

Changing Professions, Identities and Writing: Will the Real Writer Please Stand Up?

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Different professions require the ability to write in different genres. When Amanda Rinehart switched careers, she had to learn new writing genres as a part of changing her professional identity. Because her profession is important to her and part of who she is, she's been working hard at it. Combining her two professional identities when she writes is even harder because it involves two different versions of who she is. Learning new writing genres is a lifelong endeavor, requiring a lot of writing research, some introspection, and positive relationships with colleagues.

“Professional identity results from a developmental process that facilitates a growing understanding of self in one’s chosen field, enabling one to articulate her or his role to others within and outside of the discipline” (Healey & Hays, p. 1).

I remember exactly when I learned to write as a scientist. It was a biology class in 1993, where we all received a one-page handout on writing a science article explaining the science-article-formula: decoded, condensed, and simplified. It was great! No talent or finesse required. The article didn't have to read well; it just had to include the basics in the right places. In the immortal words of Joe Friday, “All we want are the facts, ma'am.” I loved it! For the first time, I understood what I was supposed to include, where I was supposed to put it, and what to leave out. All those red-marked English papers were a thing of the past. For the next fifteen years, this genre was the essence of my professional writing.

When I write as a scientist, a paramount concern is to be clear and concise. Because scientists pay a page fee to publish their work, it needs to

be short and to the point. So even though my audience is other scientists like me, who might appreciate the odd piece of imagery, sparseness is of higher value. I do not write how tiny worms on a warming microscope slide undulate uselessly in their last dance with mortality. I write that when exposed to heat, the movement of the specimen will cease. There are to be no value-laden descriptions and preferably no descriptions that are not absolutely essential. Scientists want to know the crux of the piece immediately. Hence the formula—it makes it easy for scientists to get to the information they want to know. In fact, reading a science article is totally nonlinear. Science articles are written in the following order: title, abstract, introduction, methods, results, and conclusions. On the other hand, science articles are read in this order: title, abstract, *conclusions, results, methods* . . . and then maaaaybe the introduction. After my student days, I rarely read an entire article, and I certainly never read them linearly.

My knowledge of the science article genre worked great for my first career, but then I changed professions. I became a librarian. It happened rather accidentally. Our research facility had a library, but no librarian. All of our requests for journal articles went to the National Agricultural Library. However, when the National Agricultural Library had to raise its prices, and money got tight, it was suddenly important for us to know if we had the same articles downstairs for free. Since I had worked in a library shelving books as an undergraduate student, I was deemed the most qualified to rehabilitate the library. It took me a year to clear the Mardi Gras beads and broken computer monitors out and get the books and journals lined up on the shelves. But my colleagues were still having trouble finding the information. They didn't want to paw through filing cabinets or walk up and down the shelves. They wanted to be able to search electronically and know that something was there before they went to find it. At that point, I realized that I was in over my head. If I digitized the fifteen drawers of articles, would I be violating copyright law? How could I make a whole series of journals electronically searchable without scanning every word? For that matter, how could I just get the books listed in a database without having to re-type all the citation information? So I signed up for a cataloging class. And then an information organization class. Before I knew it, I had a Master's in Information and Library Science and a new job market with great prospects.

I can't say that my writing was the first consideration in my decision to change professions, but it quickly became apparent that I would need to learn about new genres of writing. The science-article-formula would no longer suffice. I found learning to write in new genres particularly difficult, and I had to ask myself why I was having so much trouble learning to write differently. A colleague of mine, a computer-coding graphic artist, described

it best. She explained that when she finished coding HTML5, she would get up and physically walk around her chair, then sit back down in her artist persona. The act of walking around the chair facilitated the mental switch from programmer to artist. She noted that the new generation of computer artists may not have to walk around their chairs to make the transition, because they never learned that artists are not programmers, and vice versa. Even though I am neither programmer nor artist, I can totally relate to this scenario. As a scientist I write one way—the way I was taught in 1993. As a librarian I write another way, a way that I’m still learning as I acculturate into the profession. It’s not just about what is culturally acceptable or writing for a different audience—it’s about who I am when I write. I had to define my professional identities and then relinquish the scientist-identity in order to learn to write like a librarian.

