YOU CHOOSE 2009 Application: A Workshop on Effective Scientific Writing by Dr. Judith Swan at RSMAS

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Abstract

The ability to write and communicate is an essential activity within science. Mastery of writing can mean the difference between a fulfilled career and one lacking in opportunities. Despite the importance of a facility in writing, writing is not something that scientists are traditionally taught, with English classes never a requirement in a scientific graduate curriculum. This proposal addresses this gap. Dr. Judith Swan is a known expert and teacher on effective scientific writing. I seek funds with which to sponsor a workshop led by her at RSMAS. The requested resources cover her speaking fee, travel, and associated costs. Advertising for the speaking event will reach beyond RSMAS to the rest of the U of Miami community. Skill in communication serves as one ‘gatekeeper’ to increasing the participation and advancement of a diverse population in science and engineering. It is the goal of this proposal to help entry-level scientists learn how to bridge the gap, and to resensitize in more mature scientists a more conscious approach to writing.
Project Goals

Skill in the communication of hard-won scientific knowledge does not come easily to any scientist. Scientists are not specifically trained in how to write and communicate well, and often must rely on experiences outside of their scientific endeavors to develop the necessary skill. For entry-level scientists (ambitious students, post-docs, younger faculty), particularly those coming from a non-traditional background, developing the necessary skill can be daunting. This has fostered my desire to bring education on scientific writing to RSMAS, demonstrated by a list of communication tips maintained on my teaching website at http://www.rsmas.miami.edu/users/pzuidema/teaching.html.

The goal of this project is to bring further attention to the process of scientific writing, both by RSMAS and the larger U of Miami community, by organizing a full-day workshop at RSMAS led by a true teacher on scientific writing: Dr. Judith Swan. Dr. Judith Swan is an associate director of the Writing Program at Princeton University. Her grounding in science is strong, reflected in a Ph.D in biochemistry from M.I.T. She has co-authored an article entitled “The Science of Scientific Writing” in American Scientist that I have shared with RSMAS students, after being introduced to it through the National Center of Atmospheric Research’s undergraduate writing mentorship program. She has provided numerous workshops on scientific writing, including a previous one at the U.M. medical campus approximately four years ago that was very well received. Dr. Swan presents the task of writing from an unusual point of view to most scientific writers: that of the reader. This is a very useful perspective, but not one we are trained to think in consciously. With this proposal I seek the funds to pay for her travel and cover the all-day workshop fee. Dr. Swan has expressed her availability, and a room suitable for a large audience at RSMAS (the RSMAS auditorium) is available for her visit. The event would probably be held on a Saturday to maximize attendance from the U.M.-wide community.

Application of award funds to career and scholarly goals

My career goals include being an educator, and to be the best scholar I can be. This means writing manuscripts clearly enough that they will be accepted by top-rated journals, both for myself and the larger community I seek to help educate. Writing has become a continuous experience for me, yet not one that has become easier with time. To provide one example, the writing dilemma of when to use the active and passive voice is still one I need to revisit, despite a personal publication record of 20+ papers. While career self-improvement helps motivate me to participate in a workshop on effective writing, as an educator I also seek to extend such an opportunity to others. Certainly during my four years at RSMAS I have seen examples of difficulties in journal paper, thesis, and thesis proposal construction in my role as a faculty advisor, manuscript and proposal reviewer. From the larger point of view, particularly in this time of concern about climate change and varying public perceptions of science, as well as the need for scientifically educated people in many walks of life other than the lab or in strictly programming, it is imperative that scientist and students maintain a focus on articulate communication and writing. This proposal seeks funds for a broader goal than
is supported by a typical scientific grant, yet hopefully the proposal’s focus on articulate expression will carry through in all other career and scholarly goals, not just for myself but for all attendees.

**Budget**

Travel from Princeton U. to Miami:

- $300 airplane ticket (estimated)
- $250 one-night lodging + per diem (estimated)

Workshop fee: $1800 (number provided by Dr. Swan)

Ancillary costs: $150. This is intended to cover xeroxing, a car rental if needed, and provide for some food either at the event or afterwards. This could be covered based on actual receipts should the proposal be funded.

Total requested budget: $2500

A cost share is effectively provided by the use of the RSMAS Auditorium at no charge to this event.