

## **CRAFTING A TIGHT, WELL WRITTEN ARTICLE THAT SELLS**

Despite the many cutbacks and even closings of periodicals over the last few months, the magazine and newspaper markets are still prime territory for freelancers. Non-staff assignments have declined and fees have dipped. However, there still remains a large market for well designed and well written articles.

Because of the ever-growing number of layoffs, freelancers are facing far stiffer competition for space in the ever-shrinking editorial wells and news holes. You know that the quantity of editorial material is determined by the amount of advertising a periodical can sell for each edition. It is a tighter market than it has ever been in my professional lifetime. But the reality remains that hundreds upon hundreds of articles are printed in dailies, weeklies and monthlies. To crack that tight market, you must hone your ability as both a researcher and a writer.

### **What to Write About?**

As I stated in a previous column, the number one question we writers receive when we are approached by a wanna-be author is “What can I write about?” It is probably the easiest to answer. As indicated in that earlier column, the answer is simply ” Everything.”

Obviously, at different times, different topics take the limelight. Newspapers, of course, and magazines as well are particularly responsive to what’s happening at any given time. Therefore it is prudent for a freelancer to stay abreast of events and trends. Please don’t interpret that to mean that you should write only about current happenings. However, you should remain aware of them because it is far easier to place an article when it is hooked to a current event.

Whatever the topic you select, search for a unique approach. Every subject has them. For example, a doctor can describe a brand new surgical technology. A lover of the outdoors might write about using a new piece of equipment or using an old one in a new way. A plumber can write about a designer toilet bowl that’s exceptionally easy to install, just as a surfer can talk about new designs in surfboards, the ideal beach front or how to safely handle undertows or other challenging currents.

### **Crafting Your Article**

Most of the elements of a nonfiction book that we discussed in earlier columns are highly applicable to crafting an outstanding article. You begin by shaping the basic structure of the article you want to write, as well as the angle from which you plan to approach it. That's particularly important because as I have frequently stated, there are no new topics to write about. The challenge is to devise a new angle, a new hook as we call it, to make your article unique.

You must give some thought to the pacing of your piece and its tone. By pacing I refer to the way you introduce each new element that you want to discuss in a sequence that will not confuse the reader. Think of it as an expanding flower blossom. The petals are closed at the start, so your opening sets the framework for this forthcoming glorious blossom. With each level of additional knowledge you give your reader, the blossom will open wider and wider.

The tone of the article, of course, means that you write in a style that is appropriate for the subject you are covering. If you write about a light or frivolous subject, humor is fine. In fact, it may be very suitable to many subjects you write about if used sparingly. But if your subject is serious and/or academic, the reader won't be comfortable with your humor, no matter how clever it might be.

Before you ever sit down to write, create an outline. This can be formal, similar to the ones your grade school teacher taught you to do. Or you may want to outline in narrative form. Whatever is most comfortable for you is the way to approach this as long as you create a framework within you can express all that you want to say.

Now that you have determined the hook and have created the basic design of the book, you will be able to determine what areas of your article need additional bolstering. As discussed in previous columns, your choice may be the Internet or if you're having some difficulty locating exactly what you need, try the reference room of your library. The librarians there are highly trained to help you find precisely what you need for the story.

Since you now know what the article will contain, it is time to select your targets and determine whether the angle you are using will be of interest to the readers of that publication.

Back in the April 22nd column, we looked at several excellent directories of publications to which you might submit. These directories are of great value to a freelancer.

### **Sitting Down to Write**

Writers vary widely in the manner in which they approach this task. Most start by crafting a punchy and exciting opening. That, along with the title you pick, must give the reader a real sense of what the piece is all about. The title must stop the reader in his/her tracks when perusing the publication. Even if you're not completely satisfied with the title or the opening, keep on writing. You can always go back and redo them. Writers often end up returning to the opening and polishing it.

If you ever find yourself stuck at the beginning, unable to create a powerful opener, don't just stop and put things off for another day. Be aware that Writer's Block, that imagined phantom that haunts so many authors, most often occurs at the beginning of an article. Don't fight it. The very best remedy is to take what you think is the most impressive fact you learned from your research and summarize it here. It probably won't remain permanently as your opening, but it will get you started and the words will begin to flow.

The middle narrative of the article builds on the opening. While it is probably the easiest portion of the article to write, you still must maintain the reader's interest. So present your facts logically, each building on the previous one. By introducing quotes from experts in the field, you can break up the narrative and make it more interesting. The description you include, whether of people or places, must add to the reader's understanding of the story. Be certain to show, not tell as you describe. That's a lesson you learned when we discussed the novel, and it is completely applicable to nonfiction as well.

The task of your wrap-up at the end of the article is to leave the reader satisfied that he/she gained something from reading the piece. There are varying techniques for creating a strong closing. At times it makes sense to paraphrase the lead, essentially bringing the reader full circle. You may prefer to use the wrap-up as a quick summary of the piece. At times a quotation or an illustrative anecdote is the strongest way to end. Only you, the author, can make the choice of which one.

