Do the Written Words Support and Describe the Spoken Ones?
Part 2: Everyone Wants a Handout



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Part 1 of this article, The Title and Description, appeared in the May 2011 issue of Speak!. Jean discussed the importance of crafting a lecture title and description that accurately convey the content of the program and intent of the speaker. In part 2 she will discuss another written element of the speaking engagement: the syllabus.

It seems that wherever I go, someone wants a handout. Sometimes it is a person down on his/her luck and needing a meal, sometimes it is a thrifty individual looking for a sale or a discount coupon, and sometimes it is someone who wants to leave the experience with something to remember it by. Consider the seminars we attend: we get bags (handouts) filled with advertisements, coupons, the syllabus (frequently on disc these days), pens, and even food (more handouts). The booths in the exhibit halls use handouts (more pens, candy, and bookmarks—not too useful with my Nook) to lure people in to check out the service or product. We just really like handouts!

Are you like me? Do you come home and go through the seminar bag only to throw out half (or more) of the handouts received? And what happens with the syllabus and the handouts contained therein? When I began attending seminars and genealogy classes, I discovered that most people had no further use for the handout. (I can't tell you how many discarded handouts I saw in wastebaskets when I left a genealogy society meeting.) I developed my own system in order to get the most out of the handout material. Instead of keeping my syllabi (that, by the way, is the correct plural form of syllabus), I would dismantle them and file the various pages in folders dealing with general topic. Sometimes I had to create new topics (especially when the Internet became a major topic). And I do have to go through and purge files now and then to get rid of things that are outdated. But I use those files frequently when writing articles, preparing presentations, or helping clients. From that experience, I discovered that some handouts are more helpful than others, so I hope to share here some of the things that can make or break a handout (and determine whether or not I will keep it).

1. Identification. I don't keep handouts that are unidentified. If I receive one at a meeting, I try to make sure the person's name is included, along with the date when I heard the presentation and where it took place. But occasionally I miss that detail. At that point, the handout becomes useless and, since I file these about twice a year, there's little chance that I will remember the needed information after six months. Is your name and copyright date included on your handouts?

2. Contact information. It helps me a great deal to be able to get in touch with the person who presented the material referenced on the handout. If I would like to use it in an article, I need to get permission! Without being able to contact the author, even though I can include it in a bibliography, I am still uncomfortable without getting specific permission, especially if I want to reference it in a presentation. Is your e-mail address, postal address, and/or telephone contact information on your handouts?

3. Presentation title (see last issue of *SPEAK!*). Of course I want to know, at a glance, the topic of the presentation. This helps with my sorting and filing process. When I get a handout that just begins with the content, I have to read a large portion before I can file it. (For some handouts that have great content, I will write the topic on the top, but I don't have time to do that for all the handouts I receive—another tree bites the dust). Do your handouts have a clear title at the top?

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4. References. I like to see where people got their information as well as where I can look to get additional data on the topic. I don't discard handouts that are reference-less, but I do look them over carefully before deciding whether or not to add them to my files. On my own handouts, when I am doing a "how to" presentation that is designed to be a participatory program, I may have only one or two (or even no) references, but I leave a lot of space for people to fill in the blanks to add information discussed during the presentation. Even so, the references used to develop your lecture, as well as some additional ones, are often the deciding factor for whether or not a handout is worth keeping. And websites are becoming more and more desirable as sources (just remember, they must be re-verified every time you send out a handout – websites change frequently). Do your handouts give extra information in the form of a bibliography or reference list?

5. Legibility. When I find a handout with a plethora of mechanical errors (grammar goofs, misspellings, incomplete sentences or thoughts, poor use—or lack—of punctuation), my first thought is, "if there are errors in the written portion of this person's presentation, does it mean there are also errors in the information provided orally and/or written?" Ouch, that is not a pleasant thought, is it? Are your handouts written in standard English (or the language of the presentation location) with a lack of writing errors? (Hint: have someone else proofread your handout!)

6. Organization. After the presentation is over or, even more important, if I am looking at syllabus material from a seminar I could not attend, can I follow the reasoning and major points of the program? If a handout is more of a scattering of ideas with no connection, then it is unlikely I will be able to use the information again (unless I made copious notes on it during the lecture). Is your handout organized and easy to follow?

Whatever goes on paper to be passed out to the attendees of our programs should have value

Now, with all that said, here are some ideas for making your handout helpful, easy to read, and an aid to the genealogists who are interested in your topic. There are many ways to organize handout material. If I am giving a general presentation in which I am providing a number of ideas of places to find evidence, I am likely to organize the material so that it is easy to follow, though it may not exactly follow the data presentation from the lecture. For example, I may use an outline form:

I Repositories
  A. Libraries
  B. Archives
  C. Historical Societies, etc.

If I am giving a comparison-style presentation, I might set up a table that shows pros and cons of, say, on-site research. My music programs give a very short synopsis of the importance of music for the event or culture being discussed, then I list the songs and (where known) composers that are presented. I conclude the handout with a list of book, magazine, and website references for further information on the topic. I like to include photographs, if possible, but always get permission for anything under copyright and give credit to the photographer.

Use text boxes (if allowed by those producing the syllabus) to add words of wisdom to the handout. My handout for transferring from paper to electronic record keeping has a multitude of text boxes to remind people of various issues, such as "back up data frequently" and "shop around for the best deal," etc. This element calls attention to things that would be buried if included in the outline or text format.

In this era of "going green," we need to remember that whatever goes on paper to be passed out to the attendees of our programs should have value. Every work, every photo, every element of the handout should have purpose. Purpose may be to draw attention to important items, give added information,

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suggest additional research, etc., but ask yourself "who will care about this?" before adding it to the handout. And *never* just copy your PowerPoint slides as your handout: they are too small to read and use an abundance of paper that will most likely be tossed into recycling (or worse—the garbage heap). Consider the need for a handout during your program: do people have to have something in their hands? (I give one presentation when, because it is interactive, the attendees need to have the information for reference during the program, but all other programs do not have a need for the handout except as reference afterwards.)

Ways to handle a greener handout:

1. Post to your own website for people to pull up (or not) and print only what they wish to use. (Barbara Renick uses this method and it is very successful for her.)

2. E-mail the handout to all who sign up to receive it. This adds a little more responsibility to your own life as you need to follow up immediately in order to maintain your own credibility.

3. Ask the sponsoring society to e-mail the handout to the members either before or after the program. One society I speak for sends the handout to all its members in advance of the program. They are asked, if they so desire, to print it and bring it with them. This works very well for them. (I think they have about a dozen copies available at the meeting, which usually has around 80 in attendance.) Our society e-mails the handout to all the members and the guests who have signed up to receive it when they sign the guest register. I get the handout from the speaker in advance and e-mail it the day after the program.

4. Give the society permission to post the handout on its website (usually for a prescribed period of time, like about a week) after you have presented. Yes, that means that perhaps people who did not attend will end up with a "free" copy, but you have your copyright information on it (right?) and your identification. There's no more or less a chance that someone can lift that information inappropriately than if he/she were to photocopy what was received at a meeting.

Maybe something here will be useful to you as you put together (and revise) your handouts for your future bookings. Just remember the journalism adage: your handouts should say

- WHO prepared and copyrighted the information;
- WHAT was discussed in the presentation;
- WHEN it was prepared (something dated 1980 is less likely to be saved in my file than information from a similar program by the same person in 2008);
- WHERE to reach you; and
- HOW to learn more about the subject (i.e., references).

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