

The Brew-Writer's Primer

By Ron Wanttaja

Anybody who reads for enjoyment has probably thought about doing some writing themselves. But for many, the prospect of having to face the unknown world of publishing is daunting. Nobody enjoys looking like a rank amateur.

How should the article be laid out? What about illustrations? How long should it be? Will they rip me off by printing the article without paying me? How can I maximize my chances of having my article accepted?

I get asked this kind of stuff fairly often. This posting is an attempt to answer the most common questions, to help the neophyte writer. Following my suggestions won't guarantee an acceptance by the magazine of your choice, but I think it'll increase your odds.

How Publishing Works

Every month, a magazine's editor-in-chief is faced with filling dozens or hundreds of pages full of material. A good bit of space has been allocated to the advertising department. Another batch of space goes to the monthly columns. More space goes to regular features such as news summaries and cartoons.

Eventually, though, the editor has to find "N" pages of content. He or she has a number of possible sources. They could write the articles themselves. They may task their staff writers. They may ask a favorite freelance writer to write an article about a certain topic. They may grab a folder containing general-interest articles previously submitted by their favorite freelancers.

Or, they may drop their hand into the "Slush Pile" and check out the unsolicited manuscripts hopeful writers have sent them.

You can't control when the editor pulls your submission out of the slush pile. What you can do is maximize the chances that he or she will decide to use your article, rather than dumping the piece in the trash.

You have to realize what the editor needs: He or she needs to fill the magazine before the deadline. They could do it themselves...but they have plenty to do already. They want material that takes minimal additional work on their part. That's why they prefer to rely on staff writers or freelancers that they are familiar with.

Your job is to provide an article that requires minimal additional work on behalf of the editor. You want the article to be on the topics the magazine likes to cover. You want the article to be the length the editor wants to see. You want the grammar and spelling to be correct. And you want to provide the pictures/illustrations and captions.

The editor is not your mother. Nor is he your high-school English teacher. Some people seem to think the editor will somehow recognize their great talent and spend the hours to polish a "diamond in the rough."

It probably has happened. Odds are, though, it won't happen to you. Misspell a batch of words in a vague, unfocused opening paragraph, and the editor will probably just toss your work in the trash and go on to the next submission.

So: Let's see how to avoid that.

Manuscript Mechanics

The first thing you'd like the editor to see when he opens the envelope or double-clicks the attachment is a manuscript laid out in the format used by most professional writers. Sure, you might be a newbie. But don't let the very look of your submission scream it in the editor's face.

On the upper left side of the first page, put your name, address, and phone number. In the center of the first page, about halfway down, put the title of your article. I use all caps to make it stand out.

Titles are important. Providing a good title means the editor doesn't have to try come up with one. You'd like something fairly short, somewhat descriptive of the subject of the article, and alluring enough to make someone paging through the magazine want to read more. "Adding the Foam" is a good utilitarian title, for instance. Nothing really wrong with it. But a title like "The Crowning Touch" raises curiosity, and hopefully hooks the reader.

Skip another line under the title, then put your byline centered on the page. "Byline"? It's just a line saying "By Joe Smith" or whatever your name is.

Then skip another line or two and start the article. Indent each paragraph, and don't put an extra line between the paragraphs. Use subheadings if you desire. At the end of the article, skip a couple a lines, and center "THE END" on the page...that's so the editor knows the article is indeed over, in case they are worried about missing pages.

If you're submitting the article in hard copy or as a word-processor file attachment, double-space the entire body of the article. Put a header at the top of each page with the title and your name (The Crowning Touch/Smith). If you submit as ordinary text on a regular email, don't insert any manual page breaks or headers, or add carriage returns to simulate double-spacing.

And for Vishnu's sake, don't use novelty fonts (12-point Courier or Times is fine), color effects, or HTML tricks like flashing text. Don't imbed pictures or artwork; include a little note at the appropriate spot to indicate where the illustration should go. Justify both margins if you really feel it's necessary, but no one is going to object to ragged right margins.

Some new writers think they should format their article exactly like it would appear in a magazine...two columns, rather small font, pictures imbedded. Don't. The editor wouldn't have his or her job if they weren't able to mentally picture how the article would appear in print. The standard manuscript format makes it easy to read and to make notes in the margins, if needed.

Article Organization

Most articles work best when organized in a simple, straightforward way. "How to" articles aimed at newcomers are even easier. Explain the problem, discuss what approaches you could have used and why you picked the one you did, then go through the planning, preparation, execution, and finishing stages.

