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# 500 tips to 500 wishes: writing a book to support academic library staff



Rachel Bickley  
Graduate trainee,  
Leeds Metropolitan University,  
Headingley Library  
E-mail: rachel\_bickley@yahoo.co.uk

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One of the opportunities I had during my graduate traineeship at Leeds Metropolitan University was to try my hand at project management when, along with the other graduate trainee, I was tasked with some of the planning of a book-writing event. A former library colleague and now Leeds Met lecturer, Carolynn Rankin, had had the idea of updating the 1997 book *500 tips for academic librarians* by Sally Brown, Bill Downey and Phil Race. We led a team of colleagues from the library's professional development group in laying the foundations for this event.

Our first task was to decide what we wanted to include in the book, and what format it should take: did we want to use the same structure as in the original text – lists of tips, arranged in chapters by topic – or did we want to come up with our own design? After much discussion, the group decided that we should move slightly away from the original format, building the content using a mixture of tips and 'scenarios'.

With the nature of the content decided, we needed to get our writers together. We wanted the book to be relevant to all members of library staff, not just the academic librarians, and so we wanted to recruit our writers from all areas of the library. There was a significant amount of interest in this project and a number of staff volunteered to be involved; however, we found that we had some 'gaps' – we were missing writers from certain areas of the library, and so we targeted individuals in these areas. The outcome was a group of fourteen library staff – including two from partner institutions in our regional university network and one who was also a full-time student on the university's MSc information studies – who

would bring their expertise and experience to the project as writers.

With the writers recruited, a vague provisional outline of the book's structure planned and tips coming in from other colleagues via the library's internal weekly bulletin and team meetings, our attention turned to the running of the event itself. The colleague who was co-ordinating the writing planned the details of what would happen over the two days, employing the services of a creative writer, Rommi Smith, to guide the writing process. We sorted out the final practical arrangements – making sure that laptops were booked for the writers, for example – and then it was time for the event itself.

On the first day, Rommi guided the staff through writing exercises designed to get them thinking about their work in a creative way – and in a totally new way for many of the staff involved! They wrote wish-lists, poems, letters and the book-jacket blurb of the story of their working lives, which threw up some amusing and imaginative efforts. They reflected on objects that represented the challenges and achievements in their jobs, and took part in an exercise where they described the 'symptoms' of a problem at work and then wrote 'prescriptions' for each other. They were encouraged to share their attempts with each other and submit anything that they thought could be useful to the book. Rommi wanted to re-awaken their sense of play as well as creativity, and everyone seemed to have fun with the writing exercises.

On the second day, the hard work began. The writers were split into groups to work on building up the raw material for the book. The groups were tasked with writing scenarios and tips for their particular areas within the library, with a 'runner' assigned to each group to collect and type up everything that was written and keep everything going smoothly. To end the event, Rommi returned for some closing writing exercises to reflect on the days.

At the end of the two days, we were left with a large pile of flip-chart paper, print-outs and USB sticks, which were the makings of our book.

A short while later, the editing process began. The first stage was to transcribe all of the material collected and to ensure that we had electronic copies of all contributions, but also to scan all of the hand-written work, so that some material can be placed in the book in its original appearance.

The next stage will be putting the book together, which will be overseen by Carolyn and Rommi, both of whom will write introductions and linking paragraphs to bring the staff's contributions together. What came out of the event itself has changed the direction of the book; it was originally planned to be a collection of hints and tips for academic library staff, but the success of the writing exercises and the creative material that came out of them has transformed the theme of the book into one of an instructional text on how library staff can use creative exercises to think about their jobs, build up team-working skills and solve problems within their work.

The atmosphere over the two days of writing was enthusiastic and positive, and everyone seemed to have enjoyed their part in the event. Many of the participants were eager to be involved in the editing process, transcribing sections of material. It is hoped that the book will be published in spring 2010. I and many of my colleagues are excited to see what the final outcome will be. Being involved in planning and attending this event was a fantastic opportunity, from which I have gained valuable experience, and it was one of the most memorable points of my graduate traineeship at Leeds Met.