

Writing,  
Speaking, &  
Communication  
Skills for Health  
Professionals

THE HEALTH CARE COMMUNICATION GROUP

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## Preface

*The way the team works as a whole determines its success. You may have the greatest bunch of individual stars in the world, but if they don't work well together, the team won't be worth a dime.*

—Babe Ruth

For the past ten years I have had the good fortune to work with the authors of this book. Together we have taught more than three thousand courses on Writing and Speaking for Excellence to more than twenty-five thousand physicians, pharmacists, and other health care providers at every major medical center and university in North America.

Each contributor is a star in his or her own right. All are talented writers, editors, and educators with unique talents and styles. Yet I think each would agree that our success as a group has not been the result of any one person's individual talent, but rather of our ability to work together as a team with one common passion: the love of teaching and learning.

In 1990, when I was a medical writer at Bayer Corporation, Pharmaceutical Division, I began to teach writing and speaking skills to physician residents in academic medical centers. I quickly learned that while most of the participants were exceptionally bright, well educated, well trained, and highly motivated, few had had any formal training in writing or speaking. Yet many were being asked to write case reports, oral and poster presentations, grant applications, or original research. The assumption had always been, “They’re bright; they’ll figure it out.” Indeed, most of them would figure it out—after much trial and error. My goal was to give the residents a few hints to help them improve their writing and avoid some of the pitfalls.

That first year, I bought a Travelpro suitcase and was on my way. I taught ten seminars that year. By the second year, the request for seminars had quadrupled. I soon found I was on the road almost every week, racking up frequent-flyer miles and greeting pilots by their first names. I recognized that I was going to need some help. Dr David Albala, a urologic surgeon practicing at Loyola Medical Center outside Chicago, suggested that I call Catherine Coffin, a manuscript editor with whom he had worked at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in New Hampshire. I met Cathy the next week and knew right away that she had a wealth of information about medical writing and publishing that would be valuable not only to the physicians but also to me. In addition, she had a quick wit and an adventurous spirit—two qualities necessary for any true road warrior.

Soon, *both* Cathy and I were on the road every week. Then, in 1992, I met the author Abraham Verghese MD, who was leading a short session for physician writers at the Iowa Summer Writing Festival. I told him I was looking for an enthusiastic person who could teach writing and speaking skills to physicians. The next day, Abraham introduced me to Paul Casella, who was teaching poetry, creative writing, and composition at Kirkwood College. Paul was a graduate of Dartmouth and the Iowa Writer’s Workshop but had had experience producing medical videos, slides, and grant applications. At our first meeting, Paul told me he was really a poet but that he had learned early on that if

he wanted to be a poet, he needed a day job. Soon Paul joined Cathy and me in his new day job and became our expert one-on-one speaking coach. Over the years, Paul has trained hundreds of physicians, pharmacists, and other health care providers—not only in this country but throughout Europe—to be more effective speakers and leaders.

In the next couple of years, the demand for the seminars continued to grow and the face of health care began to change. More and more physicians and pharmacists were asking for courses on business writing, on marketing their practices, on leading effective meetings, and on team building. In 1997 we found Stephanie Barnard, who owns a health care public relations firm. Her southern charm and abundance of information on “the business of health care” made Stephanie an instant hit with her audiences. With her expertise, we were able to add Communicating for Excellence seminars to our Writing and Speaking for Excellence courses. As part of that series, Stephanie developed courses including Business Writing, Writing a Business Plan, Patient and Physician Communication, Ethical Marketing, and Leading Effective Meetings.

As our team of four traveled around the country, we found one request coming up repeatedly: Could we teach others to teach? We were learning that while many physicians, pharmacists, nurses, physician assistants, health care executives, and managers were being asked to teach or train others, most of them had had no training in curriculum development, adult learning, or teaching. Where, I thought, will I find someone who not only can teach but also teach others to teach?

As it turned out, I didn’t have to look far. Kirk Hughes and I met at Atticus Bookstore in New Haven, Connecticut. A mutual friend of ours taught at Yale and suggested that Kirk might be interested in joining us. Kirk had taught English, science writing, and speech and was intrigued by our group and its work. Since Kirk’s doctoral research had included study of “the rhetoric of science” and “theories of teaching,” we talked about incorporating some of his ideas into a new course. Within the month, Kirk had bought a laptop and a rolling

suitcase and was on the road with the rest of us. His enthusiasm, energy, and wealth of information put him in high demand.

In fact, by 1998 the time between the request for a seminar and the date we could meet the request had grown to about five months. While I was meeting dozens of people who had the information and experience necessary to teach a seminar and who wanted to join the group, none seemed to have the flexibility, charisma, and panache that Cathy, Paul, Stephanie, and Kirk have—a style that has become a trademark of the group.

