

How to Write Effectively for Magazines

By Gloria Hildebrandt

Freelance magazine and newspaper writers quickly learn that the fees paid for most articles are too low for the time required to produce them. Most of us are appalled when we calculate our hourly income for the work. If we have to spend more time doing a rewrite, that amount drops even further. One way to improve our hourly rate without giving up magazines and papers, is to avoid rewrites. You can do this by aiming to write a publishable first draft. To do that, it helps to **think like an editor**.

A good editor provides details of the story angle upon assigning the story. These are the editor's expectations, and meeting them in your article is important. If the editor wants changes, or your research and interviews indicate a different angle, discussing this early prevents grief later.

Making these preparations means working well ahead of deadline. Starting the week before deadline is a bad idea. If interview subjects are not available or you run into trouble with the angle and have to tell the editor, she will have no confidence that you'll be able to produce a good article on time. Finding out bad news is always better sooner than later, by which time things might be even worse.

Thinking like an editor applies right from the research and interview stage. Try to go after the meaty stuff that you think will interest the reader. If you have questions about something, get the answers right away, at the risk of appearing stupid to your interview subjects. It's time-consuming and difficult to go back later for the information. It's unlikely that you will be able to slide over the stuff that begs a question or further explanation. Provide the material in your draft at the point where it's needed.

When you're ready to write, realize that the first draft your editor receives should not be your own first draft. You may have to revise your draft a few times before it has a chance of being acceptable for publication. Be as ruthless as you can with your own work, and practise evaluating it from an emotional distance. If you secretly know you're trying to slip something past the editor, stop and clarify that point. This is certain to be the spot that needs reworking later.

Make sure you have an attention-getting lead. No matter how dry the topic, editors seem to love anecdotal leads, ones that tell a story about real people. They work. They draw readers in. If your article doesn't do that, you're in trouble.

Write short. Even though the word count may seem a lot to fill when you start, if you write succinctly, you'll have room to provide all the information that your readers will need. No matter the word count, I've always found that I had more material than I could include.

Have a detailed outline. This means that you cannot freestyle or go with the flow. Putting careful thought into a good outline lets you write first drafts that earn the most money in the least amount of time. Such an outline prioritizes the most important elements and provides secondary ones that you can expand if you find you're coming in too short. If you organize your outline into sections, you can even get a sense of how many words each section deserves, and aim to meet those estimates. Of course you need to be flexible when you draft, because some elements may end up needing more space to be treated fully.

Keep track of your word count as you draft. Writing way over length is a waste of

time as you have to go back and cut it. With experience, you may develop a sense of how much information goes into a 1,000-word article, a 2,000-word feature, and just how tight you have to write for 500 words. I now am usually able to check my word count as I approach the end of my draft, and find that I have come in right on the nose.

Writing effectively for magazines and papers, therefore, involves thinking like an editor, being well prepared, capturing a reader's interest, providing all the necessary information, and keeping to the word count. Simple, basic stuff. The trick is doing it consistently.