

Putting the 'Art' in Article: Writing Techniques for an Engaging Story

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Being clear, concise and organized in an email is important, but articles carry a higher standard.

Whether it is an informational report or a feature story about human experience, it requires writing techniques that will engage a reader and keep him or her on the page.

A recitation of facts that reads like a police report or a meeting summary is boring, and so is a feature article that lacks an interesting person and doesn't have any action, theme or visual elements. Here are a few key tips to creating good stories:

Know where you are going

It starts with finding your focus. If you don't know what you're trying to say, then everything seems important and you will include information that doesn't belong in the piece.

An article should say one thing; it should have one overarching point. You might have a lot to say about that one point, but all the details should be related to the theme.

Write a one-sentence statement that captures the meaning — the main point you want to make about this topic or person. Then be sure that every detail in your article relates to that point or theme. Finding your focus helps you to limit what you put in.

Utilize your interviewing skills

At the heart of good writing is solid information, which you can only gather through research, which can come from interviews.

Asking the right questions is essential because they yield the details that create understanding and communicate human experience.

If you are interviewing someone about an event that already occurred, then press for details by asking the person to recreate the scene: How many people attended? What did the room look like? What did the speaker talk about? What questions did people have? What did they say about the speech afterward?

Start strong

Direct leads:

You can present information either directly or indirectly. Direct leads are common in news announcements and other developments that you are releasing for the first time. And they are also effective in "news-feature stories," which have a news theme but do not contain the immediacy of breaking news.

Direct leads have the following qualities:

- **Tightness:** It encapsulates the core news point in one sentence of about 35 words. (Don't gasp at the number; this is not as many as you might think.)
- **Directness:** It usually has a main clause followed by a secondary piece that puts the news in context.
- **Simplicity:** It doesn't contain any technical language, unfamiliar terms or abbreviations that leave people in a fog.
- **Context:** It communicates why this news is significant.

Here are two examples of direct leads:

"Consumer price inflation last year rose at the fastest pace in four years, essentially wiping out wage gains for many American workers."

"Much of the nation had a lovely real estate boom for five years, but the house party is over and the cleanup won't be pretty."

The second example is a direct lead, with a touch of creativity in the use of "house party" to play off the real estate theme and reference to a "cleanup," which always follows a party.

Indirect leads:

Indirect leads delay revealing the main point of the story. Instead, they begin with unusual details and are common in softer, human interest feature stories. These leads are more challenging because there isn't a core news hook. You are not communicating an announcement here; you are more likely writing about human experience.

Indirect leads have the following qualities:

- Present unusual details that prompt the reader to want to know more.
- Make a direct statement with an ironic twist at the end that surprises the reader and stirs curiosity.
- Describe an uncommon scene.

Here are two examples of indirect leads:

“They’re the words you’ve been waiting to hear: “Go ahead and eat that cookie. It’s good for your heart.”

“Boeing’s unions are concerned about job security — the CEO’s.”

Engage readers with clarity

Words from everyday conversation usually yield greater clarity because they are more familiar, more specific and easier to read than technical or academic language. With simpler language, you convey the significance of news and you create vivid images of people and places.

When people read that an event was well attended, they can’t visualize what that means. When they read that nearly 200 staff, managers and executives squeezed into the room and held on to the speaker’s every word, they can see that.

Saying that an employee was tired, cold and wet after a three-day walk for charity fails to convey the physical toll she experienced. When they read that after arriving home, she shuffled in her front door and collapsed in a chair, exhausted, shivering and soaked, they have an image.

Use concrete language

Convey the details with concrete words that connect to real people, objects and concepts that readers can see, hear, feel and smell.

Every profession has technical terms, which are sometimes acceptable, but always avoid buzzwords. Those stale clichés that people use just because millions of others use them make for boring writing.

Referring to “human” and “financial capital” makes a reader’s eyes glaze over. Try “people” and “money.” Don’t use “virtual knowledge transfer events” to refer to “webinars.” And how many people know what it means to “upsell”?

Realize the power of metaphors and similes

Our job as writers is to help readers “see” and to move them from the abstract to the concrete. Metaphors and similes are comparisons that enable readers to see the similarities between something unusual and something more familiar and visual.

When an employee says that her first month at a new job was “like drinking from a fire hose” (simile), you know that the learning curve is overwhelming.

When a writer describes a tired executive as having “the eyes of a basset hound” (metaphor), the reader has an image.

Add to the story with quotes

Quotes should provide insight, expertise, an attitude, a corporate perspective or emotion, or simply confirm the facts. Too often, they are corporate drivel that don’t add anything to the article.

- **Make them substantive.** Quotes should communicate real information that adds depth to the story. The “I’m very excited” line or quotes that contain fact-sheet information are not adding anything new or interesting.
- **Don’t overuse them.** Avoid using quotes simply because they are quotes. An article doesn’t have to have one. If no one says anything of value, then go without it. In magazine articles and major news sites, most skilled writers use quotes sparingly because a lot of what people say is not interesting.
- **Don’t duplicate what you’ve already paraphrased.** Because quotes are not part of the news, they should advance the story by providing something that didn’t previously appear in the article. The quote might be close to something that the person said before, just don’t make it the same, word-for-word.
- **Have a strong ending.** News articles often fade at the end, but don’t let a feature story fizzle. Quotes that relate to the theme of the story make for good endings, or you can bring it full circle. You can look ahead and tie it back to your opening, or you can summarize in the final paragraph in a way that connects to the beginning.



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