Should you do an outline of the article, first? It's not vital, but they can be very useful in preventing your article from wandering off the main topic. If a particular aspect of the project seems to be taking a disproportionate portion of the outline, maybe it's time to consider splitting it off as a separate topic.

I outlined all my articles when I started writing, then cut back on the outlining as I gained experience. But fifteen years after my first sale, I still outline some articles.

While how-to articles lend themselves naturally to a linear layout, you don't have to be wedded to it. For instance, you could write a how-to article backwards...start with a tower of amber with a heavenly head, then back up through every step until you end with the raw materials prior to starting.

The big thing to worry about is the danger of making the article look "gimmicky." I might take the risk when an editor I've worked with before...but I'd play it safe, with a new guy.

The Lead's the Thing

The most critical...and the most difficult-to-write... part of an article is the beginning, or "lead." You want the lead to be so interesting that people will keep reading, whether they think they'll ever use the information or not.

The lead has other functions. It informs the reader, in more detail, what topics will be covered. It sets the "tone" of the article...serious, bantering, or outright humorous.

For a new writer, the lead has a few more major functions. It's the editor's introduction to your ability to write. Start your article with misspelled words or improper grammar, and the editor may not even bother reading the rest of the piece. Add an erroneous apostrophe in the body of the article or misspell "beer" in the closing if you must, but make sure the technical aspects of the lead paragraphs are perfect.

All right...what should the lead contain? There are dozens of basic approaches, but for me, the best ones contain a question, a claim, or a challenge. Let's take that beer-brewing article and look at some lead sentences that use these techniques.

Question: "When you spend weeks getting the brew right, do you want to risk it on faulty filtration? The taste may be blue-ribbon, but if there's flecks of 'stuff' floating in the brew, no one will notice anything else."

Claim: "Home-brewing a great ale isn't easy, but it's something well within the capability of most folks. With a few basic tools and some know-how, you can produce an award-winning beer without breaking out a sweat."

Challenge: "You can spend \$500 on a commercial filtration system. Or you can shell out less than \$20 (and a little work) and get the same quality results."

How long should the lead be? Generally, you're trying to hook the reader and provide a bit of background on what the article is about. Typically, my leads are around three to five fairly short paragraphs.

Leads are the hardest thing to write. After fifteen years or so behind the keyboard, I still sometimes take the coward's way out: I start an article with the *fifth* paragraph, instead of the first.

Say what?

It's fairly simple. If I can't seem to get a good lead going, I just start writing as if the lead is already in place. For instance, if I were doing the filtration article, I might just start writing, "You can find many different units at local brewer suppliers...."

After that start, I'll finish the entire article, THEN go back and add a good lead. By this point, I have a better mental handle on what the story is covering, so I can go

back and generate a good question, claim, or challenge that ties in smoothly with the rest of the article.

Endings

Personally, I like to end articles with a little wrap-up section. You don't have to write much; it doesn't have to be as complex as the Lead. But I think most readers like to have a little "cool down" that summarizes the major points of the article.

One hint: I really like to make my endings tie into the Lead to some extent...and to echo the title. For instance, if I used that title "The Crowning Touch," I might end the article like..."It's hard work, but not something outside the capabilities of a typical home brewer. A bright, tall head is the crowning touch for a blue-ribbon beer."

Overall Length

How long should the article be? It depends on the subject and the publication. Your best bet is to query the editor...send him or her email and ask their preferred article length. If you just want to start writing, I'd shoot for a length of about seven hundred words. That's a medium-length article.

Writing Style

The style you use really depends on what kind of publication you're submitting to. Just about all magazines aimed at the average Joe use an ordinary conversational style.

In other words, write like you talk. Don't try to get all formal, unless that's the way you converse with people. If you force a more-formal style that you're used to speaking, it'll not only sound stilted to you, but probably to anyone who reads it, too.

Don't think you have to use eight-dollar words to sound "professional." Use the simplest phrasing that gets the point across.

Writing Advice

It's too late for me to teach you composition techniques. But I can give you a few bits of advice that should improve your articles.

