

# Out of heads and onto paper

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Have you ever had to produce written materials – agricultural extension materials, a training manual, or a set of guidelines? There may be a lot of information about your topic, but it is scattered or in the wrong format, and much of it is in people's heads rather than written down on paper. Maybe you need to develop simple extension brochures for farmers, but the only material available is in research reports written in scientific



Participants in a writeshop exchange ideas.

jargon, while useful indigenous knowledge should also be included. Another example is when an organisation has been carrying out development activities for many years, and its staff have built up many rich experiences, but they are not written down anywhere. The staff are excellent in the field, but they find it difficult to write; the risk is that when somebody leaves the organisation, his or her knowledge will be lost. A similar case could be when coordinating a network of partners who implement activities in a certain subject area. The partners would like to learn from one another. They have produced a lot of monitoring reports that tell the story of their work, but pulling out the valuable information is going to be rather difficult: you might need to question each of the authors in detail before you can document it properly.

All such situations have certain things in common:

- The information exists mainly in people's heads, but it is needed on paper.
- No single person is the expert on a subject. Many different people can each contribute part of the information, and they may have different ideas about the subject. Agreement is possible, but only if people come together to discuss.
- The information has to be pulled out from a large body of data – reports, research articles, people's memories – and then

translated from one level of language (scientific jargon or farmers' language) into another (e.g., training materials).

- The information needs to be checked by several people – other experts, scientists, potential users – before it can be published.

## A solution: a writeshop

A "writeshop" is an intensive, participatory workshop that aims to produce some kind of written output. This may be a set of extension brochures, a bound book, a set of leaflets, or a training manual. Participants may include scientists, researchers, government personnel, teachers, NGO staff, extension agents, farmers and other local people: anyone who has, in one way or another, been involved in the experiences to be documented. These participants are assisted by a team of facilitators, editors, computer operators, artists and logistics staff.

The basic writeshop process was pioneered by the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction in the Philippines and has been adapted by related institutions and the authors of this article (see Figure 1). Altogether, this writeshop method has yielded more than 30 user-friendly manuals on a range of topics (see Box 1).

Before the writeshop, a steering committee develops a vision for the final publication: its target audience, objectives, subject area, etc. The committee lists potential topics within the broad subject area, develops guidelines for authors, and invites "specialists" to write a first draft on a certain topic. These specialists are not necessarily scientists or senior staff; the committee may also invite extension personnel or farmers to write about their own particular area of expertise.

Early in the writeshop, the participants brainstorm ideas for further topics to be included in the publication. These new topics are given to knowledgeable participants for development and presentation during the writeshop. During the writeshop itself, each participant presents the first draft of his or her paper. The other participants have a chance to give comments on the draft and suggest revisions. The facilitator allows as much discussion as possible so that everyone can contribute their own knowledge on the topic. The aim is not really to criticise the manuscript, but to improve it, add to it – and often to remove unnecessary information – so that it fits the end product and is appropriate for the target audience.

After his or her presentation, each presenter will talk to an editor, who has also been taking notes of the discussion. The editor helps to revise and edit the draft and to ask for illustrations, usually line drawings from one of the artists, to accompany the text. The edited text and the illustrations then go to a computer operator, who puts them together as a second draft. The revised drafts of each participant are then presented again and the audience can



Figure 1: The writeshop process.

provide comments and suggestions for a second time. After this series of presentations, an editor and artist(s) again help to revise the drafts. Towards the end of the writeshop, it may be possible to make this third draft available to participants for final comments and revisions. The final version, therefore, can be completed, printed and distributed soon after the writeshop.

