

Reaching a Popular Audience Workshop

March 26, 2010 – Vancouver, British Columbia

Executive Summary

The one-day “**Reaching a Popular Audience Workshop**” held at the University of British Columbia was pronounced a success by the organizers and, based on the feedback received, by the participants as well. Students from across Western Canada were given the chance to participate and we are hopeful that the skills they learned will lead the students to become life-long contributors to popular media.



Dr. Sean Kheraj
UBC History Post-Doc

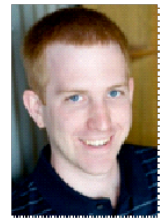
Students were taught to:

- Write and submit an Op-Ed to a newspaper
- Write and submit a query for an article to an editor
- Start a blog and maintain a strong, positive online presence

All participants have also been invited to join a Vancouver chapter of the “**Popular Publishing Writers’ Guild**”, an online support group, which was founded in the fall. This group was designed to be a source of encouragement for writers, as well as a place where members can receive feedback on their work before they take the leap of faith and submit it to an editor.

Schedule

- 9:30-10am **Introductions, coffee and snacks**
- 10-11am **Writer’s Q&A Panel**
Dr. Tina Loo, (UBC History, Canada’s History Magazine)
Laura Madakoro, (UBC History PhD, Op-Ed Writer)
Dr. Mary Lynn Young, (Director, UBC School of Journalism)
- 11-12:30pm **Newspaper Op-Ed Workshop Session**
Adam Crymble, (Network in Canadian History & Environment)
- 12:30-1:15pm **Lunch**
- 1:15-2:30pm **Magazine Query Workshop Session**
Adam Crymble, (Network in Canadian History & Environment)
- 2:30-3:30pm **Blogging and Self-Publishing Workshop Session**
Dr. Sean Kheraj (UBC Post-Doc History)
- 3:30-3:45pm **Popular Publishing Writers’ Guild & Closing Remarks**



Adam Crymble
Network in Canadian
History & Environment
(NiCHE)

The Workshop

The model for the workshop was taken from a previous event, “**Writing for a Popular Audience**” that was held in London, Ontario, in October, 2009 and organized by Adam Crymble (NiCHE) and Jason Young (York University). Based on that first event, changes were made to the Vancouver workshop that in all cases proved successful. These changes included:

- removing a session on writing press releases, since few graduate students need this skill until later in their careers
- changing the session on query writing to include a peer review of pre-circulated work
- swapping guest speakers for an expert Q&A panel
- adding an extremely popular blogging and self-publishing session led by Sean Kheraj that taught students to “command their Google” and ensure they have a strong, professional presence online

At the Vancouver workshop we had fifteen participants, including Sean and Adam. This proved a good size to ensure all students received adequate attention. All were registered in PhD or Master’s programs, or were recent graduates. The participants came from British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan and represented nine different institutions of higher learning. Thirteen were studying history or closely related fields, with the other two studying geography and environmental studies.

We enlisted the help of five UBC faculty members (Drs. Loo, Young, Thrush, Ducharme, and Roosa) and one graduate student (Laura Madakoro) to share their expertise. This high instructor to student ratio undoubtedly led to the high level of satisfaction expressed on the participant feedback forms. We were happy to welcome Dr. Goodfellow during our morning session, during which she had the opportunity to inform participants about THEN/HiER and its various programs.

We learned during the first workshop that some non-academic speakers can feel intimidated giving a presentation to a group of post-secondary students and tenured professors, which can detract from the learning experience. We also learned that when running a workshop for academics, it is best to follow models with which the participants are familiar, and that students usually preferred to get feedback on work they had previously written and circulated, rather than be asked to produce something during the workshop itself. To account for these preferences, the Op-Ed and Query sessions were designed to mimic graduate seminar discussions and students were asked to come with work prepared.

All participants filled out anonymous feedback forms. All sessions received an average rating greater than 4 out of 5, with most scoring over 4.5 out of 5. This was a marked improvement over the first workshop. All students said they would recommend a similar workshop to others, and most said they felt comfortable submitting an Op-Ed or query or creating a blog. The most common feedback was complimentary towards the

organization, the sessions, and the “safe” atmosphere we created for sharing ideas. More than one student suggested we extend the workshop for a second day, so that they could learn even more. The most common suggestion for an area in need of improvement was “lunch” which we like to think means the workshop went very well.

We sincerely appreciate the support of THEN / HiER for this project which allowed us to include students from across Canada’s western provinces.

Moving Forward

We are currently in the process of building the Vancouver chapter of our “**Popular Publishing Writers’ Guild**”. Like its Ontario counterpart, this group will send out a Call to Action every 5 months, starting in April. At the call, members will be encouraged and supported as they draft and submit work for a popular publication. The first time we ran this activity in Ontario our members were able to publish 6 articles in 8 attempts. Any freelance writer will tell you a 75% success rate is admirable, and we hope to have similar successes with these new members.

The workshop website, which is currently under construction, will be converted from a pre-workshop introduction to a post-workshop recap where visitors can learn some of the skills we presented at the event. We hope to have this done in the next few months. Here are a few of the blogposts (and a new blog) that came out as a result of the workshop.

- <http://seankheraj.wordpress.com/2010/03/31/reaching-a-popular-audience-workshop-wrap-up/>
- <http://canenvirock.wordpress.com/2010/03/26/escaping-the-concrete-ivory-tower/>
- <http://merlemassie.wordpress.com/>

One of the participants from the University of Saskatchewan has expressed interest and aptitude in holding another similar workshop in the future. We have also been approached by another former participant about holding an event in Halifax for Maritimers. We hope this is something we can continue to foster so that more young academics can learn to engage Canadians with their research.



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“Ode to Jack Kerouac” by Oliver Hammond
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