



## The Fast and Easy Way to Write Effective Success Stories<sup>1</sup>

James M. Nehiley, Peggy D. Dessaint, and Glenn D. Israel<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

What if your Extension program was one of the best in the state, but no one knew about it? Who would suffer? Your supervisors? Sure, they would suffer because they wouldn't be able to report your success to those who provide funding for successful Extension educational programs. Significant people in your area? Sure, county commissioners and industry leaders would be unable to support programs that they approve of because they wouldn't know about your accomplishments. The public? Sure, because they wouldn't know what good programs were available for them to use. You? Sure, you would suffer because the people who would reward your excellence wouldn't know what you did and how clients benefitted.

The fact of the matter is that if you don't write success stories because you are either too shy or too humble or too busy, just about everyone that you work with or provide assistance to will suffer in one

way or another. How can you prevent this? Write interesting success stories and give them to everyone who can or should support your program.

Because individuals who represent all sorts of government entities -- public interest groups, tax watch groups, etc., want access to the Faculty Accountability System (FAS) data, faculty members will have to be much more careful about how the FAS impact narrative is organized and worded, even though we are all in a hurry. A great success story can help people understand the impact of your efforts.

### A Strategy for Success

Is it hard to write success stories? No. All you have to do is to follow a simple writing formula that keeps you from becoming confused when you try to find the words that best describe what you did. What is a writing formula? A writing formula is a strategy that minimizes the number of ways that you can write something. For instance, if you had a number of facts about water pollution, you could use those

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2. James M. Nehiley, Associate Professor, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication; Peggy D. Dessaint, Agent II, Manatee County Extension; Glenn D. Israel, Professor, Program Development and Evaluation Center, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-0540.

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facts to write a problem/solution analysis of the best way to handle pollution problems. Or, you could rearrange the same facts and write a most-important-to-least-important analysis of alternative approaches to pollution prevention. With the same facts, you could even write a question-to-answer description of what happens when pollution problems aren't handled fast enough or well enough. In fact, the same information could be used to write many different descriptions of the effects of pollution. Writing formulas help you by specifying the order that you should use for your facts.

Formulas allow you to prevent the three common writing errors: 1) disorganized planning and subject arrangement; 2) awkward or improper sentences and paragraphs; and 3) lack of transition and development. A writing formula allows you to avoid these problems because it provides you with an organizational structure that you don't have to agonize over. The idea of a writing formula is a simple one. When you write, you have a collection of facts that are related to your central idea. However, you have to solve three problems: 1) what goes first? 2) what goes last? and 3) what order are the facts in between? Once you've developed a strategy to solve these problems, writing becomes simpler.

How simple? Look at the following writing formula; it only has two steps. First, you take all the facts and line them up in an order that will be the most-important-to-least-important for the reader. That is, the most interesting or important fact to the reader is at the top and the least interesting or important fact is at the bottom. Second, you put a lead paragraph at the story's top.

This is how newspaper reporters write stories. Why wouldn't you want to use this formula? Maybe because you think that newspapers aren't really considered good writing. Though this perception about news writing is widely held, most people like to get their information this way. And, if you present information in this format, people will be very comfortable with your writing. Besides, it's fast and simple. When you write a letter, it might take most of a day. In that same time, a news writer can easily crank out ten stories.

Step I. How do you determine the importance of the facts? That's easy. You just line up the facts and put a " " next to the fact that you think the reader will find most interesting. Then, you put a " " next to the fact that you think the reader will find the second most interesting. Next, you put a " " next to the fact that you think the reader will find the third most interesting. You do that until all the facts are numbered. Then, you cut and paste the facts on the computer so that " " is first and the facts go all the way through until you end up with the least important fact. If two facts go together, give them the same number.

Step II. After the facts are in order, you make a lead paragraph out of the who, what, when, where, and why facts using the most interesting piece of information. These facts can be in any order; you just start with the most interesting fact.

**The "Who" lead:** The Manatee County Extension Service conducted water-saving programs last spring to help residents reduce utility bills during the drought.

**The "What" lead:** To reduce utility bills, the Manatee County Extension Service conducted water-saving programs during the drought last spring.

**The "When" lead:** During the drought last spring the Manatee County Extension Service conducted water-saving classes to reduce utility bills.

And so forth. The sentences can be in any order as long as the most interesting fact starts the paragraph. That's all there is to putting together the pieces of a success story. Then, all you do is polish it.

For example, you can join facts to vary sentence length and structure, move facts together that make it easier to understand, and add transitions and phrases that improve sense (e.g., explain relationships or give examples).

Below is an example of an effective success story that has been created out of only 11 facts. First, you see the facts that were used to create the story, then you see the way the facts were used. This story was written to appeal to people's interest in the dramatic, so the lead is constructed with the most dramatic facts in a 'summary' lead.

