I originally designed this group workshop as part of the Mayfest 2010 professional development programme. Hopefully some of these tips and exercises are still relevant and useful.

Tanuja Amarasuriya, Theatre Bristol, 2018

So tell me about your work…

Unless we're happy just to make work only for ourselves, we all have to articulate what we do on a regular basis – whether that be in proposals to commissioners, funding applications, conversations with other artists, in marketing copy and so on. So how do we reconcile the need to often be very reductive about the work we make (50 words of copy!) without misrepresenting it?

Describing your work can be really hard; but unless you're lucky enough to have a massive ever-ready fanbase, it's something we all need to do. Keep practising, and honing, and test stuff out with friendly people whenever you can.

What sort of language/tone/images should I use?

Firstly, it's your work, and you need to be happy with the way you're representing it. There's no right or wrong language. There are no scientific rules about whether this sort of image works better across the board than that sort of image.

Think about what works for you, and crib from that.

- What sort of language/image/tone makes you want to go and see a show?
- Do you like it when artists say who they're work has been influenced by or does that annoy you?
- Does describing a show as being about "love, loss and [insert third word]" make you want to see it or just groan and roll your eyes?
- Do you prefer graphic designs or direct production shots?
- Does knowing the creative team and cast influence whether you want to see something?
- Flick through a venue programme and notice what jumps out at you – what sort of images make you stop and look? What sort of language intrigues you?

Look at examples that work for you – artists you admire, shows you love – and analyse what works for you in the language and publicity around that work.

It's also incredibly useful to identify what *doesn't* work for you.

Of course people don't tend to publish funding applications, but increasingly, artists and others are writing about creative processes and work in development. Check out blogs, videos and podcasts by people you rate, and take note of what sort of things work for you, in terms of how they talk about their practice.

Some thoughts on marketing copy

By its nature, publicity copy is reductive. It has to communicate fast to be properly effective. Luckily you can usually combine with images, which will do most of the hooking in.

A lot of the time we'll read copy very superficially – but most people will only give the copy one chance, so it has to be right. It's really about making it stand out from the stuff around it.

As an exercise, flick through a venue brochure and see what stands out to you. What makes it stand out?

Do I actually understand what my work is and how to describe it?

OK, this might sound straightforward but it's really not – especially if you're in the early stages of a project or research. It might be that you're working things out as you're doing it and the idea remains quite nebulous for a long time.

Sometimes the clearest description of what your work is at that moment, is that it's not yet fully formed. Sometimes it's better to be clear about what you don't yet know, than to fudge it.

Talking about work in development

Funding applications, sponsorship requests, partnership proposals etc almost always have to happen whilst projects are still in development.

Marketing deadlines seem to come early at the best of times, so if you're still in the process of making the work, they're especially annoying. The same principles apply as writing any copy. It still has to draw people in, even if you don't yet know exactly how the piece will turn out.

Think about what you *do* know. For example: what is it that interested you in making the piece? Are there core themes in the work that chime with funders' agendas? Do you know who the creative team is? Can you say who or what your project is inspired or influenced by?

Who am I talking to?

It doesn't matter how established an artist is, no-one is immune from writing really unclear information about their work. More often than not, it's got nothing to do with phrasing or grammar – it's just that it doesn't tell me what I need to know. And of course, what I need to know depends on who I am (whether I'm a promoter, a funder, a punter looking for a show to see, another artist at a professional development event etc).

Before you say anything, it's worth asking:

- **Who am I speaking to?** Is it The Arts Council? Or anyone who might happen to pick up a venue brochure? Or a journalist who might review my work?

- **What do I need to achieve with this particular bit of articulation?** Am I trying to get people to come and see a show? Or to get a gig at a venue? Or to interest another artist in being an outside-eye on my process?

- **What does the person you're talking to need to know?** Information about content? Info about why it meets their funding agenda? Ticket booking info?

- **How is this information reaching people?** Is it via a formal application process? Is it via twitter?

- **Can I use words, sounds, images?** What is the most effective way I can get the information across?

General tips

- **Don't assume I know anything** – tell me what I need to know

- **Don't assume I'm already interested** – tell me why I should be interested

- **Use strong images** - and be wary of using weak ones

- **Be plain speaking** - avoid jargon

- **Jargon is everywhere** - people have different understandings of what might seem like even the most basic terms e.g. "theatre", "immersive", "interactive"

- **Don't dumb it down** - the copy doesn't have to appeal to everyone. Give clear info about the piece and let the audience make an informed decision about whether they want to see it or not

- **Be confident** – don't be apologetic about your work. If it doesn't sound like *you* believe in your work, who else is going to?

- **Objective/third person descriptions are useful** - so invite people to respond to your work. If people give you good quotes, ask them if you can quote them publicly. But beware of using hyperbole - people will not trust it from unknown sources.

Exercises

These are prompts to practice talking about your work in different ways. Try and keep your responses brief (2 – 5 sentences). Do as few or as many as are useful.

1. **Tell me about your practice.**

2. **I'm an artist who is showing work in the same programme as you. Tell me about how you make work.**

3. **I'm an artist who is showing work in the same programme as you. Tell me why I should see your show.**

4. **I'm a friend of a friend that you've just met down the pub and I'm not really an arty type. Try and interest me in your current project.**

5. **I'm at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Tell me why I should see your show rather than any of the zillion other shows I could see instead.**

6. **Tell me why I should fund your work**

7. **Tell me about how your practice is similar to another artist's practice and tell me about where it is different.**

8. **Tell me about an artist whose work you don't like and tell me why you're work is different.**

9. **I'm a journalist for a local paper. Tell me why I should write a feature on your current project.**

10. **What is the SINGLE most distinctive/identifiable thing about your practice?**

You can do these exercises by yourself, but they're even more useful if you can also test your statements with other people, so you can learn what others are actually understanding from the words you use.

The best way to do this is, is to work in groups of 3 or 4 so you can get more than one perspective on your statements. With each exercise, someone needs to respond to the prompt and the others in the group need to say back to them what they understood that statement to mean.

For example in response to the question 'tell me about your practice', I might say: "I'm an interdisciplinary artist'. If I then ask the group what they understand from that, one person might say: 'That means you work with digital technology' (which may be wrong, or incomplete, because perhaps I want people to understand from that statement that I work with painting and choreography). Or someone might say 'I don't know what interdisciplinary means'.

If the group doesn't understand what you want them understand, work with each other to make your statements clearer. Try and notice what works well for you and for other people.