

If YOU give it, they will come – Workshops that Wow!

Valerie Parv and Bronwyn Parry

Whether you're multi published, or the ink is barely dry on your first contract, one thing is almost guaranteed – sooner or later, you will be asked to give a workshop about writing, or be invited to talk about writing at a conference, library or bookshop, and answer questions afterwards. While giving workshops and talks can be daunting, it's a rewarding way to connect with readers and other writers, build recognition for your name and books, plus give you the opportunity to study your own writing techniques as never before.

This session will explore how you can create a workshop that will wow! participants, leave them with a lasting positive impression and, importantly, with learning that they can apply to their own writing practice.

Through interactive strategies, Valerie and Bronwyn will model and explore ways for you, as a workshop leader, to attract and retain participants, present with passion, engage your group in interactive learning, manage time, energy and atmosphere and bring the experience to a lively close. You will also learn how to translate face to face presenting to the online environment.

The passionate presenter

People respond not only to your content, but to your passion for your subject. Seinfeld's theory that most of us would rather be in the box than giving the eulogy at a funeral affects many of us, so how can you make it easy and fun for yourself and the group? One way is to use the 3 Ps of Presenting:

- *Purpose* – focus on key goals. Ideally, participants should take away three things that are meaningful to their needs. Choosing what three elements you want them to take away creates an effective framework for your workshop.
- *Preparation* – use your stated purpose to guide you as to what ground to cover. It's a given that you know your subject, and have researched it thoroughly. Asking questions of participants at the outset can ensure your purpose meets the group's expectations.
- *Passion* – your passion and enthusiasm for the subject will engage participants. Who you are and what you have achieved is part of the reason the group is here. As the heading says – if YOU give it, they will come. Don't be afraid to share yourself and your experiences, good and not so.

Roles of a workshop

Workshops that Wow! operate on many levels. They are designed to share ideas and experiences, clarify writing techniques, stimulate creativity, model new approaches to the writing process, open discussion on aspects of the craft and deal with the many questions arising during the phases of achieving publication. More advanced workshops also take account of career management, marketing, publicity and keeping the muse happy when the well threatens to run dry. If participants know you've been there and suffered the same setbacks and struggles on your way to success, they'll respond to your presentation with enthusiasm and appreciation.

The best handouts you can use

Writers are quick studies. There's nothing more boring than being given the entire workshop in précis and reading it while the presenter gets set up, then having to go through it again step by step. Gaps notes increase the interaction of the audience, even a large audience. We've been using gaps notes for twenty five years and they work like a charm to engage participants in building their knowledge in a form they can refer back to and understand even years later. Participants at this workshop will experience the use of gaps notes and see the benefits for themselves.

Getting more Exercise

Just as getting more exercise in your daily life can be a challenge, so it is with workshops. It's vital to create a "safe" writing environment where participants are willing to take risks, to explore and to learn from the exercises you set. What kind of exercises create this safe environment? How do you make sure everybody feels involved, even the shy and inexperienced participants? During the workshop, we'll explore some of the answers, so you can confidently create your own exercises to illustrate and reinforce your key content and concepts.

Some of the benefits of well-structured exercises include icebreaking – getting participants involved and working as a group; positive involvement – including those shy members who are reluctant to contribute; keep up pace and interest, and boost confidence.

Exercises should:

- use more than one sense to reinforce learning
- be short and interesting
- illustrate or reinforce a point
- encourage participation

Exercises shouldn't:

- put down attendees
- be designed to kill time
- be designed for the presenter to show off
- be unprofessional, threatening or demeaning
- be overly long or complicated – no one can write a novel in ten minutes!

The CSI of presenting

For Workshops that Wow! CSI stands for Concept, Setting and Implementation.

Content needs to be in a form that can be remembered and shared, so we'll discuss the benefit of Memes – ideas and concepts passed from person to person. Memes are like the DNA of information – but way cooler – in that they can multiply many times faster than DNA and are catchy enough to ensure easy recollection.

Setting involves the physical set-up of the workshop, the arrangement of furniture, movement, comfort (heating, cooling, amenities etc), visual and auditory resources and group housekeeping. Setting is key because attendees cannot absorb your message if they are physically uncomfortable, the sessions are too long or short, or they are distracted by equipment hiccups.

Implementation refers to keeping up the pace and energy of the workshop, all dependant on how you present your material. Once you define your Purpose, you can pitch your content effectively, manage time – with material you can add or cut as needed, handle questions effectively, and keep things buzzing from the first moment to the last.

Presenting a workshop involves similar skills to writing. Good content should:

- engage the senses
- appeal to emotions as well as intellect
- show rather than tell

Doing it digitally

Most of the techniques covered in this workshop can be translated to the online environment. Its possible to keep the energy, passion and interaction buzzing across continents and time zones, provided you take account of the special needs of your online participants. You will need to:

- engage the senses using multiple modes such as images, text, sound, vision
- build on the advantages of the online medium, and use both synchronous and asynchronous activities
- create a social presence so online participants get a sense of you and each other
- scale interactive activities to encourage increasing engagement and learning through the course of the online workshop

Handling questions

This can a special challenge for the presenter. While many questions are well meaning and genuinely seeking information or clarification, you will sometimes encounter participants with their own agendas who may, often unknowingly, take the content off track, or hijack the session for their own benefit. Handling these questioners is a skill all it's own and we'll explore the problems and pitfalls during this workshop.

For maximum effectiveness, you should:

- repeat the question to ensure everyone has heard it
- avoid calling for questions right before a break (if you know what's good for you)

In general, it's a bad idea to end your workshop with the traditional "question time" which allows the most vocal attendees to take control while other participants grow restless. Rather than meandering to a close, you want your session to end on a high of your choosing, ensuring you have a Workshop that Wows!

Your presenters

With more than twenty six million of her books sold internationally in as many languages, it's no wonder **VALERIE PARV** is known as Australia's queen of romance, and is a popular media spokesperson for all things romantic. Already with 20 non fiction titles behind her, Valerie made love and romance a career with over 50 novels to her name. A qualified trainer and counselor, Valerie conducts seminars and workshops on creativity and all aspects of the writing craft. In 2007, her best selling guide for writers, **The Art of Romance Writing** was voted the most widely read how to text in a survey of Romance Writers of Australia members.

These days she lives in Australia's capital city of Canberra, where she volunteers as a guide at the National Zoo. Valerie appears at this workshop with the support of the Government of the Australian Capital Territory.

Winner of a 2007 Golden Heart Award, **BRONWYN PARRY** will have her first romantic suspense novel, **As Darkness Falls**, published in September 2008 by Hachette Livre Australia, with a second to follow in 2009.

Bronwyn has more than twenty years' experience in teaching and professional development, including providing consultancy support to university staff designing teaching strategies and interactive online learning programs. An occasional academic herself, she is increasingly teaching in writing and communications programs and workshops, and her PhD research – exploring romance readers' and writers' internet communities – links her professional work with her passion for writing and the romance genre.

Bronwyn lives with her husband and two energetic border collies in the Australian bush about seven hours north of Sydney.