

Five Steps For Writing Articles That Will Make It Into Print

By Jeff Davidson

Years ago, as an employee of a small consulting firm in Connecticut, I approached my boss to ask what I could do to help the firm -- and bolster my personal credentials. He suggested writing an article, an activity that would never have occurred to me, a B-minus student in English composition. After several false starts, I hit on a formula that helped me through my first piece. The concept was simple: I came up with 10 different tips, each acting as the inspiration for a paragraph or two. Next, I added opening and closing paragraphs. The end product was my article, relatively pain free. I titled that first piece, "Ten Tips on Survival for Small Business."

For me, attaching a number to the title -- such as "Eight Ways to..." -- helps organize the article in parts. Instead of being overwhelmed by the article as a whole, I concentrate on one tip or step at a time. Even if I don't come up with exactly eight ways to perform this or that, I inevitably derive six or four -- enough to sketch out an article.

With much anticipation, I mailed my first manuscript to a publication, which sat on it for five months and then rejected it. I then mailed it to another magazine, *The New Englander*, which sat on it for four months. One day without advance notice, however, a package arrived. It was thick. My article, "Ten Tips on Survival for Small Business," had been published. It was the last article in the issue, yet it was glorious. The graphics and artwork were wonderful, and the article made an attractive reprint for handing out to clients. What's more, I could now add "published author" to my resume.

Until I saw my first printed piece, I thought that only superstars and academics got their names in print. But holding that copy of *The New Englander* gave me the motivation I needed to make another attempt at writing. Following a consulting engagement with a Washington, D.C. law firm, I wrote an article titled, "How to Build a Law Practice." I kept to the recipe that worked for me the first time, essentially following a "tips" format, but this time with a numberless title. I sent the article to a law magazine, *Case and Comment*, which accepted it for publication.

While going through my files a year later, I came across the article, and it dawned on me that with a little time and effort I could convert that into another piece: "How to Build a Medical Practice." I'd worked with a number of doctors and dentists the previous year and was now familiar with the terminology and differences required to revise my earlier article.

Such was the beginning to my writing career. Since, I've been able to establish myself as a subject matter expert on many topics through the written word and have authored 32 books, including *The Complete Guide to Public Speaking* and *The 60 Second Procrastinator*.

The Mechanics

Writing an effective, thought-provoking article requires paying close attention to guidelines, plus injecting a healthy dose of individual creativity. That creativity, however, must be sculpted by structure. Many writers use the following basic steps: prewriting, free writing, preparing the first draft, revising and editing.

1. Prewriting. At this stage, an idea or a topic is hatched. It may come to you in a flash of brilliance -- a solution you offhandedly offer a client -- or you may determine your topic after oscillating between various options. Prewriting requires time. Readers will know if you jumped into a topic without giving it careful thought before you started writing.

Choose an aspect or a slice of the topic that you can manage. For example, if you're involved in designing and delivering training programs, rather than writing about an effective and proven method, focus on a controversial technique that you've tried with surprising success. Next, ask yourself questions about the topic:

- What are the key issues?
- What angle hasn't been explored?
- How do the people affected feel about the subject?

The more questions you can generate at this stage, the better. The questions will help you focus your efforts. During prewriting, you'll also find it helpful to read and talk about your topic with others. Be a sponge.

2. Free writing. Free writing is like jumping off a cliff and plunging into a vast pool of "what ifs." Here you'll just want to get your thoughts onto the page. Don't scrutinize or revise every word. Your goal is to explore the many possibilities of a topic and settle on an angle that leads to your thesis statement-- the single sentence that declares the aim of the article.

You'll also want to use this time to search for your tone. Will you be witty or serious? Conservative or bold? Whatever tone you choose, be consistent. It should come across to readers in the thesis statement and the body of your text.

By writing rapidly and without worrying about organization or content, you generate and capture additional thoughts that establish or refine your thesis. A well-chosen thesis statement energizes and focuses the entire article, and makes the reader's job easier.

3. Preparing the first draft. Yes, you will write more than one draft. Here's how to begin. List the points you developed during the prewriting and free writing steps. Now decide: Will you present them chronologically or logically? Will you use a cause-and-effect order, an ascending or descending order, or some other method? Base your choice on the effect you want to have on your readers.

Next, create an outline of your points, keeping the readers' interests, education, and possible feelings about the topic in mind. For example, if you choose to write about a controversial training technique, expect to rouse a multitude of opinions from readers who agree or disagree.

When you're ready, here are several ways to begin writing: 1) Use a brief lead up to your thesis, 2) introduce the thesis with an anecdote, 3) cite a generic example that proves the thesis, 4) confront a popular assumption or stereotype, or 5) oppose a generally accepted position.

As you proceed, use the headings from your outline as guideposts to steer you from one point to another. The headings can even serve as paragraph leads. Focus on one paragraph at a time. Later, incorporate transitions to ensure flow between paragraphs.

To end, you could state the implications of your thesis, restate the thesis in terms that broaden its significance, recommend action, answer the question you put forth in your opening paragraph, or reaffirm your thesis with a compelling example.

4. Revising. Though you may want to avoid revising, don't. I'm often asked how I get so many articles published. The answer is easy: Revise, revise, revise. The task of revision can be arduous. It feels a bit like finishing a marathon and then returning to the starting line to do it all again.

Still, reexamining the big picture and carefully refining, tightening, and improving your work will increase your chances of publication.

Check to see whether you have:

- established and maintained a consistent tone
- used the most appropriate points to prove your thesis
- ensured unity (all points reinforce your thesis); continuity (flow); and progression (every paragraph offers more information than its predecessor)

Reread the section on preparing the first draft, and think about whether you've accomplished what you set out to do. The revision can require as much or more work than writing the first draft. Now isn't the time to shortchange your efforts.

5. Editing. The devil, as they say, is in the details. Your chances of getting a manuscript accepted or rejected may depend on whether you remembered to run a spell check.

When performing your final edit, use this list of helpful tips:

- Check sentences carefully; each must be vital, focused, balanced and economical. It's sometimes useful to read your article out loud.
- Vary the sentence lengths and sentence structures.
- Check your spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
- Use active verbs.
- Trim the fat; if a word or phrase can be eliminated, axe it. Eliminate jargon and unclear words.

Remember, tidy all loose ends. Your readers have work to do; help them all you can.

After extensive editing, read your article again to catch any last glitches. Make sure that your final copy adheres to established rules of grammar and style.

Then, take a deep breath, and send it to an appropriate publication.

-- Mr. Davidson is a professional speaker based in Raleigh NC. Visit www.BreathingSpace.com