- Vary your sentence length. Having most of the sentences the same length is a bit monotonous--mix 'em up a bit.
- Use long sentences for description, and short sentences for emphasis.
- Vary the length, but sentences should be no more than twenty words long. Yes, twenty. Exceed it on rare occasions, but too many long sentences sound rambling and can be boring.
- On the same note, vary your paragraph lengths. Again, try to stay away from overly-long paragraphs. Split them into several. A single big paragraph forms a block of text, which some readers may just skim.
- Use punctuation properly...and wisely. Commas and apostrophes are usually the worst offenders. Understand the use of "its" vs. "it's"; it's a pet peeve with many professionals. "It's" is **always** a contraction of "it is." **Never** use it as a possessive...that's what "its" is for. Yes, it contradicts the normal way of

showing possession ("Joe's refrigerator"), but it's just proving that it's its own boss.

- As far as commas are concerned, people use them either too much or too little. Remember, commas indicate where we might use a slight pause in speaking. If in doubt, say the sentence aloud. If you add a pause, add a comma. Too many, though, and the sentence, while grammatically correct, gets a staccato feel, as well as being irritating to read. See? If you've got more than two or three commas in your sentence, it's probably a good candidate for splitting into separate sentences.
- Watch your adjectives. "Very" is a weak one...how much colder is "very cold"? A more precise description will make a stronger article. "Unique" is another pet peeve among some professionals. "Unique" means "one of a kind." Concepts like "Somewhat one-of-a-kind" or "very one-of-a-kind" are silly, but it doesn't stop some writers from using phrases like "somewhat unique" or "very unique."
- Use synonyms and euphemisms to keep from overusing words involved in the subject of your article. For instance, don't use the word "coffee" in every sentence. Use "brew," use "it," use "Joe," use "java," or even "Juan Valdez's finest." It just gets a bit boring to see the word "coffee" repeated over and over.
- Jokes and humor are fine, but don't go overboard. You won't sell a brewing article just because there are some touches of humor in it, but an editor might not buy it if the humor is heavy or forced.

Editing

Your job doesn't end when you type in "THE END" ...the most labor-intensive part of just beginning. Good articles aren't written, they're re-written. Go through it again and again. Correct any awkward wording or bad punctuation.

Work hard on shortening the article. Not because of the editor's length limitation. But if you can shorten a sentence and still keep the same meaning, that means the words that were cut were just "filler"—they were just unnecessary fat.

How much should you edit? I take at least three passes through the article. I also prefer, if time permits, to wait a few days before the last pass so I can look at the article with a fresher outlook. Do at least one pass reading the article aloud. If it's awkward to read, reword it to make it smoother.

When I'm hitting a new editor, I make one more editing pass, but on a printed copy of the manuscript rather than on the monitor. The different presentation gives you a better outlook. Besides, you can concentrate on finding problems rather than getting distracted trying to rewrite as you come across them.

When I'm hitting a new editor, I take one additional precaution: I get someone else to read the piece and edit it.

Who? You'd really want another writer, or at least someone who reads a lot. Someone not familiar with the writing process might not be able to specifically identify the aspects that bother them. Still, ANY outside editing is better than none.

One fairly hard-and-fast rule: Avoid anyone who might normally refer to you as "Dear." You need critical comment, not a supportive spouse or your mom. I admit, my

wife sometimes edits my stuff. But she's a full-time author, and we both know the importance of a thorough edit. She happily bleeds all over my writing, and I happily bleed all over hers.

Spell Checkers are the Devil's Spawn

Spell checkers make you lazy. Don't rely on them.

Why? Because spell checkers don't catch homonyms (words that have different meanings but sound the same) or the outright use of the wrong word. Doing your spell checking by hand forces you to read the article, and gives you a chance to detect these mistakes. If you use the word "their" when you meant "there", the editors will notice. And that'll be a big black mark against you.

I write with a paperback dictionary by my side, and probably refer to it twice while writing each article. Use the spell checker for the last-ditch check prior to sending the article to the editor.

Illustrations

If you can supply your own pictures and illustrations for the article, that's a big plus, from the Editor's point of view. Sometimes they'll have "stock" photos they can use, but if you can provide good quality artwork that's go a long way to selling your article.

Digital photos are standard nowadays, but they must be high resolution. Don't send in a cell-phone photo. Most editors want the photo to be at least 300 dpi (dots per inch) at the size the illustration is expected to be printed.

All illustrations must have a caption—again, you want to keep from making the editor have to write one. The captions must be referenced to each picture. I usually include a separate file with thumbnails of the photos accompanied by the caption.

Submission

In the old days, authors would write letters to an editor, asking if they'd be interested in an article. Nowadays, you can phone or email. Don't spend a lot of their time... just say, "I've got an article on home-brewing on a budget...would you be interested in it?" If you call, the editor will ask your qualifications and what of illustrations you might use. If you email, include this information in the email. Include any writing credits you might have, but only those involving commercial or professional publications. The editor won't care that you've been published on a web page or local newsletter.

