Podcast Transcript: Writing for Professional Safety, with Frank D’Orsi

Tina: Welcome to the first podcast from the editors of Professional Safety, the journal of the American Society of Safety Engineers. I’m Tina Angley, a member of the editorial staff of Professional Safety.

Each month, PS publishes articles written by and for SH&E professionals – experts in the field working in all areas, from industry to academia.

For many of our readers, the thought of writing an article just doesn’t seem to cross their minds. Yet our readers, working in the field, are the very people who should be sharing their knowledge and experience with others in the SH&E community.

Today, we’re talking with Frank D’Orsi, chair of ASSE’s Editorial Review Board about writing an article, and what’s involved in preparing and submitting an article for publication. Hi Frank, welcome to the podcast.

Frank: Hello, and thanks – glad to be here.

Tina: Frank, over the years, you’ve talked to many members about writing articles for PS. One question you’ve probably heard a lot is, “Why?” What are some of the reasons that working SH&E professionals should set their sights on getting an article published in Professional Safety?

Frank: Well, Tina, there are a lot of reasons. First and foremost there’s the personal and professional exposure. PS is a respected resource around the world. It’s read by 34,000-plus readers in more than 75 countries, and is by far the top-rated ASSE member benefit.

Tina: I’m sure you’ve also heard the response, maybe not in so many words, “What’s in it for me?”

Frank: You’re right, I have heard that a lot. First of all, it’s an opportunity to share your experience and expand the profession’s body of knowledge.

Plus, it gives you the opportunity to offer different perspectives and introduce new ways to think about the practice of safety, health and the environment.

One tangible benefit is that you can earn points to help you maintain your professional certifications, like the CSP and the CIH.

There’s also the satisfaction of professional and personal accomplishment.

Plus, you’ll earn recognition and be seen as a resource at work and among your peers.

And definitely not last or least is the automatic eligibility for the Professional Paper Award. This accomplishment further adds to personal and professional achievement, recognition and reward.
Tina: One misconception people have about writing an article for Professional Safety, which prevents some from even considering it, is that folks believe they have to have an advanced degree to write an article. How do you respond to this concern?

Frank: No, an advanced degree is not necessary. Some other concerns people have are:

- They don’t think what they have to say is really important
- They’re afraid of rejection
- They don’t know where or how to start

Keep in mind that we have mentors who can help you. All of our mentors are accomplished authors, Professional Paper Award winners and Society Fellows. These folks have volunteered their time and expertise, and they’re eager to help potential authors. You can consult them at any point as you’re writing your article.

Tina: Let’s talk about subject matter. A lot of would-be authors say they don’t know what to write about. What advice can you give on that front? What’s a good starting point?

Frank: When selecting your topic, think about your own professional experience. What area have you worked in most? Where have you had success or learned some hard lessons? Many authors write best about their own programs or issues that are specifically related to their operations.

Before writing your article, think about your audience. What are their wants and needs? Ask yourself who they are and what they need to achieve success in the area of the topic that you’ve selected.

It’s really important to thoroughly research materials related to your topic and organize the materials and your thoughts before you write the article. Gather the facts and review other articles on your topic. Know what’s been written and have the facts – before you begin.

Tina: That’s great advice. You mentioned writing about the success of your own programs. As an editor, I have to agree. These are some of the types of articles our readers appreciate the most – success stories, or lessons learned – these are very popular.

Frank: Yes, most of the time, readers can relate to some element of your story, so they feel engaged and interested in what you’re saying.

Tina: All right, so once you’ve selected a topic, then what?

Frank: Well, determine what the focus of the article will be. To do this, ask yourself, “What’s the point of the article?” What’s your reason for writing and what will it do for the reader? Will the reader gain new knowledge? Will they be able to easily extract the information you’re sharing, and apply it to their own programs?

Tina: Earlier you mentioned thinking about your audience before writing—which is something many safety professionals understand from having to train employees. What are some of the other things writers should do before they even put pen to paper?
Frank: Like every training session, every article needs a plan. As an author, you need to identify the most important points. Each point should grow from the previous point and lead to the next one. Develop a plan – list or outline the most important points in a logical order. Remember, good organization keeps readers interested and reading, while poor organization more than anything else will lose readers.

Writing an article that is not organized in a logical or sequential manner or failing to build on points and transitioning smoothly from one point to another is like trying to run before you can walk. It just doesn’t work.

It’s also important to write for your audience. Write in a way that’s easy for readers to understand. Don’t use acronyms without explaining them, or you’ll lose readers. Minimize jargon and stick with a simple vocabulary. Write to inform and not to impress. Simplicity and clarity are key.

Two of the most difficult items to overcome as a reviewer when reading an article is the constant use of an acronym or jargon that the author feels the reader should know, but never defines. As a reviewer, you read page after page after page hoping the definition will come soon. Often times, you feel that you may have missed it, so you backtrack in the article to find the definition. If the author doesn’t define these terms immediately when used, it creates a distraction. The reader gets the sense that they’re missing key information, reading becomes tedious and the focus on the author’s message is lost.

To bring readers in, think “bite size.” Long paragraphs and long sentences are disengaging. So, break your article into chunks. Short paragraphs and subheadings make it easier for the readers to digest. Write in short, crisp sentences and keep paragraphs short with appropriate subheadings to make the reading easier and to keep readers interested.

And, of course, choose a good headline. The title is the first thing readers see. Craft a title that will “catch” the reader’s eye and make them want to read more.

Tina: Yes, editors take a really hard look at titles. We really want direct, concise and snappy titles because that’s what grabs readers’ attention. This is especially true today, with the overwhelming amount of information we get from so many different sources. If your original title is already all of those things, chances are very good that it will make it to print.

