

# Writing for your audience

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It would appear that for a portion of the membership of the Society for Range Management there is a considerable crisis in communication. This is illustrated by the proposal that not all members be required to subscribe to the *Journal of Range Management* because the contents of the society's journal do not apply or are too difficult for a portion of the membership to understand. At the same time, I have been told rather haughtily by scientists that they do not read *Rangelands* because it contains nothing of interest. This would seem to be a society that is tearing itself apart for lack of communication.

## The Measure of Success

I propose that a measure of the success of a society dedicated to the art and science of range management is which portion of its membership contributes to the publications of the society. The publications can only be as good as the sum of the contributors. Who should contribute to society publications? Only those who have something to say is the only logical answer to this question. Stop and think about the alternative of having *nothing* to say. Where does this answer leave you professionally, and as a member of society in general? Members of any organization always seem to have complaints about the organization that can be heard in the halls and bars at meetings, but seem never to make it into print. At the same time a great number of practitioners of the science and art of range management that truly make outstanding contributions never seem to get a word of praise in print. Many of the issues that face range managers are highly controversial. Management of free-roaming horses, revegetation of mine spoils, design of grazing experiments, pseudo-replications are only the start of list of topics that must raise some desire to communicate.

## How?

How do you communicate in writing in the Society for Range Management? This is the easy part. The society has everything you want to know about writing for society publications and were afraid to ask, written down in instructions to the authors for each society publication. These exhaustive, ironclad instructions are seldom followed or interpreted twice in the same manner, but it is like herding chickens—if you get most of them going in the same direction do not fight it. The society only has one editor because editors belong to an expensive guild that dates from medieval times. The secret methods of editing are passed during the dark of the night from one generation to the next. The editor delegates authority for approving material for publication to editorial boards who are composed of society members. The purpose of these boards should be to foster communications within the society, and among other individuals interested in the environment we define as rangelands. Any time these editorial boards lose sight of this goal, they are defeating their purpose.

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Everyone can write so the story can be understood. Admittedly, writing comes easier for some than others, and certainly some have more experience than others, but everyone is able to communicate in writing. There was the extreme case of the brilliant Nevada soils scientist who made a detailed study of range sites, ecological sites, and habitat types and probably understood these concepts in environmental classification better than anyone else in the society. When asked why he did not submit this material for publication, he maintained that he tried once, but the editor took out all his swear words and he had nothing left to communicate with.

## Wonder at the Masters

This brings us to the point of this discourse—writing for the audience. There is one thing in communication that is more important than just writing the material down: it is getting someone to read your creation. Highly stylized scientific writing is seldom interesting. The more it is edited, the less interesting the articles often become. The reason for this is the need to communicate very precisely in scientific writing. If you go through the collection of a major library and skim through scientific journal articles, you will soon realize that there are a few, really good scientific writers that have the gift of communicating, no matter how basic the subject. Try articles by G. Ledyard Stebbins, Daniel Axelrod, or Israel Cook Russell and wonder at the masters at work. Stebbins has a biting, but brilliant, sense of humor. Axelrod is always positive and direct, while ignoring the maybe and might have been. Russell wrote in the 19th century with a pen that could capture the deserts of the American West and educate the American public to the wonders of glaciers, rivers, and landforms.

## We've Got Color

The transfer of technical information allows the writer greater freedom to exercise individuality. The Society for Range Management is alive with color and steeped in history. There are endless opportunities to use the color and pageantry of rangeland environments and the culture of the herdsman to enhance interest in our communications. Range management enhances the color in individuals. There is something about clipping willows for browse estimates on the Copper River Delta of Alaska, or feeding hay to hungry cows on the North Fork of the Humboldt River, or working for the BLM in Battle Mountain that tends to separate one from the yuppie clones of the metropolis. It does not matter that you are currently a bureaucrat filling out forms on the banks of the Potomac—you once saw the sunset on the Red Desert. At the next society annual meeting, sit in the hotel lobby or bar and watch the delegates. If you do not see at least one person that could pass for Porter Wagoner's brother the wagon train ran over, I would be very surprised. Of course, some of the rancher members dress like Harvard lawyers because they got the habit while attending Harvard graduate school for their MBA.

If you think the society lacks color, stand back and observe the participants in the various student contests at an annual meeting. From the haunt of the cadets to the pride of the teams from

Mexico, you can draw upon a wealth of emotions. Many range managers have the opportunity to benefit from association with herdsmen whose fathers' fathers have observed the cycles of new grass, calving, and drought on prairie, veld, pampas, or steppe. This is the real stuff. The point is that you can use the color, history, and pageantry of range managers and range environments to help sell your communication by making it attractive and interesting to read.

Look at some of the highly successful slide shows that have been prepared on rangelands. Package the same approach in your writing. Borrow from journalists and hook your readers with a good lead sentence. Borrow from popular writers and have the hero treed by a bear and then rescue him with good range management. Hide your point in the story and keep referring to it subtly. Get your readers to believe they thought of it themselves. Many issues in range management have audiences highly polarized. If you jump in with a title or lead sentence that strongly supports or opposes one point of view, you automatically lose half your audience. Stop and think about the consequences of such an approach. Did you

really want to communicate with the audience that already agrees with you or did you want to influence the non-believers?

Remember our friend, the soil scientist, who could argue the concepts of vegetation classification in bars from Vya to Wild Horse but suffered from an edited vocabulary? Would you like to try to communicate these concepts in classification to the general membership of the society? You could introduce the subject with, "habit types are abstractions that only occur in the minds of ecologists and are represented by concrete examples that only reflect a portion of the normal distribution of variability." An alternative approach might be, "Graduates in natural resources from Utah State University date events from the morning when Dr. West got the shock from the overhead project while lecturing on concepts in vegetation classification——".

Everyone can communicate through writing. A few can communicate exceedingly well and the rest of us can become experienced writers. The only thing that can stop you from communicating and becoming experienced is yourself.