

Written communications: essential skills for forestry professionals¹

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Foresters need communication skills in an age of participatory forestry, and writing is fundamental to communication. Yet written submissions to the XII World Forestry Congress (Quebec City, Canada, September 2003) reflect a paucity of technical writing skills. The World Forestry Congress is among the most welcomed opportunities for communication among forestry professionals. Yet reviewers of the more than 1 000 voluntary papers submitted to the 2003 Congress noted that many papers were not relevant, lacked analysis, were not coherently structured, were overly narrow or local in scope or merely recycled available information. If foresters are to communicate their achievements and their advice to their peers, to the general public or to decision-makers, they must improve their skills in technical writing.

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If foresters are not good at explaining their work – even to other foresters – then perhaps it is no surprise that the public image of forestry is negative. To communicate achievements and advice not only to peers, but also to the general public or decision-makers, or even in support of requests for project funding, it is necessary to communicate better in writing. How can the situation be improved? Some suggestions:

Inclusion of technical writing in initial training. Technical writing should be included in the training of foresters at professional level. As forestry is becoming more people oriented and forestry curricula are changing to reflect the new needs of the profession, interpersonal communication skills – including writing – must surely be recognized among the needs.

Continuing professional education. The training of today's foresters must continue throughout their careers, to help them keep up to date with new techniques and new ideas. In order to practise their profession, foresters in many countries must be registered with a national association which regulates the profession and which usually requires that members undertake a certain number of hours yearly in updating or extending their knowledge. This continuing professional education should include the preparation of technical or other communications, which could then be submitted to the relevant technical journal of the professional association. In Canada, for example, the preparation of forestry-related articles counts towards meeting the commitment of Canadian professional foresters to continuing professional education (McLaughlan and Comeau, 2003). The Commonwealth Forestry Association has introduced a Young Scientist Publication Awards scheme to offer prizes for the best papers submitted for publication (see *Unasylva*, 2003).

Distance learning. Several distance learning courses specifically on scientific writing already

exist. Some English-language examples include the following:

- an online module on scientific communication posted on the Web site of the Tropical Agriculture Association (www.taa.org.uk/Courses2/CourseContentCSS/CSSCourseContent3.html);
- an online distance learning course on Technical and Scientific Writing offered by Stephen F. Austin State University in Texas, United States (www.oit.sfasu.edu/courseinfo/ENG_273_501_hearell.html).

Writing and presenting scientific work (www.sciencekomm.at/advice/presenting.html), on the Web site of MedBioWorld, and *A selection of websites related to various aspects of academic writing* (www.camlang.com/links.htm), on the Web site of Cambridge Learning Consultants, present numerous links to useful online writing and research tools, including online courses.

Consideration should be given to the development, or adaptation, of self-taught or tutored distance learning programmes for writing on forestry or related topics.

Bibliography

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