Frank: Now something that seems really obvious, but bears mentioning: Proofread. Typos and poor grammar can only count against the article in the review process. After writing your article and before you submit it, be sure to read, review and read it again. After you do, put it down and review it again a day or two later. You’ll be surprised by what you didn’t notice in the first couple of read-throughs—and you’ll be glad you took another look.

Tina: Another thing to keep in mind is that spell-check isn’t always perfect.

Frank: Right. And after you’ve read through your work again, send it to a colleague or two and ask for an honest review and comments.

Tina: Are there any other mistakes that writers should avoid?
Frank: Avoid trying to impress instead of inform. Keep it simple. Avoid talking to the reader directly by writing in first and second person. And avoid jargon, and define any necessary acronyms.

Tina: We’ve talked about some things you need to think about before you write, as well as things to keep in mind during the process. So, let’s get to the nitty gritty – the various **elements of an article**. Frank, if you could, what one element of an article do you consider the most important?

Frank: For me, it’s definitely the **summary**, or abstract. In *Professional Safety*, this appears as the “In Brief.” It’s a brief series of three bullet points that precedes the article, and summarizes the content. It tells the reader what to expect. And here, the operative word really is brief. This should not be pages long, or a word-for-word rehash of the introduction.

Another very important element is the **introduction**. To quote an old cliché, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” The title of your article generates the initial interest. Your introduction should draw the reader into the article. Open with an attention-getting broad statement that establishes the general topic and says something that tells the reader, “you really should read this.” Eliminate any vagueness and make sure the sentence is error-free. Narrow the topic in following sentences that outline the state of the art or introduce a gap in knowledge. End the introduction with a general statement of the problem that will be addressed.

Tina: As the ERB chair, you’ve reviewed a lot of articles. In your experience, what aspect or element of an article do you think writers have the most trouble with?

Frank: I’d say **transitions**. Smooth transitions from one thought or concept to the next are important. These bridges move readers with ease from one idea to another. They express the relationship between ideas as you move from point to point within an article and all the way through to the conclusion.

And finally, the **conclusion**. This is your last opportunity to address the reader. It tells the reader what they’ve read, and restates the important points. Keep it short and make it as specific as possible.

Tina: So overall: summarize your thoughts, demonstrate your ideas, make a good final impression and end on a positive note.

Frank: Yes. Tell readers what to do with the information presented. Generate ideas that readers can use and develop a bridge back to their daily practice.

Tina: OK. So, we’ve covered most of the basics. Let’s talk about references. This is a sticky subject for some people. Why are references so important, and what needs to be referenced?

Frank: The things you say and the things you believe need to be supported by facts and viable **references**. This gives your work credibility. Cite your references throughout the text and provide a complete list at the end of the article. The journal follows APA referencing style – the American Psychological Association. Avoid secondary referencing when you can. The original work is always the best source for meaning and content. Remember, once you cite what someone else has said in a published work, try to follow up with your thoughts about it.
Like references, be sure to provide sources for all illustrations if they’re not your original work. Visual aids should be clear and concise, easy to read and self explanatory. They should clarify and enhance key points or technical issues. Keep illustrations simple and try not to create “clutter.” And, of course, be sure to provide captions for the illustrations.

Tina: That’s a great point. Visual elements should augment the text. You know, the prospect of developing illustrations has been a barrier for some of the potential authors I’ve talked to. They think, well, I can’t draw, so I can’t submit an article. And that’s just simply not the case.

Frank: I agree. They don’t need to be able to draw to submit an article. If they can conceptualize what illustration(s) could augment the work, I think in most cases the staff could come up with a suitable visual that would enhance the article and add interest.

Tina: Let’s talk about perhaps one of the most intimidating aspects of submitting an article to Professional Safety – the editorial review process. Can you give us an overview of this process?

Frank: First, I’d like to address the perception that the process is intimidating. Yes, it’s rigorous and detailed, but the goal, really, is to help authors produce top-notch articles. That’s something I’d really like to emphasize.

With respect to the actual review process, all manuscripts submitted for publication are blind peer-reviewed by the members of the editorial review board—the ERB. To maintain the integrity of that process, reviewers don’t receive any information about the authors of an article.

The ERB’s evaluations are independent and demanding. We do not collaborate or communicate with other ERB members or with editorial staff during the evaluation process. That’s because it’s meant to be a rigorous evaluation. It’s designed to make sure that PS publishes only high-quality articles.

That said, again, if you’re an author, we want you to understand that, in the end, we are trying to help you improve your work and present your ideas in the best possible way.

Tina: In other words, think of the ERB as your advocate, not your adversary.

Frank: Exactly.

Tina: So, if an article is not accepted, is the author just out of luck, or can he or she try again?

Frank: The opportunity is always available to re-submit an article after you’ve had the time to review and take into consideration the comments from the editorial board. Remember, the primary focus of the editorial board is to offer comments that will make your article as good as it can be and then to get it published.

Tina: All in all, safety professionals shouldn’t feel intimidated by the writing process. Writing is really about sharing your point of view.
Frank: That’s right. And in safety, that’s what we’re all about. The more information we share, the more we improve the quality of the debate and improve the profession as a whole.

Tina: All right, Frank D’Orsi, chair of ASSE’s Editorial Review Board—thank you very much for your time, and for giving our readers—and now listeners—a little bit of guidance on writing for Professional Safety.

Frank: You’re welcome, I’m glad to be able to help.

Tina: And to the listeners, thank you for downloading this podcast, from the editors of Professional Safety. Be sure to visit www.professionalsafety.org for more information about submitting a manuscript for publication.