As I develop my librarian professional identity, I am exploring more genres used by librarians. It might be because I’m new at it, but as a librarian I write more slowly, more thoughtfully, pulling more ideas together, struggling to articulate the ephemeral and individual processes of how humans interact with information. Unlike my science writing, I can no longer rely on the methods section having been dictated by logistics, or the results merely being a report of what happened. I now have to consider the multiple meanings of each word and the impact of a negatively constructed sentence. The hardest thing for me is that when I start writing as a librarian, I never know exactly what my main points are, whereas I always knew what the conclusion was before I wrote a science paper—the data had whispered it to me before I ever set a word to paper. I have to ask myself: am I really synthesizing ideas in a new way? Have I considered all the subtle consequences of phrasing? Am I really getting my point across? I sure haven’t seen any librarian genres reduced to one page.

Also, I have a lot more freedom as a librarian than I did as a scientist. There are many more accepted writing “formulas” or genres in the world of the librarian. These include case studies, viewpoints, and conceptual papers. There are in-depth evaluations of books, websites, musical productions, and movies. My opportunities have opened up, allowing me to be a critic, a storyteller, a theorist, and a musier. Each genre has its own formula components. For example, a case study is just the story of a particular idea or program at my institution. It might include a how-to section and definitely a justification for doing it again, perhaps at other institutions. My favorite part of a case study is the ‘lessons learned’ section, where I get to list all the stuff that didn’t work. A viewpoint is simply an editorial, whatever I feel and think about a particular topic as long as I think others would be interested. A book review might be as simple as a paragraph about how the book in question could benefit an

academic library. Or it could be several pages of in-depth analysis, including comparisons to similar titles and audience suitability. It's much more freeing to write in all these different types of genres, but it also makes me more nervous, because I have to expend extra effort to learn each new genre.

Before I make a commitment to write a piece, I research the genre, read examples, and talk to others who write in this way. I have never consciously thought of this as writing research, but that's what it is—the research I need to do before I even sit down to type. I note what common themes I find and what varies widely between examples. I search the literature, both to learn more and to note where there are gaps in the discussion. I consider my audience: other academic librarians, professors in general, scientists, or avid readers of all types? I have to decode the formula for each new writing genre, but once I start to see the components and how they fit together, I can begin structuring the piece with confidence.

I also frequently rely on colleagues for my writing, both as co-authors and as informal editors. If I don't feel confident writing a section of a paper, I might ask a colleague who has that specialized knowledge. Often, my librarian pieces are rather organic in growth and only kept in check by hard deadlines and clear communication with co-authors. For me, part of learning a new writing genre is to get to know those who already write in that genre. I am fortunate to have great colleagues who are willing to take the time to read my writing and provide me constructive feedback.

I also rely on feedback from my colleagues because my writing is complicated by the type of librarian that I have chosen to be. I am a Data Librarian, a relatively new type of librarianship and one that isn't well defined. Most of my writings are for my colleagues, and most of them work with books, whether digital or in print. It is my struggle to articulate my role that contributes to my struggle to write. I have to be careful—I am both novice and experienced, qualified yet unknown and strange. I need to balance my deep respect for those with years in the profession with my enthusiasm and love of the new possibilities of organizing and sharing data. I try to draw analogies, to give everyone a common storyline, and then weave in the new concepts in ways that make sense.

Although I haven't convinced any neuroscientists to put me in a fMRI to watch how my brain works when writing, I'm pretty sure that when I write as a scientist it uses another part of my brain than when I write as a librarian. They are different representations of "me," not only in style but also in perspective and professional loyalties. Occasionally I'm inspired to write a cross-over piece, where I am both identities at once, but it's rare and difficult. I have to really feel strongly about the issue and feel that I have a unique and important perspective to communicate.

For instance, writing this piece was challenging, because it's both a cross-over piece and deals with a pretty personal topic. The topic, my writing and how it relates to my career choices, is more private than discussing a theory or concept. I read other articles in *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* and even some articles on professional identities. I mentioned my dissatisfaction in feeling that I had accurately represented both of my professional identities to a colleague. She suggested that I try writing the piece first as the scientist and then as librarian, and then see how they differed. In the end, the commonalities rose to the top. The lesson I have learned when writing about something very close to your heart is to work with many editors and colleagues. They have a better perspective on what is useful to others because they are distanced from the topic.

I like to think that one day my publication record will read as one continuous lifetime of exploration, but the reality is that it will likely read like someone with split personalities. Which writer is the real me? It depends, really. Like my computer graphics artist colleague, I hope that future scientist-librarians (or librarian-scientists?) won't have the same difficulties, but I expect that all writers will face learning new writing genres at some point in time. When they do, they will have to do writing research, rely on colleagues for feedback, and maybe even explore their own professional identities too.

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References

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Amanda K. Rinehart is a former plant pathologist and current librarian. Her continuing fascination is how people interact with different types of information, most notably data. In her spare time, she watches entirely too much British television.