

## Writing with Style and Substance:

# IDEAMATTERS

**T**here are several types of articles commonly written for today's magazines, including the how-to, narrative, interview, survey and review formats. Any or all of these can involve research, personal anecdotes, individual interviews and/or survey responses.

Once you and your editor have agreed upon the topic and format, establishing your methods of research should be a fairly straightforward matter. You will know you have conducted enough research when you feel you have come full circle in your understanding of your topic.

Now, you are ready to begin writing.

### GETTING STARTED

Begin writing your article, knowing that perfection will come only in the editing process. The important thing is to get started, not how polished or complete the draft is. It may help to begin with the deliberate intention of later deleting your first paragraph or two. Many times your initial second sentence or paragraph will become the article's opening. At this stage, don't over think your subject, your words or your approach. Trust your initial instincts.

**Tip: choose an approach, or angle, to your subject and stick to it. For example, if you choose to open your article with a story introducing a dilemma, assist your reader by periodically referring to the story as you explore new aspects of your example or offer solutions. This will help unify your article and give it clearer focus while revealing various facets of your story.**

Tackle one aspect of your topic at a time, making the paragraph your basic unit of composition. Once you've done enough interviews or research and have begun writing, your article's organization should become apparent.

**Tip: If you let your own path of understanding guide you, your material will begin to structure itself. The important thing is to thoroughly read through your notes before you sit down to write the piece. It may be helpful to jot down the order in which you will introduce each of your sources. Often, this step alone will be enough to get the words flowing and establish your approach. It may be helpful to think of your article as a story you are recounting for your reader.**

### EDITING AND RE-WRITING

After you have written the first draft of your article, run spell-check and print out a copy. Then do something else for several hours, or several days, if possible. Take a bath, walk the dog, go for a jog or simply run errands. Giving the article a rest will allow your mind time to focus on other things, providing a fresh perspective to your words when you revisit them.

When you come back to the article, what may have seemed horribly written and disorganized will most likely appear to be a much better start. Address problems with transition, order and flow first, then tackle any awkward phrasing, loose sentence structure and overly long paragraphs. A paragraph is generally too long when it conveys more than one specific idea. Longer paragraphs are fine, and even necessary in many cases, but realize that most people turn away from articles with extremely long paragraphs. Long paragraphs tend to make an article appear hard to read, regardless of content.

**Tip: For sound advice on composing, editing and re-writing, refer to *The Elements of Style, fourth edition*, by William Strunk Jr., E.B. White and Roger Angell, or to William Zinsser's *On Writing Well, 25th Anniversary: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*.**

### ENDING YOUR ARTICLE

There are as many ways to end an article as there are subjects. However, if you have successfully maintained and refined your focus throughout the editing and re-writing process, then one or two possible endings should flow naturally from the material. Keep in mind that an article should end with the reader feeling they have fully explored the article's topic. In popular jargon, they will feel a sense of closure.

**Tip: If you have made references throughout your article to your opening situation or story, then a logical conclusion will end with this situation or story. This does not mean your article must solve the issue involved; rather, it should be apparent that a well-rounded discussion has taken place. An unresolved ending is very often the reality.**

**Tip: In wording your closing, remember to keep it simple, succinct and authentic. If the phrase "in conclusion" or "in summary" creeps into your closing, go ahead and finish writing the paragraph. Then immediately strike it out—it should be completely unessential. If needed, re-word your closing.**

### WORKING WITH YOUR EDITOR

At this point, your manuscript should be ready for submission to your editor. After your editor has reviewed it, they will probably provide you feedback, suggestions for re-working various parts, and, most likely, constructive criticism. Try to accept their comments objectively, keeping in mind their suggestions stem from a desire to help you produce the best article possible. View your editor as a partner, not an obstacle.

Realize, as well, that every publication has a specific focus or mission, and your editor is the one charged with maintaining editorial integrity. Sometimes even the most perfect of articles needs re-working to fit with the format of the publication. Knowing this should help you maintain objectivity concerning the quality of your work. It is also a good idea to bear this in mind when considering future article topics and approaches. You *should* want your work to be original, but remember that its style, subject and approach also need to be a good *match* for the target publication.