



# Thinking Outside of the (Hollinger) Box: Professional Writing for the Archives

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## Abstract

This paper will describe a unique course collaboration between the Ohio State University Archives Group and an English class (ENG 3405: Proposal Writing), in which students wrote a range of technical proposals and other supporting documents to fund and organize new and ongoing projects. While working on these projects, students developed knowledge of professional genres and styles while practicing individual and collaborative writing practices. As archivists, we often support class projects based on archival research. These projects are typically tied to undergraduate or graduate history courses, and the unique materials held by the Archives are the focus of student work. Often, these projects provide students their first experience with an archives or special collections setting, so instructors typically ask us to provide an overview of the archives before students dive into material for an assignment or term paper. Occasionally assignments will require follow up visits to the Archives, but the focus is almost always on the collections themselves or some historical theme. Thus, we were especially excited to interact with a professional writing class and on different terms. Instead of viewing the Archives in the typical way – as a resource for historical materials to use in an academic writing assignment – students would view the Archives Group as a client with a persistent and recurring rhetorical problem—the need to write proposals to find money outside of normal funding flows to support preservation and access activities.

## Introduction

In 2015, Jonathan Buehl, a professor of technical writing in the OSU Department of English, was looking for a course ‘client’ for an upper-level special topics course he was developing on proposal writing. As Northcut, Crow and Mormile note, “proposal writing” can describe a wide range of professional writing activities—from grant proposals to fund the missions of nonprofits to research proposals for graduate curricular milestones to proposals to fund scientific research. Jonathan planned his class around proposal writing in nonprofit institutional contexts, with the idea that students would be able to transfer what they learned regarding collaborative writing and approaches to genre and style to other contexts. Thus, the course had the following goals:

- students will understand and practice grant proposal writing
- students will understand and practice how to write collaboratively
- students will understand and practice how to manage larger writing projects
- students will understand and practice working for an institutional client

Jonathan had previously worked with University Archivist Tamar Chute, and had a general knowledge about the kinds of writing that take place in archives. When he approached Tamar about the class, she suggested that the Polar Archives was perfectly positioned to work with the class, having a strong record of accomplishment of grant proposal writing. After some brainstorming, we determined that the Archives Group as a whole, which is comprised of three collections: University Archives, Ohio Congressional Archives, and the Polar Archives, would be the perfect ‘client’ for the class, and could offer ideal proposal writing projects.

There has been much discussion in the professional literature about teaching students how to conduct research in archives in both rhetoric and composition studies (e.g., Hayden; Buehl, Chute, and Fields) as well as archival studies (e.g., Rockenbach; Weiner, Morris, and Mykytiuk). Additionally, there has been increasing interest in developing service-learning projects involving archives. However, there has been little discussion in the literature of the archives as productive sites for technical and professional writing teachers and their students.

## Professional Writing in Archives

Like any professionals, archivists write for a variety of purposes that are constrained by the material circumstances of our work. As caretakers of historical records, we encourage access, yet we struggle with long-term preservation. These competing forces often drive the writing that we do on a daily basis.

We write to celebrate the holdings in our repositories and attract researchers to use the collections. This work includes published introductions to collections (either online or in print brochures) as well as blog posts and other forms of social media. For example, the Polar Archives published a series of blogs called “Frozen Fridays,” where for 26 successive Fridays, we wrote entries from A (Antarctica) to Z (Zepelin), featuring materials in our collections.

Exhibit writing, both physical and digital, is yet another way of celebrating archival holdings, and we are expected to know how to write exhibit themes, captions, and promotional material for diverse audiences—children and adults, novices and experts, people reading in physical and online spaces. For example, the digital exhibit “[The Magic of Antarctic Colours](#)” was first a physical exhibition at the German Maritime

Museum in Bremerhaven, Germany, then later here on the OSU campus, as part of a much larger event, before becoming an online exhibit. Digital and physical exhibits require different writing styles.