### Box 1. Examples of writeshops

- In Asia, writeshops managed by the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction (IIRR) resulted in information materials and books on subjects including indigenous knowledge, low-external-input rice production, ethnoveterinary medicine, biodiversity, indigenous practices in maternal and child health care, coastal resource management, agroforestry, and management of the environment and natural resources.
- A series of major writeshops managed by IIRR in Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania resulted in illustrated manuals on ethnoveterinary medicine, sustainable agriculture, public awareness techniques for agricultural research organisations and NGOs, land management, dryland agriculture, gender issues, drought cycle management, conservation agriculture, and food security.
- A writeshop in Palembang, Indonesia, produced 11 extension booklets in Indonesian on agriculture in the tidal swamplands of eastern Sumatra.
- A three-day writeshop in Pune, India, produced a field manual on camel diseases.
- A series of writeshops in Vietnam resulted in an illustrated book in Vietnamese on various aspects of upland farming.
- In Myanmar, writeshops resulted in extension leaflets in Burmese on topics such as the safe use of pesticides and the establishment of a credit cooperative.

### Flexibility

The writeshop process is extremely flexible. The repeated presentations, comments and revision of drafts allow for papers to be reviewed and revised thoroughly. The process also allows for new topics to be developed during the writeshop, and topics to be combined, dropped or split into parts. The basic pattern of the writeshop can be varied in many ways. For example, the participants may break into smaller groups to discuss specific topics, write drafts and present them to the whole group for comments. Participants may write examples or brief stories that illustrate a particular point that can be included in a larger chapter. They can also be asked to gather additional information about techniques or processes, resource organisations or reference materials that might enrich the content of the final product. The schedule for only the first one or two days of the writeshop is known beforehand. A schedule for the following day is prepared each evening, and it may even change again several times as the day progresses.

The process can be modified and adapted to suit individual situations. Writeshops have lasted from one-and-a-half days to two weeks in length, tackling from four to more than 100 manuscripts, and with between 15 and 150 participants. Writeshops have been conducted in many languages, and it is possible to conduct a single writeshop in several languages: using interpreters, for example, indigenous livestock healers who spoke only their own languages made major contributions to a book on ethnoveterinary medicine in Kenya. While the approach described here relies heavily on computers, the method can also be adapted for use at the field level where there may not be any skilled operators or a reliable electricity supply. A group of villagers in the uplands of Negros, the Philippines, used a similar

approach in a one-day writeshop to produce a manual on indigenous tree species: all manuscripts and illustrations were prepared by hand, and the final publication is hand-written.

### Multiple contributions

Documenting an experience can take a great amount of time. The process of writing, illustrating, reviewing and revising can be long and dull. Writeshops can speed up and improve this process. Having the resource people, editors, artists and other documentation tools together at the same time and place makes this possible. It also allows for all participants' contributions to be included, taking advantage of the diverse experience and expertise of all present. It allows ideas to be validated by a range of experts in the field. Members of the intended audience or readers (e.g., teachers, farmers and extension personnel) can help pre-test the text and illustrations during the writeshop. In essence, each manuscript is reviewed dozens of times by key resource people, all within the same short period of time.

### Coordination and facilitation

The number of people needed to coordinate and facilitate a writeshop depends on the number of participants and manuscripts to be processed. For a small writeshop with 20 participants, one facilitator, an editor, an artist and someone to take care of logistics may be enough. A skilled facilitator is vital however. He or she must be able to guide the participants and manage the discussions. They must have a good understanding of the subject area and a clear idea of what types of information need to go into the final publication. Tact is important: some authors may resent seeing a manuscript over which they have sweated for many hours being torn apart by their fellow participants or the editor.

A skilled editor (or editors) is just as important. The editor works with authors, and guides them in rewriting their drafts. Very often an editor will take over responsibility for rewriting the draft based on information provided by the authors. Again, tact is vital, as is an ability to organise and structure information, and to present ideas in a way that is easy for the intended audience to understand.

### When is a writeshop appropriate?

Writeshops are suitable for documenting practical illustrated information, in simple language, where a large number of people know a little, but no-one knows all about the subject. A writeshop approach would therefore not be appropriate for narrow subjects or if one person or a small group has all the information needed.

The writeshop approach is a very intensive process, making considerable demands on participants and staff. Writeshops can be expensive, especially if it is necessary to cover food and lodging, airfares and daily allowances. When considering whether to plan a writeshop or use more conventional methods, the benefits of the writeshop approach must be weighed against these limitations.

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### Reference

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