If you're lucky, the editor will say they're willing to look at it "On spec." "On spec" means "on speculation"—it's not an agreement to print the article, it just means they're willing to read it to decide whether they want it. Ask how long they want it, and what format they want the pictures, and you're in business.

Generally, you'll probably be able to submit the article itself in an email. Count on mailing the photos, though.

The Financial Side

Some magazines pay for articles, others don't. The larger, national ones invariably will, but smaller, local ones just may have a small honorarium or give you a

few extra copies. I write for publications that pay pretty well, but I also have articles printed in magazines that don't pay. I like helping the little companies, and in any case, still get a kick out of seeing my work in print.

The paying markets generally pay "on publication." That means that you won't see the check until the issue of the magazine that contains it is published. Magazines work many months ahead...in some cases, issues have "themes" and if your submission doesn't match the theme, it'll have to wait. The delay can be a year or more. The editor should be able to tell you at the time he or she accepts the article.

If you get lucky, the publication pays "on acceptance." That means that the magazine will process your check as soon as the editor accepts your article.

Copyright

Copyrights for writing are simple. Whatever you write is yours. You hold the rights to it...it is automatically copyrighted. You don't have to register it in Washington or anything.

To formally establish the copyright, you merely have to include a copyright notice with the article. The copyright notice consists of the year, the word "copyright" (or the C-in-the-circle logo), and your legal name:

Copyright 2002 Ronald J. Wanttaja

That's really all you need. I usually include that notice on the top right side of the first page of my articles (opposite the name block).

A copyright is not a patent. It merely indicates that you wish to retain the publications rights of the work in hand. Some sources tell you not to include the copyright notice when submitting an article to a commercial publication. Since you get the protection anyway, they say including the copyright notice brands you as a novice to the writing trade.

It makes sense to me. But I still include the notice, anyway.

To print your copyrighted article, the magazine actually buys the "Rights." There are three basic kinds of Rights.

"All Rights": The magazine now owns the article, and can use it wherever they wish, such as in a book or on a web page. You cannot subsequently sell the article anywhere else.

"First Time Rights" or "First Serial Rights": The magazine gets the first opportunity to print the article, after which the rights revert back to you.

"One Time Reprint Rights": The magazine gets to print the article, but doesn't care about being the first one to do so. Generally, this is the type of rights you sell when the article had first appeared in another publication.

I usually include the rights I'm selling under the copyright notice. So the top of my first page looks something like this:

Ron Wanttaja
12292 SE 278th St

Copyright 2002 Ronald Wanttaja
First Serial Rights

Keep in mind that income from the writing (if any) is taxable. The editor may need your Social Security Number if he or she uses your article.

On the same note, your writing expenses are tax-deductible. Consult an accountant.

Will the Editor Steal My Article?

That's a fear some new writers sometime express. If you just send the article in, what keeps the editor from stealing it and printing it without paying for it or printing it under their own name?

Your basic protection is two-fold. First, check around with other writers. If there's a publication that shafts its writers, the word gets around.

Second, if you can't get a feel for the honesty of the magazine, don't send them a second article until they've printed the first. Yes, it may take a while, but you can submit another article to another publication in the meantime.

Generally, though, you don't have much to worry about. Editors continually need good material, and aren't likely to strangle the gold-egg-laying goose. The more good writers they shaft, the fewer good articles come their way. Remember, they need material for every new edition of the magazine. They'd rather have a happy writer supplying good material every month than having to repeat the search process every month.

Wrapping Up

Let me wrap up this tome with a bit of a summary:

1. The more publication-ready your article is, the less work is required from the editor and the more likely the editor will buy it
2. First impressions are important. Set up your article professionally, write a Lead with a "hook," and make sure the grammar, spelling, and punctuation are spot-on.
3. After the article is written, polish, polish, polish. Take at least three editing passes, with the last one happening on a separate day than the others. Find someone knowledgeable on writing to edit your article.
4. Query the editor by phone or email prior to submitting the article. Get any unusual requirements from them.

The final suggestion: Do NOT give up. You may not sell the first article; you may not sell the second. But you won't sell any if you don't keep writing, and it won't be anything more than a hobby if you don't submit the articles for publication.

It's hard work...but it's rewarding, in more than just the financial sense.

Good luck!

THE END