In addition to drawing attention from researchers and broader publics, archivists write to explain material that others find esoteric. For example, what is actually in the 500 boxes of that comprise the Papers of Admiral Richard E. Byrd? To answer such questions, archivists write finding aids. A finding aid, sometimes called the inventory for a collection, is much more than a list of items. As Lois Hammill explains in *Archival Arrangement and Description*, “The goal of a well-written finding aid is to assist the researcher by narrowing his search and saving him time in identifying the most pertinent records for his research.” Good finding aids include a biographical or historical sketch of the individual or entity, a scope and content note that succinctly describes the contents of a collection or sub-section, and a list of folder titles. The sketches and notes require writing descriptively and concisely, but even folder titles take consistency and attention to detail, including adhering to the latest metadata standards.

Other occasions for writing in archives emerge from the competing desires of providing access as broadly as possible while preserving unique material as well as possible. Meeting these goals can be challenging as most archives have limited budgets, and it takes time and money to restore, preserve and digitize collection items and then to provide access to them through events, exhibits, documentaries, websites and other media. Archivists often seek additional resources from the larger institution, private donors, foundations, and government agencies through various kinds of proposals. This type of writing is very different from the previously described work of promoting and describing collections, and it requires an understanding of the institution’s culture, donor relations, and the grant funding process. Archivists often learn this type of writing on the job and may not have any institutional proposal-writing support. In the best cases, the institution has a grant writer who understands how to find and win grant awards. Frequently, archivists seek sample proposals as well as advice, from others in the field or at their institution who have successfully navigated the world of grant funding previously.

Finally, writing about preservation work (for either internal or external audiences) requires an understanding of technical processes. Different media require different resources and present unique problems; thus, understanding physical attributes of specific media is crucial for describing projects effectively. For example, to get a grant to fund the restoration of historical film, one must be able to describe accurately the features and condition of the footage for potential funders who may or may not be knowledgeable about film preservation. These readers will need to know about the gauge of the film (typically 16mm or 35mm), the material used in the plastic base (e.g., nitrate or acetate), and the composition of the image itself (e.g., the type of color dye or the levels of silver particles that comprise black and white film). Further, they will need to know about any degradation of film and the costs of restoring it; thus, archivists must be able to write about the preservation issues of film, such as vinegar syndrome, shrinkage, and nitrate degradation. The technical work of preserving audio-visual material is an immense challenge and one that technical communication students are uniquely positioned to help address through service-learning projects.

## Case Study

In 2012, a donor sent the Byrd Polar and Climate Research Center Archival Program (Polar Archives) at The Ohio State University a stuffed chinstrap penguin—an artifact that had been in her family since her father returned from the U.S. Antarctic Service Expedition of 1939–1941 (Figure 1). Standing roughly two feet tall, this preserved penguin did not arrive in the protective Plexiglas enclosure that houses it today; rather, it arrived carefully rolled in bubble wrap, packaged in shipping box from Home Depot, and delivered by FedEx.

Although no unique artifact is ever considered ‘typical’ by archivists, the penguin is certainly one of the more unusual items we have ever received in the Polar Archives, and it presented unique challenges for us. It would not fit neatly in archives stacks designed for uniform cardboard boxes, its plaster base needed to be rebuilt, and its fragile wings and delicate tail were not something we could protect with our typical supplies. However, the processing of this artifact into our collections *was* typical, in that it involved a range of standard professional writing activities related to its acquisition, description, preservation, and access.

For example, before the penguin even arrived, I corresponded with the donor to outline the terms of the donation and to explain how best to ship the specimen. (As it turns out, shipping a taxidermied penguin is not a common practice!) Once the penguin arrived in the repository, a number of various documents needed to be written. A formal letter of thanks was sent to the donor along with a “deed of gift,” which is the instrument used to convey ownership to the repository. An acquisition record was created to describe the details of the object for internal audiences, and a more user-friendly item label for the archives’ finding aids and catalogs was written to explain the object, its context, and significance. Finally, to cover the cost to preserve and refurbish this historical specimen, I sent a short-format, narrative-style grant proposal to the non-profit foundation that ultimately paid for the penguin’s new base and permanent Plexiglas enclosure.

Although this anecdote is about a seemingly quirky polar artifact, similar processes of composition take place constantly in archives as archivists work to increase their collections, preserve rare materials, and facilitate public access to historical artifacts and records.



