called "limbic resonance," and that is exactly what good writers try to create for their readers.

However, when we write we're sometimes so focused on what we're trying to say that we forget to remember our readers' perspective. We often fail to understand that we may be missing those all-important connections. This is where revising and rewriting can help us in discovering who our audience really is.

Jordan believes that if we can decide exactly whom we're speaking to in whatever piece we may be writing—if we can turn a hypothetical reader into an actual person in our mind, for instance, then, based on our knowledge of that person, we can make better decisions about how and what we

communicate. Some questions we can ask ourselves: Should we make the piece a story or not? Should we start with excitement or begin by setting a scene? What about voice and tone? Knowing something about our reader will often tell us the best way to begin.

A fictional example illustrated Jordan's point. Her hypothetical client had just invented a super-efficient corn husking machine and wanted her to write a press release to get the word out. The inventor wanted to focus on how the machine was built, what it was made of, and all the things it could do. He wanted her to tell his potential customers all about his machine. She asked him: "But who is your audience? What will this machine do for them? Why should they care?"

Another example came from her experience writing a direct mail piece for a nonprofit. The piece was to target folks new to the Boise/Eagle area with a certain level of income. "Who are these people?" Peggy wanted to know. "Are they tech-savvy? Are they more likely to be elderly? What are they likely to know about the nonprofit? What misconceptions might they have about the organization?" By asking these questions she was able to narrow down the type of information she needed to better connect with potential donors.

Jordan had some suggestions for us in our attempt to figure out who might be our typical targeted readers. She suggested we think about, or research in some way, their ages, demographics, the kind of cars they might drive, the size of their houses, how they order coffee (double-decaf-latte-skim-milk or black no sugar?), or perhaps whether they are dog or cat people. This kind of information, whether factual or even an educated guess, will inform our decisions on what to leave out as well as what to include in our writing.

Another decision we must make in addressing our audience, Jordan believes, is to decide whether we want our audience to act upon the information we are communicating. If, indeed, it is a call to action, she urged that we be very clear what we want readers to do.

At this point she returned to the features vs. benefits aspect of writing that she had touched on earlier in talking about the corn-husking equipment manufacturer. She used this to illustrate that our persuasive writing will be more effective if we can focus on the benefit to the reader of whatever we are writing about rather than simply expound on the wonderful features of the item/service.

Another important point to keep in mind, she emphasized, is that we should always use the language of the reader—language that they are familiar and comfortable with. She used the example of portable computers being referred to in advertising as "notebooks" rather than the term "laptops" that the majority of us are familiar with. This type of misdirected jargon can (and did in the example Jordan cited) cause important information to be overlooked.

Jordan urged us to ask our readers what they want to hear—and to really listen to their answers. An audience member related that she asked friends what they wanted her to write about by asking, "What can you picture coming out of my voice?" This value of this type of "dialogue," Jordan reminded us, should never be overlooked.

Most types of writing can benefit from such dialogue, she said. Writing for government agencies is a good example. Attempting to wrap management's ideas into what the public wants to know is often a struggle for Jordan, yet, as she points out, the result of dialoguing and finding out what the audience wants can result in improved agency/public relations and communication.

One attendee asked what specific techniques can be used to finding one's audience. Jordan's short but succinct answer was, "Ask!" If you aren't sure who to ask, find published material similar to our own, and ask the publishers of those pieces who the perceived audiences are.

In closing, Peggy offered both a suggestion and a quote. The suggestion: to keep in mind for any writing project, "I am writing this for X (fill in the blank) to help them be/do/have/understand Y (fill in the blank)." The quote: "You may write for the joy of it, but the act of writing is not complete in itself; it has its end in its audience." – Flannery O'Connor.

Notes submitted by Linda Hill