In the summer of that year, I was in Seattle waiting to give a seminar to some fellows at the University of Washington when I first saw Janet Rasey teach a course on grant writing. Immediately, I saw a potential addition to our group. Janet knew all the ins and outs of grant writing, but equally, if not more importantly, she communicated the information to her audiences in a way that both motivated and entertained. Later that day, I met with Janet to see if she would be interested in working with us. Since Janet had a full-time research position, she was available only on a limited basis. She soon became our “weekend grant-writing expert,” traveling not only throughout the United States but also in Canada.

Renée Robillard soon joined us as another part-time trainer. She had been a medical editor with the *New England Journal of Medicine* and had worked as a medical writer for a surgical instrument company in Arizona. When Renée became a member of our group, she was teaching English at a community college in Sacramento. With her twenty years of experience in the field of medical writing and publishing, Renée has been instrumental in developing two advanced courses: Writing for Publication and Researching the Medical Literature. These courses have been in great demand at many medical centers and universities.

Our group became complete following a one-day writing and speaking seminar I was giving at Emory University for the Georgia chapter of the American College of Physicians. As is often the case, someone in the audience asked me to recommend books on writing, speaking, and teaching that might be helpful. One of the books I like

to suggest is *The Bench and Me*, by J Willis Hurst. It is a concise book, full of excellent information about science, teaching, writing, and speaking. Much to my surprise, a gentleman in the first row thanked me for my kind words about his book.

It was in that way that I first encountered Dr Hurst, an avid reader, writer, and teacher who is the former chair of the Department of Medicine at Emory. Over the next year, I had the pleasure of talking several times with Dr Hurst, and it was from those meetings that we came up with the idea of this book.

*Writing, Speaking, and Communication Skills for Health Professionals* encompasses the years of experience, collaboration, and teamwork that created the Writing and Speaking for Excellence seminars. It is not intended to be a textbook; for a comprehensive guide to grammar, punctuation, and word usage, you will need another book. The authors' intentions are to address some of the most frequently asked questions, comments, frustrations, and problems they have heard from medical writers, speakers, and teachers—and to offer practical solutions. Not all chapters will be of interest to all readers.

This book contributes to an ongoing conversation with scientists and health care practitioners throughout the United States about the connections between strong communication skills and excellence in the medical and biological sciences. Lecturers, teachers, editors, and university faculty members alike have observed how poor communication skills can obscure even the most important scientific information. Ineffective seminars, lectures during grand rounds, and conference talks alienate nonspecialists, bore students, and dishearten the very practitioners we most need to encourage toward collaboration and problem solving. This book is a wake-up call for improving medical communication skills. The contributors offer little by way of theory and much in the way of practical suggestions. They urge that the current explosion in specialized bench research be accompanied by ongoing attention to clear explanation of the results.

In addition, the book argues that medical training must be ongoing, lifelong, and responsive to technological advances in the culture at large as well as in science. Rather than ending with school,

ongoing training must be part and parcel of one's professional identity. *Docere*, the Latin root of our English word "doctor," means to teach, yes. But the best people in medicine are also constant learners: they refine their communication and teaching skills as rigorously as they pursue their science.

The five parts of this volume address communication skills that are essential to a wide range of twenty-first-century health care practitioners. Part I (Reading Science) focuses on ways to organize the complex technical data that health practitioners encounter in clinics and in the scientific literature. Robillard and Ullery extend this critical awareness of medical data by offering handfuls of pragmatic suggestions for time-efficient assessment of journal articles in their chapter, "Reading the Medical Literature."

Parts II and III discuss the publication and presentation tasks facing most health care practitioners. Hughes's "Grammar Tips for the Information Age" (Chapter 2) and Casella's "Creative Process" (Chapter 3) suggest practical ways of getting research projects off the ground and into the clear and accurate language that readers can understand. Coffin and Rasey share years of editorial and grant-review expertise in chapters that address four publication genres: the journal article (Chapter 4), the research grant (Chapter 5), the scientific poster (Chapter 6), and the curriculum vitae (Chapter 7). Similarly, Casella and Hughes outline practical ways to sharpen the delivery of conference and seminar papers (Chapter 8) and to improve learning in classroom teaching (Chapters 9 and 10).

This book concludes with several chapters that consider changes in the business of health care. The complexities of contemporary health care systems create communication challenges as never before. Part V reviews some of the ways individual departments in complex organizations can improve both the service they give and the service they get (Chapter 11). "Building Your Practice" (Chapter 12) outlines key steps that smaller practices can take to develop an edge in increasingly competitive markets. Likewise, Barnard's practical

meeting skills (Chapter 13) and business-writing suggestions (Chapter 14) can trim hours of wasted time and effort from professional workweeks.

Finally, as you read this compact book, you will see that the diversity of this group is its strength. Each speaker uses his or her own experience to guide health care professionals toward more effective communication—sometimes gently, sometimes emphatically, always with humor. Each unique voice speaks in concert with the rest, and all share a common goal: furthering the commitment to excellence in communication.

#### **A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S**

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Finally, we warmly thank our families for putting up with our bizarre schedules and numerous absences. They have made coming home the best part of the job.

Deborah St James