**Figure 1.** This chinstrap penguin, affectionately named “Little Moe”, was collected during the U.S. Antarctic Service Expedition of 1939–1941. The process of acquiring, describing, restoring, and preserving this taxidermied specimen required professional writing in many different genres and styles.

## ENG 3405: The writing modules

In the first module, students worked individually to create short proposals for small projects (\$5000 or less). After reading about generic proposal arguments and short proposals (Karsh and Fox; Margolin), students were given an actual situation that the Polar Archives had faced in the past—persuading a non-profit foundation to fund the restoration and preservation of the previously described stuffed chinstrap penguin. Before responding to this problem with short proposals, students were given basic details about the artifact and the cost of the preservation work; however, we purposefully withheld details about the

funder to see how students approached the problem with only basic textbook advice and a general sense of possible audiences—foundations. After they drafted these “warm up” proposals, we provided them with details about the funder and the actual proposal that I had previously submitted. Specifically, they learned that I had a long and positive relationship with the funder, that the funder had a history of supporting OSU projects, and that the funder was especially interested in polar history. Thus, the proposal I tailored for this particular funder deployed a more energetic and personal style and provided more details about polar history than the students’ proposals. Though the students were writing about the same problem, they did not have the details of those previously submitted proposals, nor were they aware of the long-standing relationship that the Polar Archives has established with this funder.

After comparing the style and content of the student proposals with my actual proposal, plus three other proposals that I had sent to the foundation in previous years, students were tasked with writing to the same funder about a new project. I provided students with this scenario: the Polar Archives wanted to fund a series of film screenings featuring a documentary produced from archival footage of Admiral Byrd’s Second Expedition to Antarctica (1933-1935). In addition to researching the logistics and costs of the project, and then persuasively writing about them in short proposals, the students wrote other documents appropriate to this situation—the cover letter accompanying the proposal and the thank-you letter that is sent after the dispersal of the funds. For this assignment, all documents were written with the benefit of reviewing past proposals, to see what had been successful with this donor previously.

The second writing module was more challenging. We wanted students to build on their knowledge of the proposal genre and professional styles while learning more about collaborative writing and writing for an institutional client. We also wanted them to write in detail about the unique challenges archives face when working with specific types of media. Finally, we wanted students to practice new kinds of research—finding appropriate funding sources and identifying credible vendors to support complex technical projects. We grouped the students into five teams, with each team comprised of five or six students, to write mid-range grant proposals to fund preservation and access projects ranging from \$5000 to \$50,000.

To prepare for this second module, students visited the OSU Archives to gain a better understanding of their client’s needs, the physical space, and the technical constraints of working with specific media. During this site visit, students toured the facility before meeting with subject matter experts who introduced them to the specific collections and particular problems they would write about in their proposals. Each team was tasked with working on one of the following assignments:

- digitizing phonographic recordings of university radio programming
- restoring and digitizing historical polar films
- preserving John Glenn’s home movies
- creating accessible digital copies of jumbo-sized historical maps of the polar regions
- creating a searchable digital archive of John Glenn’s fan mail

The site visit was critical for educating the students about both the wide range of formats held in archival collections (e.g., paper; film; magnetic audio and video tape; aluminum, acetate, and vinyl phonographs) and the on-going need for funds to preserve these items, particularly those on rapidly degrading formats, such as magnetic media.

Alongside this introduction to the technical challenges of preservation and access, students also needed tools for working and writing together for this team assignment. Readings and exercises from Joanna

Wolfe's *Team Writing* provided an important foundation, and students used self-assessment questionnaires and wrote team charter documents to define personal and collaborative goals and responsibilities.

This second module required students to develop a deeper understanding of proposals and the processes and genres that surround them. Specifically, they needed to learn research strategies for finding funding. During a class visit, we discussed searching in different funding streams while broadening and narrowing their search terms. For example, a set of phonograph albums might be interesting to a funder for the type of content, the age of the recording, details about recorded performers, its relevance for local, state or national history, the format of the media, or all of these reasons. By searching for different search terms and in different databases—ranging from general search sites to government databases—students were able to find multiple funding possibilities.