## Success Story Example

### Facts

1 The Manatee County Extension Service participated in a water management project.

7 The project was funded by the Southwest Florida Water Management District and other water management agencies.

6 It was a three-year project that ended in 1999 (1996-1999).

8 The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NCRS) did the initial irrigation evaluations. Extension agents and the project coordinator did the initial landscape evaluations. Project leaders met quarterly to review the project's progress.

9 The first water-use data was collected in 1996-97. In fall 1999, final water-use data was collected and the landscape evaluations were completed.

8 HDL Engineering in Tampa won the competitive bid to coordinate the project.

3 One of the Manatee County project sites decreased actual water use by 31%, saving 1,524,692 gallons of well-water.

2 The multi-county water management program decreased water use by 48% for all participants in 1999, compared to historical water use prior to 1996, thus saving 4,772,198 gallons of water (combined well and municipal sources).

4 Because the property manager was able to supply adequate water during the dry months (and then save water during the wet periods), he was able to gain better control of chinch bugs through spot spraying on an "as needed" basis.

5 The property manager in one project used one less application of Dursban during each of the last two years. This saved time and money.

11 As a result of the initial irrigation evaluation by NRCS, the property manager was made aware of inefficiencies in the system (pump leaks, PVC pipe and emitter leaks, design flaws). The

property manager was then able to have those problems solved.

10 During the final landscape evaluation in Fall 1999, the turf was greener, thicker, and shrub beds had few water-related problems (e.g. juniper rots from over-watering).

### Lead Paragraph and Ordered Facts

Using excessive amounts of water on landscapes is a serious problem. The Manatee County Extension Service participated in a landscape experiment that reduced the amount of water necessary to maintain landscape and turf.

The multi-county water management program decreased water use by 48% for all participants in 1999, compared to historical water use prior to 1996, thus saving 4,772,198 gallons of water (combined well and municipal sources).

One property manager in Manatee County who participated in the program reported that he used 1,524,692 fewer gallons during the second and third year of the project.

In addition to saving water, the program also allowed one property manager to use fewer pesticide applications on the turf because it suffered less heat stress. Because this manager was able to supply adequate water during the dry months (and then save water during the wet periods), he was able to control chinch bugs with one less application of Dursban during each of the last two years. This saved time and money.

The three-year project began in 1996.

Called the Landscape Water Budget Pilot Project, it was funded by the Southwest Florida Water Management District and other water management agencies.

HDL Engineering in Tampa won the competitive bid to coordinate the project and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NCRS) did the initial irrigation evaluations. Extension agents and project coordinators did the initial landscape evaluations. The project leaders met quarterly to review the projects progress.

The first water-use data was collected between 1996-1997 and the last data in 1999. Extension and NRCS staff did the final landscape evaluations.

According to one property manager, "During the final landscape evaluation in December, 1999, the turf was greener, thicker, and shrub beds had few water related problems."

### **Creating the Final Version**

That's all there is to it! Then, all you have to do is collapse the sentences by deleting the spaces between them and your success story is done. You've taken the facts, arranged them into a simple story using the formula, and you've created something that anyone interested in your program would like to know. If the story seems too long, simply delete one or more of the least important facts from the end.

### **Final Version**

Using excessive amounts of water on landscapes and turf is a serious problem. The Manatee County Extension Service participated in a landscape experiment that reduced the amount of water necessary to maintain landscapes and turf throughout the year, and especially during periods of drought. The multi-county water management program decreased water use by 48% for participants in 1999, compared to historical water use prior to 1996. A total of 4,772,198 gallons (combined well and municipal sources) was saved over the three-year project. In addition to saving water, the program also allowed one Manatee County property manager to lower the use of a turf insecticide because it suffered less heat stress. Because this manager was able to supply adequate water during the dry months (and then save water during the wet periods), he was able to control chinch bugs with one less application of Dursban during each of the last two years. This saved time and money. The three-year project began in 1996. Called the Landscape Water Budget Pilot Project, it was funded by the South West Florida Water Management District. HDR Engineering in Tampa coordinated the project and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) did the initial irrigation evaluations. Extension agents helped with the initial landscape evaluations. Project leaders met quarterly to review the projects progress. The

first water-use data was collected between 1996-97, and the last data in 1999. Extension and NRCS staff did final landscape evaluations. According to one property manager, "During the final landscape evaluation in Fall 1999, turf was greener, thicker, and shrub beds had few water-related problems."

### **Conclusion**

Effective success stories can be fast and easy to write if you remember to focus on the reader's interest (usually in terms of how clients benefit) and arrange the most important facts first.