After identifying funding sources, students needed to learn how to read requests and calls for proposals (RFPs and CFPs) to determine what they would need to write and how they would need to write it. For example, in the case of the deteriorating films, students identified the National Film Preservation Foundation as the most likely potential funder. Using the specifications set out by the NFPF, students prepared a proposal that included an extensive technical description of the films' condition, as well as a justification for the historical significance of the film. Additionally, the NFPF requires a description of how the archives will provide access to the films, not only archival access (for researchers), but also for public events. Finally, the students also prepared a detailed budget, which required additional research to identify credible vendors, obtain plausible estimates, and articulate the logistics of a film screening.

The third and final module built on the lessons of the first two modules while providing a culminating experience for the course. Unlike the first two modules, students did not actually write a grant proposal. Rather, they developed a strategic plan and proposal-writing resource kit for preserving magnetic media in all of the collections of the OSU Libraries, Archives Group and Special Collections. The audience for these deliverables was composed of stakeholders from across the OSU Libraries system—the librarians, archivists, and administrators who would need to write many grant proposals across multiple years to tackle the immense challenge of preserving magnetic media.

Magnetic media (cassettes, reel-to-reel audio, VHS tapes, etc.) are decaying at an alarming rate. To preserve collections of this material before they reach the ends of their usable lifespans, some universities have been investing millions of dollars and thousands of hours to digitize and store unique magnetically recorded content. For example, in 2013 Indiana University committed to “preserving and providing access to all significant audio and video recordings on all IU campuses by the IU Bicentennial in 2020,” and millions of dollars were dedicated to meet this goal (Media Digitization & Preservation Initiative). Like Indiana, OSU owns thousands of pieces of magnetic media; however, it lacks a dedicated budget for multi-million-dollar preservation efforts. The task of Jonathan's students was to develop a flexible strategic plan to raise external funds and to demonstrate to internal stakeholders that preservation work is worth funding through more and smaller grants and targeted budget allocations. To create this plan, students needed to do the following:

- better understand the various stakeholders and collections involved in a massive university library system
- help librarians and archivists prioritize which projects to take on first
- create resources that stakeholders throughout the libraries could use to find and respond to grant opportunities as they arise
- offer advice to often isolated stakeholders on how to work and write together effectively

Thus, students needed more information about their prospective audience of librarians and archivists and the collections they curate. Through interviews with these subject matter experts, students were able to collect this kind of background information. During class, they developed a standard script of interview questions that would productively generate information that they could later include in bio sketches, collection and artifact descriptions, and other “standard components” of preservation and access proposals. These components and a description of their proposed approach to distributed fundraising were created in a wiki platform, which allowed everyone in the class to work on the project without the issues that can occur when groups of students work in Microsoft Word or other file-based platforms. The interviews also yielded information that guided students in searching for appropriate funding sources.

In addition to creating proposal related resources, the students also created a set of “best practices” to help librarians and archivists from different parts of the university collaborate effectively. Thus, students had to reflect upon their own experiences with collaborative writing.

The class concluded with a presentation of their strategic plan and resource site to an audience of librarians and archivists. The plan has provoked positive discussions among librarians, archivists, and administrators as they come to grips with the immense problem of preserving decaying magnetic media for future generations.

## Conclusion

Working with a professional writing class was a new experience for us in Archives, though we regularly support class projects based on archival research. Writing persuasive, descriptive, and concise arguments for funders is a necessity for archivists, and we had a host of possible scenarios to draw on when developing course projects. We used past and current situations to create realistic case studies and real time client-based projects for the students of English 3405. The projects were distributed over three writing modules that varied in the documents students produced, how they produced them, and the audiences they attempted to persuade.

We were impressed with the students’ work in this course. The learning curve was extensive. Not only were students learning about archival resources on formats and subjects that were unfamiliar, they were also learning about the grant-writing process and how to work collaboratively to achieve a common goal. We consider this course a success. We have co-taught the course twice, and plan to teach it again in 2019 (it is not offered every year). We believe that the skills learned by the students will translate well into their future coursework as well as into their eventual careers. At the same time, the Archives Group gained actual proposals, as well as a real plan for moving forward with various preservation priorities and projects.

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